

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

~A Sign-on-the-Line Wedding Story~

6



contract.

- * A debt is taken over.
- * A loan is allowed.
- * Don't attend on party.

Cecis, Thomas, Fumina
Viola, Mayden, Euphonia

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MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

CORYDALIS

One of Cercis's subordinates as well as his partner-in-crime.

Tends to get roped into shenanigans by his peers, possibly due to being the only one with any common sense.

CERCIS

The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family.

Extremely attractive and great at his job, but a bit incompetent in his private life. Ends up getting into some trouble thanks to the royal siblings of the nearby country of Aurantia.

VIOLA

The daughter of the Euphorbia family, a poor noble house. A bright, positive, and responsible woman, growing into her position as duchess! She just heard some shocking news about her husband during a tea party at Verbena's, and...?



ORANGÉ

Osmanthus's younger sister.
Smarter than her brother.
Won't give up on Cercis.

OSMANTHUS

Crown Prince of the
nearby country of Aurlantia.
Falls in love with Viola at
first sight during a party.

ROHTAS

The Fialis family's head butler.
He has worked at the ducal house
for a long time, and knows
a lot about a lot of things.
A bit soft on Viola?

IRIS

One of Viola's friends, and the
daughter of Marquis Sanguineah.
Currently on the hunt for
a husband.

VERBENA

Cercis's childhood friend,
and daughter of Duke Argenteia.
After many twists and turns,
she's become one of Viola's friends.

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Prologue

The garden that lay before us was a wonder—its guests could even enjoy luxuriously gazing at the beautifully sparkling surface of the Wahl River. Only one family in the Kingdom of Flür could possibly include a whole *river* on their manor grounds: that of Duke Argenteia.

We—Miss Iris, myself, and two other ladies—had been invited to the Argenteia's estate for a tea party by our friend(?), Miss Verbena.

The mild weather and cool breeze was perfect for an outdoor gathering, so us ladies were having a grand old time chatting and sipping on our teas. That is, until the subject of the princess of Aurantia—the country we'd just been at war with—asking to marry Mr. Fisalis came up. I *really* brought down the mood after that.

“...”

There were six girls present, but the only thing you could hear was the inappropriately tranquil chirping of the birds...

Miss Verbena, Miss Iris, and the other ladies had all tried to follow up with something to lift my spirits, but now they were just silent, worriedly watching to see how I reacted. I mean, I'm super glad that they're all worried about me, but still!

“The Crown Prince of Aurantia is paying Flür a visit.”

How many days had it been since Mr. Fisalis had told me that? I actually hadn't seen him for a while after that—but let's leave that aside for the moment. He'd told me that the Crown Prince and his party were coming to hold a ceremony celebrating the end of the war and to discuss the future. He never told me that “the future” included a husband for the princess, much less that *mine* was going to be her first choice.

...Like, isn't it weird that Miss Verbena knew, but I didn't? That must mean it's not much of a secret. Why wasn't I told? Damn, this is making me upset.

From what the girls said, both Mr. Fisalis and the king himself had instantly

refused the marriage offer and delivered an official document saying exactly that to Aurantia at record speed. If they'd refused already, wouldn't it have been nice to at least mention it happening? It's absolutely wrong that everyone but his damn *wife* knew!

Mr. Fisalis usually blabs about his work stuff, even to the point of leaking classified intel, but he couldn't tell me something *this* important? I mean, yes, our marriage began as a contract with no feelings involved. But after spending so long with him, I've ended up really seeing him in a new light (despite how I may act sometimes). And he'd given me a real vow too.

"I, Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, promise to love Viola Mangelica Fisalis till the end of my days."

...Wahhhhh! What am I remembering that for!

...That vow did make me pretty happy, though—my heart might have even skipped a beat. And I'd believed him too. But when he goes and does things like this, I feel like he doesn't trust me at all. I mean, it's kind of my fault, since I did kind of take him up on his offer to wait for an answer instead of telling him how I feel. But still!

No. I'm getting more depressed the more I think about it! I'm gonna get stuck in some kind of feedback loop if I keep this up.

"Miss Viola? Are you sure you're alright?" Miss Iris, the daughter of Marquis Sanguinneah, was staring at me anxiously. *Sorry, got a bit carried away there.*

I'd told them I was fine when they'd asked, but I'd ended up getting carried away with my distressed thoughts. "Oh, yes—I was just doing some thinking... I'm sorry," I answered after taking a deep breath to calm myself down.

"No matter what that princess does, we're all on your side, Miss Viola! Stay confident!" Miss Verbena announced, with Miss Iris, Miss Nastersham, Miss Krokusse, and Miss Columbine piping in their agreements, complete with a few strong nods.

My friends are so reliable!

Thanks to those Aurantian idiots deciding that a trip to Flür was a great idea, I'd been having to stay at work later and later. Even today, the sun had already gone down by the time I noticed. I was gonna end up getting home in the middle of the night again.

The double whammy of getting home late but having to leave early in the morning meant I'd barely seen Viola in ages—at least when she was awake. She was always asleep by the time I got home and still sleeping when I had to leave again. *Ah, jeez, I'm having such awful Viola withdrawal!*

...I'd been sneaking the occasional peek at her while she slept, though. If I didn't, my Viola deficiency would have driven me mad. I didn't care if Rohtas gave me dirty looks for it either!

Dammit, Aurantia! Just get here and get gone ASAP!

Just as I was hurrying through the halls of the palace to deliver some papers to the Minister of War as he chatted with His Majesty, I saw Consul Argenteia—Celosia—walking down the opposite side. He was carrying documents too, so he must've been on his way to bring them somewhere.

"Hey, Cercis. I was just looking for you. You've sure been busy lately, huh?" he said as we were about to pass each other.

As the second son of Duke Argenteia, Celosia was working at the palace as Consul. We'd known each other since childhood due to our family ties, and with us being the same age as well, we were pretty close. He was also Verbena's older brother.

Seeing him walking the palace halls looking so composed was very funny to me, knowing his usual laid back personality. But whenever we met somewhere like this without any onlookers, he'd always slip back into his typical smirk. And despite saying he'd been looking for me, he didn't *look* like he had been.

"Thanks to you. I'm so busy, I might just go crazy."

"Oh, so that's why I can sense that pissy aura of yours a mile away."

"Leave me alone," I muttered curtly, only to get a smirk back. *What? Is there something you wanted to say, Celosia?*

When I glared at him, he just laughed it off. “Oh, don’t get so cranky about it. I know why you’re so upset. You haven’t seen your wife lately, have you?”

“Huh? That’s not it. We just haven’t had *much* of a chance to talk since I’ve been so busy.” I made sure to emphasize the “much.” *It’s not like I haven’t seen her at all—really!*

“That’s what I mean, though! I heard you didn’t tell her about the whole ‘marrying Aurantia’s Princess’ thing. It’s not good to keep secrets. Nope.”

His self-satisfied look as he said that pissed me off even more. I could feel the veins on my temple throbbing just from dealing with him. *Calm down, self. If I get angry, he’ll only be more amused!* “I haven’t kept it a secret, I just haven’t told her directly since I don’t want her to worry. And the offer was rejected immediately, so it’s like it never happened.” *I haven’t been hiding anything. It just wasn’t even worth telling her.*

...It’s just that truthfully, I’m afraid Viola would hear it and tell me to go ahead and divorce her to marry the princess.

When I said that, the smirk vanished from Celosia’s face, and he suddenly looked at me with a completely serious expression. *What’s with that face, though?! The fact that he actually looks worried for once makes me incredibly curious.*

“...What is it? Wait... How do you know Viola didn’t know about the princess thing?”

“Verbena held a tea party at our manor today.”

“Yeah, I heard. Viola was invited.”

Verbena and Viola had become friends(?) at the Argenteia’s last party, despite Verbena being super hostile towards her before...? I’ll never understand women. But setting that aside that, I’d thought that Verbena was just being polite when she said she’d invite Viola to a tea party, but I guess she actually did it. Rohtas said that Viola was shocked to get the invitation too. That tea party was today, at the Argenteia’s manor.

Had something happened there?

“Apparently the topic of Aurantia came up.”

“Wait just a second. How?”

“I don’t know. It just went from Aurantia’s crown prince coming to Flür, to their princess marrying into Flür as a show of goodwill, and then to the princess’s first choice for a husband being you.”

“...I still don’t really understand how it came up in the first place, but I see how Viola learned about it.” *In the absolute worst way, too!*

“Verbena said that she’d brought it up because she figured your wife already knew. Oh, but...if you didn’t actually tell her, there was no way she would have known. The Madam was quite shocked when she learned, I hear.”

Verbenaaaa! Why did you have to open your big mouth?! All of the effort I put into pulling her out of the tea party with the princess so she wouldn’t hear has been wasted.

...No. I shouldn’t blame other people. This is my fault for not telling her in the first place.

While I was standing there in a daze, Celosia spoke up again. “Verbena was worried when your wife went pale, so she wants you to patch things up! That’s what she asked me to tell you.” Once he’d finished delivering his message, he walked the opposite way down the hall, waving his hand behind his back.

“So that’s why you knew what happened at the tea party! Hey, wait, what?! Wait, come back here! Celosiaaaa!”

Don’t drop that bombshell and then just walk off! Once I came back to my senses, I turned to try to stop him, but I was too late. My grabbing hand only met air, while Celosia quickly disappeared down the other end of the hallway.

I tightened my hand into a fist. This was no time for me to be whining about only seeing Viola while she was asleep! I had to do whatever it took to see her and talk to her when she was awake! I wanted to go home right then, but... *Damn! There’s a mountain of stuff I still need to get done. Corydalis would probably kill me if I skipped it now.*

Whatever. I just need to get my work done ASAP and get back home so I can

dispel any doubts Viola has. Celosia said she had looked pale. Was she that upset by the news? Was she in danger of fainting from the shock? Viola was usually so energetic, but she did have her moments of fragility. That's why I worried so much and why I wanted to protect her so badly.

...Ah, but if she was shocked when she heard about the princess thing, that probably means she's not gonna suggest divorce, at least. Is that progress? I wanted to go home, but I knew Corydalis would absolutely murder me.

Dammit, Aurantia!

I needed to get my boring work done as fast as possible. I would have done anything to get home and see Viola as soon as possible!

1. I'm Not Upset Despite the fact that I'd ruined the mood of our peaceful little tea party, I was able to say goodbye with a smile, at least.

Special Skill: Business Face ☆

I gave the girls a cute wave and a little “bye-bye” as I stepped into the carriage, pretending I was fine, but dropped the act as soon as I was out of sight. The mental fatigue of a tea party and the explosive topic of another woman ready to marry my husband hit me all at once, and I collapsed back onto the seat. *Dahlia would get mad at me if she saw, but she's not here, so I'm good.*

But man, that was a shock. Was I the only one who hadn't known? Did Rohtas know? What about Dahlia or Stellaria? I hadn't gotten a sense of what had happened from what Miss Verbena had told me, so I decided I'd ask them once I got home. All in all, I really just wanted to be back!

As I abandoned myself to the comfortable swaying of the carriage, the manor came into view. The dignified stone building, with its imposing appearance that really made you feel its history, just gave me this sense of security. I felt like I was home.

Oh, hey, I'm so used to the Fisalis manor that it's registering as my actual home! Of course it is, though. I mean, I barely ever leave it.

As the carriage drove along the walls surrounding the manor, the main entrance soon came into view. When we approached, the iron gate with its delicately carved reliefs swung open from the inside thanks to the gatekeeper. The carriage slowed down, and we quietly slipped inside the walls. I was finally back in my own territory.

And, as always, all of the servants were lining the entranceway to welcome me home. When I saw that, what little energy I had left completely vanished. I went totally limp.

“Welcome home, Madam. Are you all right? Have you fallen ill?” Poor Rohtas,

who had opened the door for me, got quite a shock when he saw me completely flopped over with exhaustion inside and quickly moved to hold me up.

“I’m just a bit tired,” I replied, stepping outside with his help.

Seeing how wobbly I was, even with assistance, Dahlia and Stellaria rushed over as well.

“Madam, are you all right?” Dahlia asked, helping to support me.

“I think my nerves were stretched a bit thin, maybe? I’m just a little bit tired, I promise~”

“I don’t think a simple tea party should have exhausted you to the point of looking ill... We’ll want to hear all about it from you, so please, come inside. Would you prefer to go to the salon or straight to your own room?”

“Hmm... I’ve got some things I want to ask you guys, so the salon.” *I’ve gotta ask them about the princess deal, after all.*

“As you wish. Stellaria, help Dahlia hold Madam up in my place. All of the other maids, please prepare a blanket and something warm to drink in the salon.”

“Yes, sir!”

At Rohtas’s orders, the maids all promptly went to work. Just seeing how normally everyone was acting back home was a relief. I was still dead on my feet, though.

After I was half-carried to the salon, I took a little break with some warm herbal tea first. Then I flopped down on the sofa while Dahlia covered me with a blanket. Oh, it just felt so great, I nearly fell asleep there. But I couldn’t! Can’t ask questions when you’re asleep, after all!

“I didn’t know anything about Aurantia’s princess wanting to marry Mr. Fisalis...” I murmured, wrapped up snugly in my blanket.

“The Master intentionally kept it from you so as to keep you from worrying,” Rohtas said, a bitter smile on his lips.

“So you knew about it, Rohtas?”

“More or less. But neither His Majesty the King nor Master himself paid it any heed. They refused the offer immediately.”

“Yeah, that’s what Miss Verbena said. But I wish someone would have told me *something*, you know? It was open enough information for Miss Verbena to find out from her brothers, right? That means it wasn’t a huge secret.”

Now that I knew how Mr. Fisalis felt about me, I couldn’t get all worked up about someone wanting to marry him, much less act like I would have at the beginning of our relationship.

“Please understand that Master is trying to protect you.”

“Actually, him hiding it just makes me kinda suspicious that something else is going on.”

“Please, Madam.”

“...Fiiiine. I will graciously accept it as Mr. Fisalis trying to protect me,” I conceded, my lips naturally puckering out a little bit when Rohtas admonished me. *Oh, that might have sounded like I was pouting when I’m actually pretty sad about this.*

While I was thinking to myself, everyone around me started giggling. *Yes, I know I’m acting like a kid. Ugh...*

Once Rohtas got over his chuckles, he spoke up again. “Ah. Master has asked that I inform you that he will be home late again tonight and to eat dinner without him.”

“Okaaaay. I understand!”

It was the same thing I’d been hearing every night lately. *I don’t think I’ve actually seen Mr. Fisalis at all for a while, have I?*

As I was relaxing in the salon, my in-laws came running to check on me, having heard the fuss, I guess you’d call it. They looked worried when they saw me lying on the sofa.

Mother Fisalis gave me a big hug, the beautiful face she’d passed down to Mr. Fisalis clouded over with anxiousness. “Oh, Vi! That must have been quite a shock. Are you okay? Don’t worry, that stupid proposal was already turned

down!" she cried, trying to comfort me.

"That's right, you're our only daughter-in-law, Viola! Both Cercis and His Majesty were absolutely disgusted by the idea. Everything's already been rejected, so you have nothing to worry about," Father Fisalis continued.

But, uh, rather than worrying about whether or not it had been accepted, I was more upset by the fact that I hadn't been told about it at all. But telling them that wouldn't do much good, would it?

"Yeah... You're right! I'm fine now. Thank you both so much," I said, giving them my usual smile in an attempt to keep them from worrying any more than they were already.

"Cercis will be home late again tonight, won't he? You must be so lonely, eating all by yourself, so we'll have dinner with you here tonight. Is that all right, Rohtas?"

"Yes, of course."

Seemingly placated by my twenty dollar smile, Mother Fisalis decided they'd have their dinner in the manor proper. *Being all on my lonesome is indeed lonely, so I probably would've just headed down to the servant's dining room for my supper—whoops, that's supposed to be a secret!* Nodding at Mother Fisalis's request, Rohtas had all three of our meals brought to the main dining room.

Now, after going to a tea party when I'm not used to them AND learning about Mr. Fisalis's (already rejected) possible marriage, combined with all the stress from getting so upset over it, I was absolutely pooped. Since my husband wouldn't be home until late again today, I got all ready to sleep and lazed about in my bed, eyelids becoming heavier and heavier. *Ah, the moment you start nodding off feels so great~!* But just as I pulled my blankets over my head, thinking I'd sleep like a log until morning...

A light knock echoed through the room.

Wait, someone is knocking on my bedroom door? That almost never happens this late at night. Is there some sort of emergency?

"What's that?" I asked Stellaria, who was on standby beside my bed.

“I don’t know...” she replied, looking confused.

Hoping that nothing big had happened, I called out for whoever it was to open the door.

“Madam, Master has returned!” Rosa, Mr. Fisalis’s personal maid, rushed in.

“What?! Mr. Fisalis is home?”

“Yes!”

I shot out of bed. Was he seriously home?! I mean, yeah, just because he said he’d be late didn’t mean that he would *never* get here, but this was a bit of a weird time to arrive. Since he’d specifically said he’d be “late”, I thought I’d be fast asleep by the time he got in. This was super early comparatively. Or, wait...

“Oh... I’ve gotta get up and see him, don’t I?”

“Yes, you should.”

“But I’m in my jammies,” I complained, looking down at myself.

“Yes, you are,” Rosa nodded, smiling wryly.

I was nearly asleep, okay?! As I was starting to wonder if I should change, Stellaria spoke up.

“Putting a shawl on should be enough, Madam. Here you go,” she said, handing me a large stole. *Great follow-up, Stellaria!* I quickly wrapped it around myself.

But why was he waking me up at such a weird time instead of just letting me sleep like usual? Had something happened? I mean, it’s probably fine, but...

“Is he already here?”

“Yes. He’s speaking with Rohtas in the entranceway.”

“Oooh~ I’ve gotta rush, then!”

Well, if he was already here *and* I’d already gotten out of bed, I guess I had no choice.

Tightening the stole around me so my pajamas weren’t visible, the three of us made a mad dash for the entrance.

2. You're Home Early

Rushing down the stairs, I saw Rohtas and Mr. Fisalis speaking in the entranceway.

It's been a while since I've actually seen Mr. Fisalis. Hmm, more than three or four days, probably? More than that, actually. He's been working on the days he usually has off, so I've kinda lost track of time.

Mr. Fisalis, on his part, looked remarkably dignified for the late hour, showing not a bit of the exhaustion he must be feeling after working so long. *Hurrah for attractive men! I mean, what? But actually... Has he lost weight? Kinda looks like the lines of his pretty face are sharper than usual.*

Come on, Viola, now isn't the time for admiring your hot husband!

"Welcome home! You've been working hard!" I said, quickly approaching him.

"Ah, it's been so long since I've seen you awake, Viola!" cried Mr. Fisalis, giving me a tight hug.

Wait. Did he just say "seen you awake" or am I just imagining something kinda creepy?

"You must be exhausted, working from early morning to late night every single day. It's been a while since I've seen you. Have you eaten? If you haven't, we can ask Cartham to whip something up for you."

"No, I'm fine. I've eaten already. But never mind that..."

"Never mind that?" I echoed.

Mr. Fisalis looked away hesitantly. *Don't stop right after saying something like that!* I stared into his beautiful dark brown eyes as I waited for him to finish.

"I heard that you've been told about Aurantia's princess wanting to marry me."

"Ah..."

He sounded like he had to really brace himself to say that. *But how do you know that when it just happened today? Ah, he might've heard it from Rohtas*

just now.

I looked up at him, surprised that he'd actually brought it up, only for his face to close in on mine. Like, super close. Close enough that I had to bend myself backwards. But his brown eyes weren't smiling like usual—instead, they looked very serious. What could be the matter?

"I'm sorry for having you woken up when you were just getting to sleep, but I needed to talk to you."

"Okay...?"

"I'll explain once we're settled in the salon."

"Okay...??" Swept up by Mr. Fisalis's momentum, I couldn't even tell him to wait until morning. I just ended up giving him some half-hearted replies.

"Rohtas, have some drinks brought to us, with something warm for Viola so she doesn't catch a chill."

"As you wish."

"I'll be back as soon as I get changed, so just wait for me inside, okay?"

"All right."

After making some brisk arrangements, Mr. Fisalis headed to his room to change, and I moved to the salon to wait for whatever talk he'd decided we were having. Finally, he came back downstairs in a casual white shirt and black trousers.

"I want to talk to Viola alone, so please leave, all of you," he ordered, clearing the room of servants.

"Certainly."

Wait, that included Rohtas?! That leaves me a bit...no, a lot on my own here!

After watching everyone leave the room, Mr. Fisalis took his usual seat right beside me. Was he worried about something? His pretty face wasn't sporting his usual smile, but instead a slight grin that looked kind of forced.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes."

“Want some sweets too?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful weather we had today.”

“Yes.”

He kept talking to try to break the ice, but I didn’t give him much by way of answers. *Wah, what should I do? This is so awkward!*

While I had a sip of the warm tea that had been made for us to fill the awkward silence, he finally began to speak, “About what I mentioned earlier...”

I quietly set my teacup back on the saucer and turned towards him, ready to hear him out.

“I didn’t tell you about the thing with Aurantia’s princess because I didn’t want to worry you. But in the end, you heard from someone else, and it made you even more upset. I’m sorry. I rushed to get home, and then I found out from Rohtas about the state you were in when you returned... I just *had* to explain things to you myself, so I asked Rosa to wake you up,” he said apologetically.

So Rohtas told him all about me pouting like a little kid?! Dammit, Rohtas! That’s embarrassing!

“Ahh, um, I was just a little bit surprised, since I hadn’t heard anything about it...” But my fear, or worry, or whatever wasn’t actually about that. *What should I do? Should I ask him straight up, or just leave it since it’s already all over?* I fell silent, lost in thought.

“What’s wrong? Is there something else you’re worried about?”

Damn, he’s sharp. He cut straight to the point.

“Oh, not really. You’ve already refused, haven’t you?”

“Of course I did! I already have an absolutely adorable wife named Viola, so I don’t need some weird princess from another country!”

“Pfft! ‘Weird’...! You’re talking about a princess, you know!”

He sounded so sincere, but the way he worded it was just so funny I had to

laugh. Who would call a *princess* weird?! Really!

He smiled in relief when I laughed. The tension in the room vanished, and I calmed down a bit, too.

“She’s weird to me.”

“Oh, Mr. Fisalis! I really wasn’t mad or sulking or anything like that. I was just kind of surprised to hear it. I’m not worried, but I just couldn’t help but wonder if you’d hidden it because you had something else to feel guilty about.”

“...Yep, you really do go for the throat, don’t you, Viola?”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing at all. I-I mean, yeah, that sometimes happens. I’m sorry for hiding it.”

I might have been a little bit too blunt, because he flopped face down onto the table, clutching his chest. But he popped right back up! *That’s my Mr. Fisalis!*

“I heard that you sent them a rejection extraordinarily quickly.”

“Of course we did! A normal, proper royal envoy would take ages, so I spoke with His Majesty and we sent Corydalis with our reply instead! The Aurantians got a special next-day delivery of my complete and utter rejection,” Mr. Fisalis said proudly, but...

Poor Corydalis. He was probably riding all day and night. Maybe I should send him some refreshments next time... Oh, but now’s not the time to think about that.

“If you rejected it immediately, couldn’t you have told me about it, even just a little hint? I would understand if it was some big secret, but it wasn’t, right? Miss Verbena said she heard it from her brother, after all. That means it was tea party-level chatter.” *Ah, I was kind of pouting a bit again when I said that. Am I really that upset about him hiding this? I’d been feeling gloomy earlier when I was talking about it with Rohtas.*

Embarrassed by how sulky I sounded, I peeked up at Mr. Fisalis, only to see him looking at me in shock. Was he surprised that I was actively pouting while

insisting I wasn't? Did he think I was actually really angry at him for keeping it from me? I watched him, confused internally.

"I... I thought that if I told you, you'd cut me off in the middle of the explanation and tell me to just divorce you and marry her instead. I didn't know if I could handle hearing that. But I didn't think you'd get this angry with me for hiding it," he murmured.

I knew it! No, that's not what I want to say. That really does sound like something I'd say, doesn't it? Wait, that also doesn't work. I mean, yeah, I would've probably said that when we first got married, but...

But, you know...

"I'd never say something like that anymore! I know how much you treasure me now!" I nearly yelled, glaring into his beautiful dark brown eyes.

Yes, I can be a bit oblivious, but even I can tell that! Sometimes I even forget I started out as a show wife! Now, he loves me so much that people are getting jealous. I would never say anything like that anymore!



“Viola?”

“And you told me, you know...b-back at Le Pied...”

Where did all that energy go, self? I looked away. I’m sorry—it’s way too embarrassing to repeat myself, so I just kinda trailed off instead. Ahhhhhh, but I feel like I just said something big! I’m making myself feel even more self-conscious! Ugh, my face is on fire!!

Unable to look Mr. Fisalis in the eyes anymore, I turned my entire body away, only to hear him chuckling behind me. *Jeez, stop laughing at me!*

“I see! I’m sorry, Viola. I was wrong,” he said, hugging me from behind.

Eek! Mr. Fisalis?! It isn’t good for my heart when you do things like this out of the blue! It feels like it’s about to explode!

While I panicked in his arms, he just laughed again, loosening his grip. I kept looking away, not wanting him to see how badly I was blushing, but he twirled me around to face him. When I glared up at him, all traces of his earlier stiff, serious look were gone, and his usual smiling brown eyes were back.

This is mortifying. So mortifying! He’d looked so grim before, but a single word from me could change his mood entirely.

Hm? Wait, isn’t that a good thing? Whatever.

“Yes, yes, you were wrong.”

“There shouldn’t be secrets between husband and wife, huh? I can’t do much about top-secret info, but in light of that whole mistress fiasco, I’ll make sure to tell you everything that I can.”

“It’s okay if you just tell me enough that I won’t get the wrong idea...” *Please don’t tell me anything too heavy.*

“Okay, okay,” Mr. Fisalis said, squeezing my hand as he gazed deep into my eyes.

“So the princess will be coming along with the crown prince’s party, right?”

“Yes. Since I rejected her proposal, she needs to find someone else.”

“Miss Verbena and the other girls said that Celosia was a good candidate.”

“Hmm... He’s probably the most likely pick, but he *really* doesn’t want to be chosen. He’s desperately searching for someone else to take his place,” he said, smirking as he thought of his friend. *It’s someone else’s problem now, huh?*

“He doesn’t want to marry her either?”

“His preferences lie elsewhere.”

He said it without hesitation, but political marriages don’t usually take the couple’s opinions into account, do they? Could he really reject a diplomatic match just based on his taste? I’d never heard of that happening before. Mr. Fisalis only got out of it on account of already being married (in Flür, concubines and lovers aren’t a necessity, so you don’t need to take any if you don’t want to).

But what kind of person could this princess be if people didn’t even want to marry her for political gain...?

3. The Prince's Party is Here!

And so, the day of the crown prince's arrival had finally come.

Even though their country had lost the war, they were still guests of the state and accordingly were entitled to a welcoming party—although since the whole of Flür wouldn't be celebrating, the city of Rozhe itself would be going about their business as usual. Even the welcoming party itself would only include a small portion of the country's highest officials.

And of course, the house of Fisalis was invited. There was no way we *wouldn't* be. We were one of the premier aristocratic families in Flür, after all!

To quote Mr. Fisalis: "They're causing trouble just by showing up. Since they're going ahead with this despite the fact that they're not wanted here, there's no need for the whole country to welcome them." He was really salty about it!

One morning, Rohtas, a few of the maids, my in-laws, and I were seeing Mr. Fisalis off in the foyer.

"I'll be working at the palace all morning, so you need to come with my parents later, Viola." Since he'd be working as usual, he was in his full uniform. Even his appearance at the party would be for work. He was part of the royal guards now, and his "cover job" was protecting important people. He'd probably be assigned to one of the royals.

By the way, his uniform was super handy—he could wear it at formal occasions too!

"All right."

"Since my father is here to represent the Fisalis duchy in my stead, I'll probably be focusing on my work. But I'll be dropping in to see you when I have time, so you need to stay with Mother and Father until then, okay?"

"Okay."

He explained it in a way that was easy to understand. I should be fine with my in-laws, anyway.

“Mother, Father, please take care of Viola.”

“Don’t worry, just leave it all to us!”

“Yes, we’ll take care of everything.”

Even Mother and Father Fisalis confidently accepted the job of being Viola-sitters. That whole bit was probably why they were actually here seeing Mr. Fisalis off for once.

“I’ll be going then.”

“Have a good day!”

After giving me a big hug, he set off for work, looking back over his shoulder reluctantly a couple times.

“I’ve heard that the Aurantians should arrive after noon. Then, they’ll have a meeting with His Majesty before a banquet. After that will be the evening welcoming party, so that’s when we’ll be heading out. All you need to do is stick close to us.” Father Fisalis explained how our day would go as we stood around once Mr. Fisalis had gone.

“All right.”

That meant that we’d be leaving around dusk, so we had loads of time. Until then... Yep, I’d probably be in the hands of the Spa Squad.

We then went our separate ways until it was time to leave; my in-laws headed to the cottage while I retired to my own room. And just as I’d predicted, the Spa Squad proceeded to polish me from head to toe. After that, Stellaria and Mimosa did my make-up and hair perfectly. Social Mode Viola was now ready for action!

And of course, a new dress had been made for me before I knew it. Part of me wanted to cry about adding yet *another* new dress to my wardrobe, but I’d already assured myself that I was just doing my duty as a first-class aristocrat. Also, I had absolutely no recollection of getting measured again, so this new dress was probably the same size as the last one. *Well, it doesn’t really matter, since it’s not like anything actually important got any bigger.*

Tonight’s dress was made in burgundy to match Mr. Fisalis’s uniform. He was

a royal guard now, after all! The royal guard wore burgundy, special ops wore navy, and the frontline troops wore dark green. *Oh ho ho, I can remember all that now!*

The dress was new, but the jewelry I wore was the same “Viola Sapphire” stuff as last time. I still had to advertise our gemstones, after all. And of course, I had my ring too☆ Mr. Fisalis had been hoping we’d have some “Viola Eyes” (yes, that really was the name for the highest quality ones~ And yes, it *was* horribly embarrassing~) by now to make some new jewelry out of, but unfortunately none had been dug up yet.

“You look perfect again today, Madam!” Mimosa said, looking quite satisfied with herself. She was right—my reflection looked like an entirely different person! My maids always did such a great job.

“Yes, you look lovely!”

“Show that foreign princess you’re the only wife Master will ever need!”

“You won’t lose, even to royalty!”

“You’re invincible!”

“Uh... I’m just going to a regular evening party...”

After calming down my maids (they were breathing very heavily for some reason), my in-laws and I headed to the party. We were directed to a reception hall that seemed kind of deserted—probably because only a small portion of Flür’s aristocracy were invited, instead of every single one of them. The only nobles invited were those with the rank of earl or higher, and only three or so of the most important members of each house (plus their immediate families), which made it a pretty cozy event.

Apparently the reasoning for the limited guest list was because fewer attendees meant they would need fewer guards. Though the Aurantians were basically uninvited, they were state guests all the same, and thus security was tight to make sure nothing untoward happened.

Now that I think about it, my father is technically an earl. Are my parents here? Although, since attendance isn’t mandatory because the event just isn’t that important, they probably wouldn’t come.

The orchestra was playing an elegant waltz, but nobody was dancing yet. Everyone was too busy greeting everyone else.

“Good evening, Miss Viola.”

“Good evening!”

While I was following Mother and Father Fisalis on their greeting rounds, I casually glanced around to see who was there. Miss Iris and the three other girls noticed me, quickly coming over for a chat. *My parents might not have shown up, but these girls definitely wouldn't miss an event like this, with their perfect party attendance record... Ahem! I should probably keep my mouth shut!*

“Good evening Miss Viola, everyone.” After they'd headed over, Miss Verbena also popped in to say hello.

Seeing that I'd been surrounded by friends, my in-laws told me they'd be close at hand and headed off to chat with some of their acquaintances. *Mr. Fisalis was specific when he told me to stay with his parents, but we're in the same room, and I'm surrounded by people I know. I should be fine, right?*

“Good evening, everyone. His Majesty and the royal guests haven't arrived yet, huh?” I asked, looking at the empty visitor's seats. Maybe they were still eating.

“My brother Celosia said that they'd be here in a while.”

“I wonder what the Crown Prince is like...and the Princess as well.” Everyone had been glancing towards the entrance in anticipation, but Miss Iris's eyes turned towards me in concern as she spoke.

“Yeah, I really wonder. Ah, by the way, Mr. Fisalis and I had a proper talk about the whole thing, so everything's absolutely fine now!” I rushed to smooth things over.

“Oh, I see! I knew Duke Fisalis would handle it!” Miss Iris said, smiling in relief.

Had I really looked awful enough for the girls to worry this badly...? I tried my best to smile. While I was busy regretting my social skills...

“Ah, they're here!”

Right in time with Miss Krokusse's quiet announcement, the chamberlains in

front of the door bowed reverently, announcing in a clear voice, “His Majesty the King and His Highness the Crown Prince of Aurantia have arrived!” Verbena and the other girls decided to move somewhere they could get a better look at the guests, and they ended up pulling me along with them. The spot they chose was, to my amazement, right up close to the guests themselves.

...I guess trueborn noblewomen don't hesitate to get front and center, whether it's the guest seats, or any other super visible spots! My favorite spots are still near the walls, though.

The chamberlains opened the double doors with a heavy creak, and in walked the king of Flür, accompanied by the crown prince and princess of Aurantia. After they were inside, the queen of Flür and the other royals followed.

“That’s the crown prince and his sister?” I asked Miss Verbena, who had moved up right beside me.

“Yes,” she answered with a nod.

My first impression of the crown prince was that he was...burly. Yes, *burly*. He was probably around the same height as Mr. Fisalis, but way wider. Like, two...no, two and a half times as wide, maybe? Mr. Fisalis was slender but still well muscled from his training, but the crown prince... Hmm, plump wasn’t the right word—maybe rugged? Like he had biceps on top of his biceps? He wasn’t overweight, but he looked like he certainly loved his muscles.

His manly—maybe *too* manly? Brutish?—*Ahem*, his *manly* face was different from how people looked here in Flür. Most of the people here had slim, fresh-looking faces, but in contrast the crown prince’s face was square, with thick eyebrows and heavy dark eyes. He was just defined all over. Maybe it was just because Aurantia was a warmer country, but he seemed to have a tan that made his features look even more chiseled.

To me, since I was so used to Mr. Fisalis and his beautiful face, the crown prince’s features were a bit *too* defined. I mean, yes, he was manly and imposing, but he was a bit different from what we in Flür considered attractive.

“...I’m fairly sure his name is Osmanthus val Aurantiacus, but Gaudy McChiselface seems to fit better...” Miss Verbena muttered.

“Pff!” I totally agreed (internally, of course), but what a sharp tongue!

And as for the princess, she was smaller than her brother and kinda looked like someone had squished her down from above... *Ahem*, um... I mean, she was a bit on the plump side. Her face closely resembled her brother's, and I won't go into any more detail than that. *I can see exactly why Celosia was trying so hard to avoid having to marry her. I'm sorry.*

Though she was already tiny and round, she had dressed up in a baby pink, super frilly dress, which made her look even more plump. *Am I going on about that too much? Ever so sorry!*

“Princess Orangé, was it...? Tiny, fat, and ugly...”

“Ah! Don't say it like *that*!”

When Miss Iris, standing on my other side, murmured that, I quickly moved to stop her. *Her tongue is just as sharp as Miss Verbena's. Hm? Why didn't I just say she was wrong? ...Yeah, um, the answer to that is obvious.*

Man, my vocabulary is getting tested today. I can't describe either of the visiting royals in a positive way. And between Miss Verbena and Miss Iris and their tongues, I was internally sweating.

“Duke Fisalis must have been shocked that someone like *her* had her eyes on him,” whispered Miss Columbine behind me.

“...”

“Must be a pain to have someone that's so far from your type swooning over you,” Miss Verbena said sharply.

Wow, no mercy!

“But I never imagined Aurantia's crown prince would look like *that*. How old is he? Do you know, Miss Verbena?” asked Miss Iris.

“I heard he's twenty-eight. His sister should just be twenty,” replied Miss Verbena, tapping her finger to her lips as she thought.

Miss Verbena knows a lot. She's got an answer for everything.

“Twenty-eight?! I thought he had to be well into his thirties!” Miss

Nastersham cried quietly. *Yeah, he did really look older than he was.*

“Princess Orangé looks older than us, as well.”

“And that dress... Frills are so dated.”

“Aah, I’m so glad I went on a diet.”

“Miss Sati...!”

The girls were really starting to lay into those foreign royals, though when Miss Krokusse started to stare pointedly down at her own body, we all forced ourselves to smile.



Even Miss Iris, who had loved cute and frilly dresses, had recently started wearing a simpler look. You could see that was the trend just by looking around the room, so Princess Orangé's dress stood out like a sore thumb. *This trend isn't my fault! It really isn't!*

I mean, the girls were right when they said both the color and design of the princess's dress were way out of style. But the woman herself was smiling confidently, so she must have been really sure of herself. *I see—her dress must be the height of Aurantian fashion! Probably!*

I'd ended up just listening in on our group of unusually vicious ladies. *This isn't good. I'm having trouble figuring out what to say...*

"Miss Viola, where is the Duke?" Miss Iris asked, seemingly just realizing he wasn't around.

It had completely slipped my mind thanks to the Aurantians making such a big impression, but I hadn't seen Mr. Fisalis since we came to the palace. There was someone completely different standing next to His Majesty in Cercis's usual spot, and I didn't see him anywhere. The person beside His Majesty might have been the Captain of the Royal Guard. If he was there, then Mr. Fisalis might have been organizing things behind the scenes as the vice captain. Also, I spotted Corydalis and a few other familiar faces here and there.

"Oh, he's on the job today~ I'm sure he's just behind the scenes somewhere. He said he'd drop by if he had some time, but I dunno." *It'll be fine if I just spend my time chatting, right?*

After that, I had a proper chat with the girls and even danced when I was asked. I really tried my best to socialize properly. *Don't you think I've grown a lot, since I'm able to do all that now? And of course, I didn't forget to advertise our Viola Sapphires☆*

4. At The Welcome Party

Mr. Fisalis must have been busy working—he didn't show up by the time the party was underway, and I ended up stuck in the usual endless stream of dance requests.

"Duchess Fisalis, please dance with me next!"

"Of course!"

Since I was getting so many invitations, I had to do my best to make sure I didn't piss Rohtas off—er, I mean, *disgrace* Rohtas! Mr. Fisalis had been super cranky about me dancing with young (or worse, *single*) men, but this was my job. I did it as well as I could.

On the other hand, Miss Iris and the other ladies were aggressively dancing with young (and ideally single) men. Miss Verbena was among them. Even today, they were devoted to their search for a husband. That would never change.

Currently, there was a light waltz playing. Tonight's lineup was super easy, since none of the songs played were difficult to dance to. After I lost track of how many dances I'd been invited to, I got a glimpse of the crown prince dancing. Amazingly, his presence was unique enough that I could tell it was him just from a single glance.

Since he was huge both vertically and horizontally, the lady dancing with him seemed tiny in comparison. Just being with him would make you feel like you'd been on a diet! Or...maybe not.

It looked like he was really bad at dancing. He was messing up his steps so badly that it was incredibly obvious. I really felt for the lady he was dancing with. *I'm cheering you on internally, Mystery Miss!*

But since I kept seeing him out of the corner of my eye, I started to get curious just because he stood out so much. And one of those times I was looking, our eyes met.

Guh! This is super bad! We made eye contact! He's gonna think I'm some

super rude lady who stares at people! I quickly looked away from him and pretended it never happened.

But unfortunately, that was the start of our eyes meeting even more often. I happened to glance somewhere, he was there. I turned, he was there. This definitely wasn't me just being self-conscious—literally any time I felt like someone was looking at me, there he was.

Damn, this is scary! Is he targeting me because I was staring before?! I wanna get out of here before I leave some kind of impression!

Quite a bit of time had passed since the party started, but Mr. Fisalis hadn't shown up yet, and the dance requests were never-ending. I was exhausted. I just wanted to go home. I'd been doing my best today! I'd even been subtly advertising the sapphires! Just as I was ready to stop dancing and sat down for a break...

"May I have this dance, young maiden?"

Someone behind me asked this question. I was pooped, so it should be okay to say no, right? I turned around, completely ready to say that I was done for the night, and...

It was Prince Sore Thumb standing behind me. Yes, the same crown prince of Aurantia that I kept catching with his eyes on me. He was smiling as he held his hand out towards me, but the air around him was kind of intimidating. *Hmm. Is his face the problem, because it's just so chiseled and craggy? No, his smile... Ah, now that I look at it, his eyes aren't smiling at all. That's why it's so scary!* The crown prince was looking down at me with a gaze that would have shook the Demon Lord Bellis.

Guh... The crown prince himself is asking me for a dance! Me! There's loads of beautiful ladies in this hall, and he asks me! ...But this is an invitation I can't refuse. Even I know that much.

"Is something the matter, young maiden?" he asked again, apparently tired of waiting while I stared at him silently.

Maiden... I'm not a "maiden." I'm married! I've gotten so used to being called Madam. Ah, but I can't leave a state guest waiting, no matter what is going

through my mind.

“If you’re not bothered by dancing with me,” I ended up replying, giving him my best good-wife smile.

The crown prince took my hand and led me to the very middle of the dance floor. From what I saw of his dancing earlier, he definitely wasn’t good enough to be dancing right in the center, but... Whoops, excuse me! Whatever the case, we *really* had no business dancing somewhere this visible. *Ah, but maybe he wanted to stand out no matter how much he sucked (there, I said it☆) because he was the guest of honor. I’d very much prefer not standing out at all, though.*

Though since he’s so huge in the first place, it might be impossible for him not to stand out. I’ve got no choice but to try to make sure I don’t mess up my own steps.

As I internally begged the orchestra not to play anything difficult as we waited for the next song, my prayers were answered with an easier tune. *Most of the music they’ve played today is easy, huh? Are they doing that on behalf of the crown prince? I’ll definitely be fine dancing to this song, as long as nothing else happens.* Despite my relief, I still needed to keep on my toes.

“May I have this dance?”

“Certainly.”

Giving the traditional back-and-forth, we began to dance to the waltz’s melody, but in no time at all he nearly stepped on my feet. *That was close... He really does suck at dancing.* He looked so confident, but his dancing was awful. The tune currently playing was an easy one that kids learned when they first started. The only turns were the super simple ones, and the individual steps weren’t hard either. I wanted to ask how in the world he was managing to mess *this* up. *That’s* how easy it was.

But Mr. Crown Prince here was missing his steps constantly, so it was incredibly hard to keep up with him. I’d become so used to practicing with Rohtas and Mr. Fisalis that I’d started taking their dancing as the standard level—wrong of me, I know. Even the average partygoer in Flür was good enough that I never noticed. I’d be okay, though. Thanks to Professor Rohtas’s teachings, I could still dance properly, even with a partner as terrible (I said it

again☆) as him!

“Ah, yes—I haven’t asked for your name yet, lovely maiden.” While I was doing my best to keep his terrible dancing from messing up my own, the crown prince kept talking without a care in the world. *If you’re gonna act so calm, at least get your dance steps right!*

Dancing like this isn’t *just* dancing, you know? Basic dancing abilities are important for this. That way, you can take the time to chat while you dance, and that brings up a lot of opportunities. For me, I advertise our “Viola Sapphires.” I can’t just come out and ask people if they want some sapphires without them thinking I was nuts, but when they say my sapphire accessories are pretty, it gives me a smooth opening to tell them all about them. And for people who want to meet that special someone, it gives them a chance to get to know each other and see if there might be sparks.

Professor Rohtas taught me all about the true purpose of dancing. I had barely been passable as a dancer before Rohtas had drilled the skill into me, but I was never as bad as this. Stepping on your partner’s feet was unthinkable. Rohtas would go mad if he saw how bad the crown prince was at this.

I’m spending so much time concentrating on my steps that I can’t even socialize properly!

...Whoops, I guess I might have been a little too frank there. Socializing was my job, so I swallowed down my true thoughts and kept smiling as I did my best not to let him drag me down.

Oh, but he’d asked my name.

“Viola Mangelica Fi—”

“Viola, huh? What a cute name. It suits you perfectly!”

“...Thank you very much...”

He cut me off without listening to the whole bit. *Don’t talk over me! He was the one who asked, and he didn’t let me finish!* I was nearly about to start glaring, but I rushed to slap a smile on my face instead.

“And how old are you, Viola?” The crown prince must’ve been encouraged by

my smile, because he asked another question with nary a hint of remorse for interrupting me.

“I’m eighteen—”

“Oh, how young! Ten years younger than me! I see, I see...”

Hey! I was answering your question and you cut me off in the middle again! I don’t want to deal with this guy anymore...

He was having a grand time chatting at me, but was still missing most of his steps. *You’re terrible at best, so concentrate on dancing rather than talking! Do you realize how hard it is to dance while dodging your feet?! Jeez, I just want to stomp on his now.*

I resisted the urge to glare again and looked up at him; he looked happy, but his eyes were still pretty intimidating. Was the “smile doesn’t reach his eyes” thing a habit? *It’s so different than Mr. Fisalis’s sparkling smile. Rather than sparkling, the crown prince’s eyes were glinting...*

“Your hands are so delicate. It looks as if you’d be helpless if I held them,” he said with a smile.

Don’t squeeze my hands with those gnarled paws of yours—I’m terrified you’re gonna squash them, the way you’re looking at me! And you don’t need to hold them so tightly while we dance. It hurts! Ah, jeez, I miss Mr. Fisalis’s elegant but masculine hands...

“O-Oh my, oho ho ho ho...!” I couldn’t keep my smile from twitching at this point!

Our conversation—which really consisted of me being asked something and him not listening to my answer—continued, and I was already getting groggy by the end of a single song. *Someone save me! Oh no, I’ll have to run away myself!*

In the end, I wasn’t able to get away and I was forced to dance with him for a second song. Taking care not to get my feet stomped on while also matching his horrible dancing used up much more of my concentration than usual. Even my own steps were starting to get iffy, and I was pretty sure I’d end up stomping on his feet in turn before long. Just as I was preparing myself to run...

“Viola—I’ve been looking for you. Marquis Pastoris is waiting for you over there. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? Your Highness, would you allow me to borrow my daughter for a moment?”

Just before a third song started, Father Fisalis came to the rescue. *My hero! I have no idea who Marquis Pastoris is, but I don’t care. I’ll take any out I can get!*

“Oh my! It’s been so long since I’ve seen Marquis Pastoris. I’d love to go have a chat. Thank you ever so much for the dance, Your Highness.”

“Huh?! You’re leaving already?” the crown prince grumbled begrudgingly, but...

“How many years has it been?”

“Hmm... So long that I can’t even remember!”

Father Fisalis and I just kept up the act as we walked away, acting as if we couldn’t hear him.

“Whew, thank you so much, Father Fisalis!”

“You did your best, didn’t you, Viola?”

“Yes, I did! I tried, but it was impossible!”

“I saw. It’s okay. Don’t worry—you aren’t at fault here!” He comforted me with a pained smile.

I did the best I could, but the steps just weren’t working out (the crown prince’s dancing was so tedious) and our conversation didn’t click (the crown prince kept cutting me off.) Our time socializing left me with more questions—like, is all of that okay to do?

Just as I was headed back to my safe place by the wall, determined to spend the rest of my time there inconspicuously, I noticed Miss Iris and the girls frozen and whispering to each other. The usual four were all looking in the same direction. What were they looking at?

“Miss Iris? Is something the matter?” I asked, closing in on them.

“A-Ah, Miss Viola. No, we were just looking at Aurantia’s princess.”

“Their princess?”

Looking at where she was subtly indicating, I saw Princess Orangé of Aurantia. It seemed she was chatting with the Queen of Flür and the princesses.

“Oho ho ho ho! This frills-on-frills dress I’m wearing is the very *peak* of Flüran fashion! I had it made especially for this occasion. I wonder if that’s why I can feel all of the men’s gazes on me?”

“...”

There was a lot of ambient noise and there was music playing too, but we heard Princess Orangé’s voice loud and clear. *Actually, she’s just way too loud.*

“The men are looking at you for a completely different reason than you think,” Miss Iris quipped, looking disgusted. *Ouch! Her vicious tongue is still in full force!* I was in complete agreement, though.

“She’s *way* behind if she thinks frills are still in here in Flür.”

“Is she even looking at the people around her? If things like that were still in style, wouldn’t everyone be wearing one? Does she really not notice that not a single person here is dressed like that?”

“Should someone tell her?”

“This all happened because there was no one who *could* tell her.”

“That’s true...”

Everyone was stunned, overhearing the princess. Even I couldn’t stop listening. *I see, so the reason she is in that dress was because she thought it was the top of fashion in Flür, not because it was popular back in Aurantia. What do I do? I can’t exactly back her up.* Looking around, I saw other people forcing smiles with their shoulders shaking after hearing Princess Orangé.

But the princess herself didn’t seem to notice that everyone was staring. “He only saw glimpses of me before, but when Duke Fisalis sees how dolled up I am tonight, he’ll definitely rethink his decision! Can you imagine if he throws his wife aside and runs straight into my arms? Ahh, how romantic!” *Or so she thinks, anyway.*

That’s kinda... Um.

Completely off in her own world, Princess Orangé twisted her round... I mean,

full body this way and that as she got herself all worked up.

Aah, I can see the first princess trying so hard not to laugh. She quickly turned and hid her face behind her fan pretending to cough. *You're doing good, girl!* The second and third princesses were also doing their best not to laugh, the edges of their lips twitching with the strain. The Aurantian princess didn't notice, but the queen sure did, and she was glaring at them.

Seemingly a bit irritated at Princess Orangé babbling, the queen spoke—gently, but very clearly, denying the foreign princess's nonsensical daydreaming. "I don't believe that will happen, Princess. Duke Fisalis loves his wife very, *very* much. I would even go as far as to say that he positively dotes on her." *Oh, looking a bit more closely, the queen's eyes aren't smiling either!*

"Oh, really? I thought for sure he'd choose me. What a pity."

"Oh yes, what a pity! Oho ho ho!" the Queen laughed, hiding her mouth behind her fan while her temples visibly twitched. Princess Orangé really was something, nearly shattering the perfect masks of pro socializers like the royal family! *Do your best, Your Majesty!*

While my heart was racing as I watched over our royals, I heard someone holding back a laugh next to me.

"Pfft... Where the heck is she getting that confidence from? Has she looked in a mirror lately?" It was Miss Iris, trembling from the strain of keeping her laughter under control. *Keep holding it back, Miss Iris! You absolutely cannot laugh now!*

"I understand completely why Consul Argenteia was trying so hard to avoid having to marry her," Miss Columbine said, having repressed her laughter so much she actually looked kind of serious.

"But *someone* has to be sacrificed for the sake of normalizing diplomatic relations after the war and showing that our countries are now friends."

"Don't say *sacrificed*, Miss Nastersham!" I nearly shrieked, trying to stem the tide of savage burns coming out of my friend's mouths. *Everyone is being too honest here! What happened to your social masks, girls?!*

"Wouldn't it be a better show of friendship to give up on making someone

marry her?" The girls all harmonized, very quietly.

Damn, both of the Aurantian royals are just full of points to dig at. The two of them really are dense.

5. A Disturbance

As the Aurantian crown prince's welcome ceremony continued, it stretched on late into the night. But even so, Mr. Fisalis must've still been busy, because I hadn't seen him at all. The (probable) Royal Guard Captain was still standing behind His Majesty's seat.

Since it was so late, I was getting... No, I was *already* super exhausted. After saying goodbye to my friends as they started their socializing rounds again, I met up with my in-laws.

"Cercis must be busy. Let's just leave him and go home," Father Fisalis said, since he understood how much effort I was putting in. If I had said that, Mr. Fisalis would've gotten pissy, but it should be okay if his father was the one to suggest it. Since I was utterly pooped, I was all for it!

"Yes... It's late, and Vi must be tired," Mother Fisalis agreed, looking to me for an answer. Thank you!

"You're right—I'd love to go home."

"Then let's say goodbye to his Majesty and get going."

"Yes."

And with that, the three of us headed to the King of Flür's seat to say goodbye. Mr. Fisalis? He's a big boy, he can get home by himself! He'll probably complain about it later, though.

As I followed my in-laws over to where His Majesty was seated, we found him seemingly in the middle of a talk with the Aurantian crown prince. I really didn't want to see the prince again. His clingy gaze really bothered me... And so, I tried to hide behind Father Fisalis so he couldn't see me, but he immediately locked on with his sharp eyes. *Seriously, that's scary!*

"Your Majesty, we'll be taking our leave soon."

"Ah, Duke Fisalis. Leaving alr—"

And without letting the king finish responding, "Oh, Viola! So you're the Fisalis

daughter!”

“Huh?” I blurted out in shock. *What did he just say? And you can’t go interrupting the king!*

...No, that’s not the important thing here. He said this incredibly loud, so everyone around heard it clear as day. The buzzing hall suddenly went dead quiet.

The crown prince had seen Father Fisalis when he saved me from more dancing, but it seems he only just found out that he was (the former) Duke Fisalis right now... But enough about that.

He thinks I’m their actual daughter?!

“...”

My in-laws and even the king himself were all stunned. And because of how loud he was, everyone around us was staring too. While everyone else was busy being dumbfounded, the crown prince was disgustingly happy.

“Having your parents here makes things easier. I want your daughter for my queen. All right?”

His words echoed in my head. *What? Me, his queen?! Is he serious?!*

It was so silent you could hear a pin drop. Of course it would be. A country’s crown prince had just made a public proposal. *To a married woman.*

Taking no notice of the silence around him, he continued, “I’d planned to search for a candidate for my queen during our stay, but I fell in love with Viola at first sight. I completely missed my chance to ask who her family was, but I see now! So she’s the daughter of Duke Fisalis! That would mean the current duke is your older brother, right? You’re the spitting image of your mother, so I knew immediately! If you’re the daughter of a duke, and the most prominent one in your country at that, then there’s no problem having you become my queen! Ah, this must be fate!”

“...”

He was rattling off on his own. *Okay, just wait one minute. First of all, you didn’t miss your chance to ask, you specifically didn’t listen!* There are so many

points I wanted to refute that I didn't know where to start!

First of all, I'm not Duke Fisalis's biological daughter, but his daughter-in-law! And I look like Mother Fisalis? How in the hell does my plain face look like her beautiful one?! It's like he's insulting me, seriously! Mother Fisalis does look like someone: her son, my husband! Line 'em up beside each other—you'll go blind from their beauty! And my hair color is completely different from theirs! If we were related, we'd have similar coloring, wouldn't we?!

And his babbling about me becoming his queen... Saying I'm "from a prominent family" and it must be "fate"? Are you nuts? I'm the daughter of a poor, declining, very-in-debt earldom! Though, it's true that the Fisalis family really deserves all those superlatives! (They're the true super-elite, super-rich duchy☆) But I only became duchess because of a contract marriage with Mr. Fisalis, you know!

...

...Okay, I got a little worked up. Just calm down, Viola. Take a deep breath, and then let it out. lllliin... Oooout... Okay, I think I'm good.

"Um, Your Highness? I'm actually..."

Just as I was about to tell him I was already married and thus there would be absolutely no wedding in our future...

"If you become my queen, don't worry—I promise I'll never take any concubines or lovers!"

Listen when people talk to you already!

...I'm sorry, I'm losing my temper here. This guy interrupted me again! You're an adult, man, calm down a bit! Although the whole "no concubines or lovers" bit is the exact opposite of my marriage... Or at least it was the exact opposite of my marriage. Sorry, Mr. Fisalis☆

After taking a deep breath, I began. "Not about *that*! Listen very carefully, all right?! I am Duke Fisalis's wife! W-I-F-E—*wife*! I am *not* the biological daughter of the former Duke Fisalis, but the *bride* of the *current* one!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. It might've been the loudest I'd ever been in my life.

Whoo, I said what I wanted to say! I finally finished a sentence in front of him! Did you hear that?!

The crown prince, for his part, looked shocked at hearing the words “wife” and “bride”. “Huh? *That* Duke Fisalis? His...wife?” The forcefulness he’d displayed up until now was gone as he stared at me like an idiot. His eyes were still pretty scary, though.

The only thing you could hear in the hall was some quiet background music. Everyone was watching us. *Ugh, I want to disappear!* Unable to take the atmosphere anymore, I resolved myself to running out of the hall in anger, but..

“Yes, Your Highness. That is indeed my *wife*, Viola,” a beautiful, dignified voice echoed through the room. All eyes moved to see who spoke, and it was none other than Mr. Fisalis, who had appeared in the doorway without anyone noticing. His long strides quickly closed the distance between us where he put himself between the crown prince and I as if to protect me.

That wasn’t all. Noticing someone behind me, I turned—only to see Corydalis. *I guess he’s bringing up the rear.*

Mr. Fisalis stared straight at the crown prince. “I’ve heard everything, but I’m sorry to say that since Viola is my beloved wife, she will be unable to accept your proposal. Please look for your queen elsewhere.” On the surface, he was using his usual soft voice, but I could see the black aura radiating off of him. He was (very quietly) raging!

“I see, so Viola wasn’t your *sister*, but your *wife*! I see—she *is* quite beautiful!”
I’m sorry, Prince, I really have no idea what you mean.

I don’t know if he was intentionally ignoring the mood, or he really didn’t realize how angry Mr. Fisalis was, but he let out a hearty laugh as everyone held their breath.

“Your compliments are too kind,” Mr. Fisalis said, giving him a knight’s salute. He wasn’t backing down, though!

“Duke, it seems you’ve become an even better man than you were when we met in my country.”

“Really? Thank you for saying so.” *You’re saying you’re thankful, but your voice is saying anything but!*

I heard Corydalis quip behind me with a wry smile, “No one’d be happy having *that* compliment them.”

I agreed completely.

Curious as to what kind of face Mr. Fisalis was making, I sneakily peeked at him from the side. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes were glinting angrily as he glared at the crown prince. The foreign royal’s gaze was clingy, but Mr. Fisalis’s was like a sharp blade. The two of them were glaring straight at each other, neither looking away. *Seriously...what’s happening?!* I was starting to get nervous just watching them.

The entire hall was filled with a tense silence. Shockingly enough, the one to break off the spark-filled staring contest was the crown prince.

“I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you take one for your country?” He was looking as if he’d just thought of something great, but what had he actually come up with?

“Take one for my country?”

No one knew what he was talking about. While everyone listened on, puzzled, Mr. Fisalis repeated his question in a lower voice.

“You and Viola will divorce.” The prince was saying something absolutely crazy.

“What?” Both Mr. Fisalis and I harmonized in our shock. *Huh? Us, get divorced? And he thinks he’s going to make us do that? For our country? What? What the heck is this guy saying?!*

The moment he heard what that idiot said, a freezing aura that would shake even Bellis started emanating off of Mr. Fisalis. It was about five times worse than the atmosphere a moment earlier!

This is bad. Mr. Fisalis has a sword... Yeah, he’s got to—he was working up until just now. No, Mr. Fisalis, we’re in the palace right now! I’ll have to hold his sword back.

The atmosphere around us and the feeling Mr. Fisalis was giving off had changed, but the crown prince didn't seem to care (or did he just not notice?).

“You two will divorce, Viola will become my queen, and the Duke can marry my younger sister Orangé. Our countries' friendship will be cemented. Isn't that a perfect idea? You agree—right, Orangé?” With a self-satisfied face that just screamed, “Damn, I'm smart☆,” he loudly called out to his sister.



When Mr. Fisalis had finally shown up to the party, Princess Orangé (who had been in the center of the hall until then) had locked her gaze on him as she approached. Rather than being summoned by her brother, it was more like she just wanted to get closer to Mr. Fisalis. *What is my husband, a magnet?*

But this guy is missing a few very important screws. Everyone is glaring at him and he doesn't even notice. I could only stare at him disdainfully, but then...

“Wow, what a wonderful idea, brother! I’m definitely much more of a catch than your wife, aren’t I, Duke Fisalis? Right now I’m dressed in Flüran *haute couture*, so I look completely different than when you saw me back at the palace, right? I do admit that your wife is beautiful enough for my brother to fall in love with her at first sight, but she’s just a frail stick. Women should have a little meat on their bones...”

His dumbass sister... I mean, Princess Orangé was all for her brother’s suggestion. *They really are related! And is “meat on their bones” the norm in Aurantia? Ah, that’s not the issue here. And who are you calling a stick?!*

Seeing as they were trying to make a couple divorce for their own benefit, I was starting to doubt Aurantian morals. *Is that really something royalty should be saying?! Take a cue from our king here!*

While I was busy being irritated by Princess Orangé’s words, Mr. Fisalis cut her off.

“No—how wonderful Viola is can’t be described by shallow words like charming or beautiful. She’s dainty, but lively, and not only is she lovely to look at, but she’s amazing on the inside, too. Really, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that her inner beauty shining out helps make her more physically beautiful. She has the strength to properly manage and protect our manor while I’m away, and she’s also kind enough to consider other people. She’s the owner of a gentle heart that can cherish and love everyone around her.”

Here Mr. Fisalis was going off on one of his “I LOVE MY WIFE” spiels! *Stop! We’re in the palace right now! If I didn’t get him to stop soon, things’d end up like they did back with Miss Verbena that one time! I’m glad he’s talking back to Princess Orangé, but please just stop!*

I grabbed his arm, crying out, “Mr. Fisalis, please, stop right there!”

“Why? I need the Princess to understand just how wonderful you are...”

“If you appreciate my good points, that’s enough!”

“Hmm... That’s true. I’d actually want to keep you all to myself.”

“Right?!” I was desperate to get him to quit talking. *Ah, Corydalis is laughing like mad! Oh, this is humiliating!*

While Mr. Fisalis and I were arguing and forgetting our surroundings...

“I told you, didn’t I? Duke Fisalis dotes on his wife, and as you can see, they’re very happy together. We couldn’t force them to divorce for the sake of our country,” the queen told the Aurantian siblings, driving the point home.

But...

“Really? I thought it was a great idea.” The crown prince still thought he was brilliant.

“It was. Both of us would have been perfectly happy...” Princess Orangé did too.

You guys may have been happy, but your abuse of power would’ve been unbearable for the two of us!

“Well, that’s that. Please forget about both of us,” Mr. Fisalis said flatly as he pulled me close and planted a kiss on my cheek. *Trying to take advantage of the confusion, huh! But it’s important for us to show exactly how happy we were.*

Ignoring my own embarrassment, I cuddled right up to him. *Yes, we’re a lovey-dovey couple!*

“Let’s head home, Vi.”

“Yes!”

Mr. Fisalis had switched from his severe look to his usual sparkling smile, and I gave them all my best twenty dollar smile, too.

And so, we were finally able to leave the exhausting party. My energy was just about zero.

6. After the Party

I was absolutely drained after that night's get-together. I mean, I'd been tired after going to other social events, but this was on a whole other level. How is it that the biggest impression I had of the entire thing was "some selfish crown prince who wouldn't listen and couldn't read the room—and his sister, too—went on a rampage"? *The two of them were absolute idiots. Were they even right in the head? Especially that prince! Now that I'm calmer, I'm just so angry.*

But regardless, I was completely out of energy. Even just putting my feelings into words was too much effort. Mr. Fisalis and his parents were in the carriage with me, but I couldn't even muster the energy to put on a polite smile. Instead, I was slumped in my seat, wearing a distinct frown. Luckily, no one was getting on my case about it, and I was so thankful for that.

But I wasn't the only one who was angry. While I seethed in silence...

"What is *wrong* with them?! *That's* their crown prince?! Why in the world would the Aurantians send someone so stupid to deal with another country? Are they making fun of Flür? And what was with that sister of his, too? She even managed to get Her Majesty the Queen, who's basically seen *everything*, to stiffen up like that... Ahh~ Just thinking back is making me upset all over again. Cercis, go back and attack Aurantia again! That country needs to be burned to the ground!"

Mother Fisalis's beautiful eyebrows were so deeply furrowed in anger that they were nearly vertical. The folded fan in her hands creaked as she squeezed it with all her strength. *It's bending—you're gonna break it!* But it kinda felt nice, having her say exactly what I was thinking.

I was silently stewing in rage, Mother Fisalis was fuming, and both Mr. Fisalis and his father looked cranky. The mood on our carriage ride home wasn't great at all.

"I've always thought they were complete fools, but I didn't think they were *this* bad. I understand that with both their king and second prince under house arrest, *that* group was all they could send, but... The foreign ministers must be

at their wit's end, bringing them along... Or at least, they *should* if they've got any brains in those heads of theirs."

"You mean Flür's foreign ministers?"

"Both Flür *and* Aurantia's," Father Fisalis said, exasperated.

To think that a foreign prince (the crown prince of a country that we just defeated, to boot) would publicly propose to a married woman! Worse, he wanted Mr. Fisalis and I to divorce "for our country" and remarry the Aurantian royal siblings. No matter that I'd only ever heard of him secondhand, I didn't think he'd be that stupid. He's their crown prince, for goodness sake! How the hell was he raised?!

"If that prince's divorce plan was ever somehow accepted officially, we'd still be absolutely against it, so don't you worry."

"Of course, father. If it ever happens, we shall raise the flag of revolt!"

"Great idea!"

Mr. Fisalis and his father were getting really worked up, to the point where they were talking about starting a rebellion. The scary thing was that they'd actually do it too.

My husband still looked upset, but he squeezed me a bit closer, his arm still around me from when he'd first pulled me away. Normally, I'd get embarrassed about it, but I didn't have the strength left in me to resist. I was just letting him do as he wished, but at the moment, I found it kind of calming.

His other hand was holding mine tightly. It was the same hand the crown prince had been gripping, but this felt completely different. The prince's gnarled hands had been overbearing, as if he was trapping me without hope of escape, but Mr. Fisalis's hands were strong, but a gentle and soothing kind of strength. Back then, I'd missed his hands, which were elegant despite wielding both a pen and a sword. It was like he was surrounding and protecting me, maybe? The feeling of relief I got just cuddling up beside him was amazing... I might end up falling asleep.

When that now-familiar manor finally came into view through the window of the carriage, all of the tension just left my body. Once I'm inside, I'll be safe! It's

my sanctuary! I was really completely exhausted.

I sighed in relief just seeing the faces of the servants who came to meet us, and after seeing my in-laws back out to the cottage left me feeling even more at ease, I completely ran out of energy in the entranceway. My legs just gave out!

“Whoa?!”

“Viola! Are you alright?!” Mr. Fisalis said, catching me just before I crumpled to the floor.

“I’m just so relieved to be home that I went a bit weak at the knees~” I tried to smile to smooth things over as Mr. Fisalis picked me up in his arms... although what I said was actually true.

Seeing me so exhausted, Stellaria and Dahlia both rushed up to me, their faces pale pale.

“Madam looks incredibly tired. Did something happen?” Dahlia asked Mr. Fisalis.

“Yeah, a *lot* happened today. I’ll bring Viola to her room. We’ll talk more later. Stellaria, look after Viola for now.”

“As you wish.”

“Rohtas, Dahlia, come to my room. Ah, and call for Father as well.”

“Yes.” Mr. Fisalis was giving orders as he ascended the staircase, carrying me in his arms. *They’re probably gonna be talking about what happened tonight. Sorry, I’m too tired to participate, so I’ll leave it to you guys!*

My bedroom was all set for me to drift off to sleep. I mean, it always was, but seeing how much the servants cared really warmed my heart at that particular moment.

Setting me down gently on my bed, Mr. Fisalis said, “Okay... I need to go talk with Rohtas and everyone else. You just get some rest, okay, Viola?”

“Okay.”

“I’m leaving everything to you, Stellaria.”

“All right.”

After giving both of us a few words, he left the room. And once I heard the door latch shut behind him...

“Ughhh! I’m exhausted! I’m gonna have a bath and then get to bed. I really want to sleep, like, forever!”

I’d love to go straight to bed, but I need a bath first! I’m gonna relax, soaking in my nice, warm tub! As I hobbled towards my bathroom...

“Should I assist you with your bath tonight?” Stellaria said, rushing to support me.

Oh no, I’m fine! No matter how tired I am, I can at least bathe just fine. Don’t roll up your sleeves like that!

“I’ll be okay! I’m a big girl!”

I was so tired I wasn’t quite sure what I was saying, but I gently pushed Stellaria away as I politely(?) declined. Doing my best to avoid meeting her worried gaze, I stepped into the bathroom. She didn’t follow me inside, but it seemed she was going to wait just outside the door. Usually, she just waited in my room. *Oh, but I do remember getting dizzy in the bath once when I was exhausted, and everyone got super worked up about it. Gotta watch out for that.*

Once I’d washed myself all clean and sunk into my nice-smelling bath, I was in paradise.

“Mmmm... This feels so nice... Oof! Ack! Whoops, nearly fell asleep there!” It felt so nice that I actually lost consciousness for a second, and woke up when my face hit the water. *Whoa, that was dangerous. Getting dizzy in the bath has nothing on nearly drowning in it! That would end up causing way more trouble than last time. What am I doing? I literally just told myself to watch out!*

“Madam! Are you all right?!” Stellaria cried, slamming the door to the bathroom open as she did.

Gyaaah, don’t open the door! I’m naked!

“I-I’m okay! Just got a bit of water to the face, that’s all☆”

“Really? All right, then.” Giving me a suspicious look, she went back outside.

Whew...

After narrowly avoiding falling asleep in the bath yet again, I headed straight to bed. *I'm just gonna stop thinking about everything that happened. I can do all that thinking tomorrow! For now, I just wanna sleep... Zzz...*

The next morning, my in-laws joined us for breakfast. It was unusual that they took the trouble to come to the main manor from the cottage.

"Today, His Majesty and I will be speaking to the Aurantian crown prince. Well... Less speaking, more lodging a complaint."

"I see. I'll leave it to you, then."

As we drank our post-meal tea, Mr. Fisalis and his father started continuing their talk from last night. Mr. Fisalis was wearing his uniform this morning as well, so the complaining was probably gonna be done during working hours. Father Fisalis was just nodding along; apparently he wasn't going to the palace today.

Then, Mr. Fisalis looked at me. "Viola, you are not to go outside until *they* finally leave."

"Okay? So business as usual, then." Why was he pushing that so hard? Who did he think he was talking to? *I'm the great Madam Shut-In. Where does he think I'll go, when I'm nearly always here in the manor? Also, Mr. Fisalis is just calling the Aurantian's "them" now?*

My husband looked pleased with my answer, nodding before he continued. "If that crown prince tries anything—coming for a face-to-face meeting, trying to give Viola a personal letter, etcetera, throw him right back through the door," he said to Rohtas. "There's no need for you to be hospitable."

"As you wish."

"Don't worry. If he comes to complain, I'll deal with him myself!" Father Fisalis said, thumping his chest. *Reliable as always!*

"But what about that party in three days? Will we just be leaving Vi home?" After listening to the rest silently, Mother Fisalis chimed in with her question.

What? There's another party in just three days?! And the way she worded that

sounds like I'm supposed to attend! I did a double take at this new information. *What's with these parties so close together?!*

...Oh, yeah. Going to parties is just like breathing for most aristocrats. Duh.

But still, it was just three days away. What was this party about? *I've never gone to two parties one after another before! And no one ever told me about this one!* Since I didn't know anything about it, I'd just have to listen to everyone else to find out.

Mr. Fisalis raised his eyebrows at his mother's question. "Of course we will. She doesn't have to come," he replied seriously.

Yay! I still didn't know what the party was for, but I got an official okay to skip out! Lucky me☆ "Okay! I'll take care of the manor while you're all gone!" I said, giving them my brightest smile as I announced that I'd be a good girl while they were away.

"Lord and Lady Fisalis will be staying in the main building for a period, so you *cannot* act like you usually do." After returning to my room once breakfast was finished, Dahlia put the last nail into my coffin.

What? So my in-laws are gonna be moving into the main house from the cottage?

"What, really? When was *this* decided?!"

This was totally news to me. Hadn't they been having a grand old time having the cottage, all by themselves in their married bliss?

"It was decided last night, by Master and his father. Master wanted to raise the manor's security while he's at work. Please do try to behave yourself, at least for a while."

This was probably what Mr. Fisalis called his father and the servants into his room for last night. So Father Fisalis is babysitting me?

"Is that why they were talking about turning that prince away at the door?"

"Yes. We need to be prepared for any possibility."

"...Okaaaaay."

I know it's a bit late to be asking this question, but... If I have to behave myself, what I'm I supposed to do all day?

7. You're Taking it Back?!

Mr. Fisalis has forbidden me from leaving the estate, and on top of that I've been told to behave, so what in the world am I supposed to do with myself?

"Guess I'll go to the garden to take care of the flowers."

The weather was lovely, and gardening was an in-law-approved activity, so I could be obvious about it. If I was in the gardens, I could take care of my flowers, or pass the time weeding! But then, just as I was about to make haste to the gardens...

"Please wait a moment, Madam," Rohtas said, stopping me in my tracks
"Huh? What? Is something up?"

I thought he'd given u—er, I thought he approved of my gardening. Was it suddenly a problem today? I turned to him, confused as to why he'd stopped me "Instead of gardening, let's do some martial arts training." Rohtas was standing behind me with a grand old smile. *Wah, the pressure! He's sooo intimidating! And there's a bit (well, more than a bit) of darkness seeping out from behind his smile!*

I can't defy him when he's like this... But I'll still try!

"B-but it's not raining today! It's so nice out, the garden is calling my name!"

"There's no rule saying that you cannot practice on a sunny day." Rohtas was still smiling. My resistance amounted to nothing.

"...Okay." I nodded reluctantly (or maybe I just hung my head in disappointment).

Rohtas just gave me another smile and a big nod of his own. *Ah, the darkness is fading...*

"Well then, I'll go call for Bellis, so please get yourself ready. Stellaria, please dress Madam in traditional formalwear. Maybe overdress her a bit."

"All right! How overdressed?"

"Put her in the heaviest dress she owns. It would be even better if it was

covered in embroidery and jewels.”

“Okay. What about shoes?”

“Highest heels.”

“Understood!”

While I was standing there hanging my head, Rohtas and Stellaria were deciding how to dress me up.

“What?! What do you mean get ready?! Formal *and* overdressed?! What is happening?! I’m scaaaared!”

It seemed that I was going to practice no matter what, because Stellaria dragged me back to my room. And they said *formal*. Like, dressed to the nines! I’d been forced... er, I’d *done* a few training sessions all dressed up before, but this would be even more difficult! I’d be unsteady in my high heels, and the dress would be heavy and hard to move in.

All of my party dresses were light and easy to wear, but more traditional formalwear was made with thick, heavy fabric, and covered with embroidery and gems. Despite their elegant appearance, they were incredibly heavy, so they were only worn at important palace ceremonies like coronations.

But seriously, putting me in formalwear? I’m sorry, I’ve never been to a coronation before (since the current king came into power before I was even born), so I’ve only ever worn it after marrying into the Fisalis family, and then only during lessons. Even just that is basically torture for me.

And after practice, I knew they’d make me do more hallway sprints. Running at full speed from one end of the U-shaped hallway to the other! Bonus points for making the two sharp turns well or not☆

...No! It’s too hard! It’s tiring! Are prestigious duchesses supposed to do this much physical exertion?!

After a review of everything I’d learned so far while in formalwear and high heels, they really *did* make me do the hallway dashes. It was insanely difficult. I nearly gave up halfway through! *Why are they making me go through this grueling practice? Seriously, why?!* By evening, I was totally zonked out and

dripping with sweat.

“I think I’d make a much better servant than a duchess. This *sucks*. It isn’t fun, and it’s *hard*!”

I had a quick bath to wash off all the sweat and got a healing massage from the Spa Squad before Mr. Fisalis came home. I just let it all happen, since I didn’t have the energy to resist. *But it did revive me a bit, thanks!*

“Once you’re used to it, you’ll be able to do it all in your sleep,” Stellaria comforted me as if it was nothing. *That is totally impossible though!*

“I’m never gonna get used to it!”

“Oh, don’t say that. This is all for your protection, Madam.”

“...When you say that, I can’t *not* do it...”

If anything ever happened to me, I’d cause the Fisalis family a lot of trouble, which also meant that I’d be causing the servants trouble and making them worry to boot. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. We’d already had that incident with the ruffians in Le Pied. If anything like that ever happened again, it wouldn’t hurt to be able to protect myself...

Which means I have no choice but to do my best.

I was back in business after my bath and massage. Just when I’d managed to regain a bit of stamina, Mr. Fisalis returned home. As always, I met him in the entranceway, and after seeing him off to his room to go get changed, I headed for the dining room. While I waited for him there...

“I apologize, but Master and the former Master are having a bit of a chat, and they have asked for you to wait a few moments for them,” Dahlia said, passing on the message.

“Oh, really? Okay.”

“They shouldn’t be long, but would you like some tea while you wait?”

“Okay... Maybe some herbal tea, to perk me up a bit.”

“As you wish,” she answered, and the maids waiting behind her instantly began preparing a pot of tea.

What could they be talking about that needed to be settled before dinner? Mr. Fisalis, both his parents, and Rohtas were nowhere to be seen, so they all must've been talking together. *After yesterday, it might be about that stupid crown prince. Mr. Fisalis mentioned that he was going to lodge a complaint with him this morning, after all. Could it be related to that?*

Whatever. Today was pretty peaceful, so they must've gotten everything sorted out. All I have to do is stay at home like always and wait here in the manor for that group of Aurantians to leave.

Although I was told it would only take a few moments, it actually took three full cups of tea for them to finally show up in the dining room. *My stomach is full before I've even eaten anything.* Both my in-laws and Rohtas followed Mr. Fisalis in, so I must've been right about the talk being between the four of them.

"I'm sorry for making you wait, Vi."

"Oh, don't worry, I was just relaxing here drinking some tea. Are you all finished talking?"

"Yes."

Now that all of us were finally here, our food was brought out.

"Viola, last night I got a little ahead of myself and said you didn't need to go to the next evening party—but we've decided you really must," Mr. Fisalis said apologetically as he settled down for his after-supper tea.

W H A T ?!

I nearly spit out my tea. *He said before that I didn't have to go! He did, right? Can you really go back on your word like that?!*

My mouth was just hanging open. I wanted to protest, but I was so shocked nothing would come out.

"U-Um, you said before that I didn't have to go..." I managed to squeeze out, but it wasn't much of a protest. *Damn you, chicken-Viola!*

"I'm sorry. I did say that, but the situation has changed," he continued, still apologetic.

"...Situation?" What did he mean? Did something happen at today's talk?"

“Yes. I spoke with the man earlier, asking him what in the world he was thinking, proposing to a married woman—and telling us to get divorced for our country, at that. I also said that we’d *never* divorce and I had *ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION* of marrying the princess.”

He really emphasized the “*ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION*” part.

“I see.”

“It seems that he’d cooled his head overnight as well, because he listened. He apologized to both of us and said that he’d give up and find his partner at the next party.”

“Wha?!” *Wait just one second!*

I was completely shocked again at what Mr. Fisalis said. *Should the crown prince of a country really be finding his future queen at a party?! I mean, this isn’t at all like when some lady is looking for a husband, right?* It seemed that the astonishment was written all over my face, because Mr. Fisalis chuckled at me.

“He won’t be picking at random! They’ve already got a list of potential candidates. He’d just be choosing one of them.”

I see. That makes sense. I should’ve thought of that... Aah, I was so worrie— Wait, no! Why does this mean I have to go to the party?!

“B-But doesn’t that mean I don’t need to go?”

I got that the crown prince would be choosing a queen at the party, but I didn’t see how that was linked at all to me going or not.

“I wasn’t thinking straight earlier when I told you that you didn’t have to come. Now that I’m calmer, I realize that His Majesty will be attending, and you were invited specifically. Don’t you see how it would be bad if you didn’t attend?” He was smiling, but for some reason I just got the impression he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Grr, I thought social events were optional! Ah, but... I suppose if we really can’t turn it down, I’ll have to attend.

“But... I didn’t *know* there’d be a second party,” I muttered, doing my best to

resist.

“Would you like to see the invitation?” Full-on grin. *I don’t need to see it, I know that it probably specifically says “Bring your wife, too☆” somewhere!*

“...If you’ve got proof I’ve been invited by name, I guess I haven’t got a leg to stand on.”

“He’s apologized, so everything should be fine.”

...But don’t you find that a bit suspicious? Whoops, my true feelings are slipping out. But, seriously—I don’t really believe that those two royals would actually take the hint and apologize.

“...” Since I didn’t really believe that they’d changed their minds, I didn’t know how to respond.

“Don’t worry, Vi. I’ll protect you if anything happens,” Mr. Fisalis declared, looking straight at me. Once he’d said *that*, I really couldn’t say no.

When I looked at my in-laws, they just smiled and nodded. Rohtas did too. *I’ve got no choice, then.*

“Okay,” I agreed, incredibly reluctantly.

I’m still not exactly sure why Mr. Fisalis’s attitude about the situation changed, but everything should be fine if he’s saying he’ll protect me if anything happens. There were still things I was hung up on, but it’d be unacceptable for me to boycott anything the king himself was going to.

Okay, I give up. I’ll go.

8. Well-Prepared Means No Worries?

The next day.

“Good morning, Madam.”

“...? Good morning? Huh, is it time to wake up already?”

Dahlia had come to get me. Normally, I would already be awake by the time she showed up, but this time I’d been sleeping so soundly that I hadn’t even noticed her come in.

“No, this is much earlier than usual.”

“Hmmm, really? What’s up? Do I need to go see Mr. Fisalis off?”

“No, that’s not why.”

I got out of bed, having a big stretch while Dahlia put a shawl around my shoulders.

“Is he gone already, then?”

“Yes, just a while ago.”

“That’s so early!”

I had opened the curtains when I was getting up, and it was still slightly dark outside. If I was gonna be woken up early, I would’ve preferred that it be early enough to say goodbye. *Though that would be a matter of me getting up by myself. Sorry.* But if it wasn’t to see him off, then why was I being woken up now?

“Is there something I need to do this early?”

“I’d like to show you something. It’s still a bit chilly outside, so we’ll get you dressed first,” Dahlia said, moving to my closet and pulling out my usual clothes.

I see—so we’re going outside. And since I still wasn’t allowed to leave the grounds, it must be somewhere on the estate.

After getting myself dressed, I obediently followed Dahlia as she led me through the manor. We went downstairs and past the servant’s dining room, so

we were probably headed to the little corner of the garden that servants tended to use on their breaks. There, I saw the maids waiting for us. There were fifteen in total, so they were all here! Mimosa was still off duty and Stellaria was there in her place, so the total hadn't changed.

Though it was still cold enough that you'd end up shivering if you stayed still, the maids were all waiting quietly, clutching their brooms, rakes, and mops. They were only dressed in their usual uniforms, but they must've been concentrating really hard, since none of them seemed to notice the cold. When they saw me, they all gave a bow before standing back at attention.

Were they gonna be taking care of the gardens...? No, they wouldn't need mops for that! I quipped back at myself, wondering what was going on, when...

"Begin your drills!"

After Dahlia's dignified shout echoed through the garden, the maids all started to duel each other with their cleaning implements! Stellaria had a broom, while Rosa fought with a mop.

What was this?! Had the maids always trained this way so early in the morning?! I had no idea! All I could do was watch their practice in mute amazement. The satisfying clacking ringing through the gardens wasn't from wooden swords, but everyday cleaning tools.

"You're leaving your side wide open!"

"No problem at all!"

A maid with a broom and one with a rake were having a suspenseful close-combat battle... With cleaning implements. Rake Maid, who had seemed to be in a bad position, had dodged Broom Maid's finishing blow, quickly changing stances and regaining her strength.

Whoa... That's so cool...! Morning exercises... Or rather, warm-up duels!

The maids were in groups of two or three, practicing battling with their cleaning tools/weapons. I had completely forgotten about the cold, watching them on the edge of my seat.

"Do you guys do this every morning?"

“Yes.”

“But everyone should have concealed weapons, shouldn’t they? Why not use them instead?”

“We do train with them some days, but today just happened to be one where we trained with whatever we might have on hand,” Dahlia explained as we watched.

That’s right. During my training, I’d been taught to use whatever I could find as a weapon. I get it—so this was a demonstration!

“Drills, over!”

With another brisk shout from Dahlia, they all stopped at once, straightening their uniforms and calming their breathing. Then...

“Let’s all do our best today. Everyone, to your stations.”

“Understood!”

And with that, they scattered to their usual workstations.

“By training like this every morning, we’re able to be ready to protect you if anything happens, Madam. Regular practice is key.”

“Ahhh, thank youuuu~!”

Oh my! So I wasn’t the only one training after all! All of the servants did daily drills to keep their skills sharp. I need to stop whining and take my training more seriously!

“...Hm?”

“Is something the matter?”

Just as I had decided to work harder during practice after seeing the maids at their drills, I glimpsed three familiar backs heading towards the main gardens.

“Dahlia, that’s Rohtas, Cartham, and Bellis, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“What are they holding?”

“Rohtas has a longsword, and Bellis has an ax.”

I couldn't see what Cartham was carrying, but where were they going with all that dangerous stuff?

"Are they training too?"

"I don't know," Dahlia answered, seemingly confused.

"Can I go see?"

"If you wish. I'll accompany you."

With that, we chased after the three men, finding them stopped under a big old camellia tree.

"Rohtas! What are you guys doing over here?"

"Ah, Madam. Good morning. We were just about to cut down this old tree."

"Really? Isn't that just Bellis's job?"

"We're using it as an opportunity to practice a bit ourselves. Please step back, Madam. It's dangerous to be so close."

"Okaaay."

"Now, Madam. Let's go," Dahlia urged, and we walked a bit away from the men.

The three of them each had the weapon they were best versed in—a longsword for Rohtas, an ax for Bellis, and carving knives(!) for Cartham. *Oh, so those kitchen knives of his double as weapons! I guess that's not too strange—cutlery can hurt you pretty easily.*

"This should be all right," Rohtas checked with Bellis.

"Yes," Bellis nodded back.

What exactly are they going to do to cut down the tree? I know an ax would work fine, but kitchen knives?

And then... *Thunk!* Bellis swung his ax hard into the tree trunk with a heavy thud, knocking down the camellia fruit that had been weighing down the branches.

"Wah! What a waste!"

“You can pick them up later, Madam.”

“You knew exactly what I was going to do!”

I’d almost dashed out to try to save the fruit, not wanting them to go to waste, but Dahlia had a comeback ready. And while Dahlia was holding me back, the other men began to attack the falling fruit.

Swish! Rohtas brandished his sword, swiping twice. Beside him...

Shushushu! Cartham was chucking carving knives, normal knives, and forks. Where the heck had he been hiding those?

After Bellis took another few swings with his ax, the old camellia tree fell down with a thud.

“That wasn’t as hard as I thought. I’d hoped it would present more of a challenge,” the three men said in unison as they straightened themselves up. At their feet were camellia fruit sliced right in two, or with knives and forks sticking out of them.

“Was this the only tree that you wanted to replant?” Rohtas asked, wiping down his sword with a handkerchief.

“Yes.” Bellis nodded again in reply.

“These should be enough to keep our cleaning stock up for a while. What do you think, Madam?”

“Why not use the fruit oil in a dessert? You love those, don’t you, Madame?”

“Madam, would you like to plant the new tree with me?”

All three of the men picked up the fruit and brought it over to me.

“Oh wow, this is great! We’ll do our best with cleaning! And dessert tastes great when you eat it after a good workout! I’ve never grown a camellia tree from a seed before, so I’m excited!”

Then, we all headed back inside the manor together.

It was still early morning, and I’d found out I wasn’t the only one who was training. I needed to suck it up and work hard without whining!

After having breakfast at our usual time, my special training started again, just

like it had the day before. I was doing close combat today.

“Use anything close to you as a weapon, just like the servants you saw training this morning.”

“All right!”

“If there’s no cutlery close by, even your ring can be used as a weapon.”

“What?! My ring?!”

“Yes,” Rohtas replied, pointing to the shining ring on my left ring finger, which matched the one worn by Mr. Fisalis.

Oh yeah, it’s thick and set with heavy gems, so it’d probably hurt a lot if you punched someone with it, but... What if those delicately set stones came off...?

“It won’t be damaged easily. It was designed with this use in mind,” he quipped, seemingly having read my mind. *Amazing, Rohtas!*

“O-Okay!”

“Since it’s on your left hand, make sure to focus on attacking with your left. You’re right-handed, so your blows will be weaker if you don’t concentrate. Angle yourself like this, with your left side in front... Squeeze your fist closed tight and aim for the vitals.”

“Wha—? Where are the vitals? I don’t know that!”

“Hmm... The best target might be the solar plexus. Other ones are the chin, temples... If your opponent is a man, their Adam’s apple, or their most *vital* of vitals.”

“Okay, you don’t need to elaborate on that last bit!”

Rohtas gave me a rundown of the vital spots throughout the body. But I was nervous just about being asked to punch someone, especially with Bellis as my target!

“Don’t worry. I’ll dodge it right before your fist lands,” said Bellis, moving his face closer so I could hit it easier.

Gyaaaah! Even if I know he’s gonna dodge, I still can’t punch him! And wait, why should I practice a dodgeable attack anyway?

As I faltered in front of Bellis, Rohtas urged me on. “Practice makes perfect, Madam.”

“No, but...I can’t punch him!” I cried, on the verge of tears.

“Do your best!”

Normally, Rohtas would give up and stop the lesson, but today he was pushing me on! *What’s up, Rohtas?! Are you in a bad mood?! You’re just bone-chillingly scary right now!*

“Wahhh! I’m sorry, Bellis!” Since he was leaning down, I aimed a punch right at his temple! But, of course, he caught it before it hit.

“Too half-hearted,” Bellis said, still holding my fist.

“Faster! You aren’t putting enough strength into it,” Rohtas yelled encouragingly.

Wasn’t all of my martial arts training up until now self-defense? When did we start adding offense into the mix? Is it because offense is the best defense? Asking me to aim for someone’s vitals when I’ve never punched anyone before in my life is just too much!

Waaaah! I have to go to that party, and my training is super strict—everything is just so hard!

9. A Little Time, For Once

Although I thought I'd be living my easy shut-in life, instead I ended up spending three whole days building up my physical strength and combat skills. Then, the time of the next evening party had finally rolled around.

The renewed assaults from the palace (or rather, the Aurantian crown prince) that Mr. Fisalis and his parents feared never came to pass, so things had been peaceful. *Yes! I'm able to concentrate on my training!*

...Don't actually know what I'm aiming for there, but....

When I went down to the dining room for breakfast, Mr. Fisalis was already there—and not wearing his uniform. *Wait, why's he in normal clothes?*

"Good morning. Do you not have work today?"

"Nope! I've got the day off, so we can go to the party together."

"I see!" So *that's* why he wasn't in uniform. *And as usual, I don't know a thing about my own husband's days off*☆

I still very incredibly *extremely* wasn't looking forward to the party, but it was comforting to know he was coming with me! *With him there, no one'll try to talk to me, at least.*

Apparently because he was home, my only lesson that day was some easy dancing.

"Yes, Madam—your steps must be flowing. And your lead is impeccable, Master."

The two of us danced in time with Rohtas clapping to the beat. *Man, it's so much easier to dance with Mr. Fisalis's wonderful lead.* Whenever I almost lost my balance, he'd casually pick me back up, and he never once stomped on my feet! Now that I had a point of comparison, Mr. Fisalis was seeming better and better.

Compared to dancing with a terrible dancer like that prince, Rohtas's lessons are nothing... Ahem! I mean, I must be getting pretty good if I'm thinking that

these lessons are a breeze. Or at least, that's what I was feeling, oddly enough. And Rohtas had gotten on Mr. Fisalis's case for letting his skills get rusty, so the duke had taken up practicing on his own. Neither of us were getting much of Rohtas's strict *encouragement* now.

Ah ha ha ha! We've both grown!

"Oh, that's right, Mr. Fisalis— isn't this your first day off in a while?"

"Hmm... You're right. I've had to give up my days off for work lately."

"You leave early and get back late, so you have no time to relax, do you? You'll make yourself sick like that!"

"Are you...worried about me?" he asked. *What's with that shocked look?*

"Of course I am!"

"Thank you! I'll be taking some time off once *those two* leave."

"Please do. And relax as much as you can today."

Since we didn't want to exhaust ourselves this early, our dance lesson ended on a moderate note. As we were walking towards the dining room for lunch, "The weather is beautiful, so why don't we take a stroll in the gardens?" Mr. Fisalis suggested.

"That's a great idea! Ah, why don't we have our lunch outside, too? Some of the flowers will be at their most beautiful right about now!"

"Yes, let's. The temperature is nice, so we can relax."

"Okay!"

And so, after our dancing session, we decided to eat our lunch out in my personal garden before lounging in the sun a bit. Mr. Fisalis had been working himself to the bone lately, so I wanted him to relax as much as possible. Though we had that party looming over us, we had some free time until then. We admired the beautifully blooming chrysanthemums as we ate the sandwiches that had been made specially for our little picnic.

This was the first time in a while that Mr. Fisalis and I had relaxed together. Since I was completely in chill mode, the idea of going to a party just felt awful.

Did we *really* have to go?

It seemed I was the only one wondering that, though.

“We should begin getting you ready,” Dahlia said, giving me one of those hard-to-resist smiles when she came to get me.

“I was totally in chill-at-the-manor mode...” I whined, hanging my head.

“Oh, don’t say that. You just need to get through one night, so try to put a little effort into it,” chided Mr. Fisalis.

Awww... Even Mr. Fisalis is getting on my case about it, despite the fact that our “Let’s not go!” “Good idea!” back and forth was becoming a running gag! (Rohtas getting mad at us afterwards was also a running gag.) I felt a bit betrayed.

Mr. Fisalis stood up before holding out his hand to me. When I took it and stood up, he was kind of staring at me. *What’s up?*

“Mr. Fisalis?”

“...”

When I looked up at him in confusion, he pulled me close for a tight hug.

“Wah?!”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing, and even if anything happens, I’ll definitely protect you.”

I was surprised by how different the air about him was than usual. This is the first time he’s said anything like that before we went to a party, isn’t it?

“What’s up all of a sudden?”

“...I mean, you’re always dancing with other men...”

As I looked up into his beautiful dark brown eyes, he gazed back at me before turning his head away. The hug tightened too.

...Wait, is he jealous? He’s blushing as he looks away. Wait, no—this is too cute!

“I mean, it’s kind of unavoidable~ Socializing is my job, isn’t it? But I’ll be more

careful today,” I replied, hugging him back. As I did, he finally looked relieved. *Damn, what’s with him acting like a cute little animal or something?! Is he going for, like, emphasizing the difference between his looks and his actions?! Well, damn...I gotta say, it’s working!*

“Let’s head back,” Mr. Fisalis said, letting me go reluctantly.

“All right.” It was late enough that we really did need to start getting ready. It takes a lot of prep work to get someone as plain as me ready for high society. Mainly there’s a lot of special effects makeup, more special effects makeup, and then some special effects makeup on top of that. Sometimes the dress helped, too. If I wasted my time here when we were running out of it, I’d be causing trouble for Dahlia, Stellaria, and all of the other maids.

After slipping out of his arms, I quietly followed Mr. Fisalis as he led me by the hand back to the manor.

And once again I was put in a dress, decorated to the nines, and after all that effort work/social mode Viola was finally complete. My gown was the same burgundy color as last time, but with a different design. It was probably made to match Mr. Fisalis’s uniform. But more than anything, I was ecstatic that it was made of light, soft silk! I had been stuffed into my best dresses (with very heavy fabric, very heavy decorations, and the maximum amount of everything) for a few days by now, after all.

I’d gotten so used to those super heavy dresses that it almost felt as if I wasn’t wearing anything at all! *Light, loose dresses are so comfy!*

“Wow! It’s not heavy, or stifling!” I cheered happily, spinning in place. *It’ll be easy to dance in this!* And my shoes weren’t those stiletto heels I’d been practicing martial arts in, but ones with heels half the height that were easy on my feet. “My feet won’t get tired with these!” I cried when I realized. *Turning corners will be simple in these! Oh wait...guess I won’t be doing that* While I was getting happy about all those simple things...

“Today’s dress looks wonderful on you, Madam. Let’s get your jewelry on, too,” said Stellaria, promptly putting on my necklace, earrings, and my usual ring—my beautiful, sparkly ring that matched Mr. Fisalis’s. *Which can also be a deadly weapon if needed, apparently... I’m gonna pray that day never comes!*

As I stared at the ring, Dahlia and Stellaria both gave me strained smiles, seemingly reading my mind.

Once I was all done up, I went down the stairs and found Mr. Fisalis all ready in the salon. *Sorry for making you wait...*

Today, he was wearing proper party clothes instead of his uniform. It'd been ages since I saw him in something other than that! Dark colors suited him. He looked wonderful and manly in his work clothes, but dressing properly like this really brought out his handsomeness too.

By the way, our matching items today were his ring, tie, and pocket square. All of the little details matched. Yes, it was pretty much obligatory by now.

"I'm sorry for making you wait!"

"I wasn't waiting long. Let's get going right away, though."

I greeted Mr. Fisalis as he sat on the sofa, and he folded up whatever document thing he'd been reading and put it in his inner pocket before walking up to me.

"You're looking your best again today, Viola. Sometimes I wish I could keep you locked up here at the house."

"Please, I'd love it if you'd lock me up!"

"But I can't. Not today. Ah, I should've slacked off more on preparations."

What's wrong, Mr. Fisalis?! You usually go along when I say something like that! But today, he was all for me going out to socialize. Rohtas didn't even need to pop in!

And hey, what do you mean by slacking off on the preparations?

"If I don't get all dressed up, no one would even notice me."

"That's ridiculous! Your beauty shines from within!"

"Stop that already!"

He was on the verge of having an "I Love My Wife" attack, so I slapped my hands over his mouth. *Don't do that here! Rohtas is so shocked that he couldn't even get in a dig at us!*

After we finished our little back and forth, we headed for the carriage porch. The carriage was already there, but my in-laws were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, are Mother and Father Fisalis not coming with us tonight?”

“Mother was called to help Her Majesty with her stress, so she left before us.”

“Ah, I see.” Probably she was going there to chat with the queen and help her relax that way. Of course, I’m sure I don’t have to mention the *source* of said stress.

Despite how crazy they acted, the Aurantian siblings were technically Flür’s guests, so the royals would’ve still had to deal with them after we all left. Princess Orangé had made even a social pro like the queen slip up last time. I felt bad even just watching. I couldn’t imagine how anxious the queen herself had been.

And with that, we boarded the carriage.

“Have a nice time.”

“Please be very careful.”

Rohtas and the others saw us off, but what did they mean by that last little bit there?!

10. Matchmaking Party?

Our carriage swayed back and forth as we rode to the palace.

“Tonight’s party is being held so the crown prince can pick a queen from the candidates who’ve been invited, right?”

“Yes. And not only the crown prince, but the princess as well. That’s why the guest list is quite small. There’ll be even fewer people than last time.

“Ah, I see.”

Since they’re choosing Aurantia’s next queen, they can’t have anyone with too low a rank. But they’re looking for someone to marry THAT prince, so I don’t think it’s the time to be too picky. ...Ahem... Oh my, I let my true thoughts slip~ Ohohoho~!

While I played straight man to my own jokes and tried to laugh it off in my head, Mr. Fisalis gave me a puzzled look.

“Just saying, but... while all of the dukes and marquises will of course be there, the only other ones invited are the children of nobles with the rank of earl or higher. It is a crown prince looking for a queen and a princess looking for a family to marry into, after all. Can’t have anyone too lowborn, after all,” he explained.

My thoughts were right on!

“Is Miss Verbena the top candidate for the crown prince’s wife?”

She was the daughter of a prestigious family ranked only just after the Fisalises and was just the right age. I couldn’t think of anyone who would be a better candidate.

“She was, but both she and Celosia did everything they could to get out of it! She even blurted out that she already had someone her heart was set on! Aha ha ha!” Mr. Fisalis replied, laughing as if this was all hilarious.

So the sister did the same thing as her brother! Isn’t that abusing your authority a bit too much, Argenteia family~?! But what Miss Verbena said kind of made me worried.

“Someone she has her heart set on...” I said, staring directly at Mr. Fisalis. The person she had previously had feelings for was...

“No, no! It’s not me! I heard from Celosia, but yesterday Verbena and Duke Argenteia were talking...”

According to Mr. Fisalis (or Celosia?), after the party at the Argenteia estate a while ago (which was a matchmaking party for Miss Verbena too, now that I think about it☆) there’d been mountains of marriage proposals pouring in for her, but Miss Verbena hadn’t looked at a single one. This seemed to be how it went down.

Duke Argenteia: “If you don’t want to marry anyone in Flür, why not become the queen of Aurantia instead?”

Miss Verbena: “Huh?!”

Duke Argenteia: “They’re choosing candidates for the crown prince’s wife, and you’re the top of the list.”

Miss Verbena: “Don’t even *joke* about that! Why should I marry *him*?!”

Duke Argenteia: “You’re the daughter of a prominent family just like the Fisalises, about the right age, and you have no fiancé. You might as well have been *begging* to be a candidate.”

Miss Verbena: “Don’t decide that for me! I...I already have my heart set on someone!”

Duke Argenteia: “You’re still on about that? Cercis is married and very, very happy with his wife. Didn’t seeing that make you give up?”

Miss Verbena: “It isn’t Cercis! It’s someone else!”

Duke Argenteia: “Then introduce him to me!”

Miss Verbena: “I’ll start looking for him now!”

Duke Argenteia: “Huh?! Well, with that personality of yours, I can’t even imagine you being a match for *that* crown prince, in any case...

And so, the duke had sighed and agreed to tell the king to give up having his daughter as a candidate for the match.

Whoa. Go Miss Verbena. But...

"That means..." She doesn't...actually have someone she likes?

Knowing how I was going to finish that sentence, Mr. Fisalis grinned. "Even Duke Argenteia saw what the crown prince did and how he acted at the last party, and then considered Verbena's personality. He put it all together and decided that they wouldn't work, even as a political marriage, so she was taken off the list."

"So in the end, the person Miss Verbena has her heart set on..."

"Is that special someone she'll find someday."

What the heck is that all about?

"...So who ended up being chosen as candidates?"

"One daughter of a duke and two daughters of marquis, making three total."

Three! So someone got the short end of the stick... Or maybe it'd be more accurate to say they pulled the joker!

By the way, out of the usual four party-going girls, both Miss Iris and Miss Nastersham could potentially be among the candidates, just going by their rank. *It wouldn't be surprising, but I have mixed feelings about it.* While I was wondering who the candidates might be, though, Mr. Fisalis continued.

"Ah, that's right. Your friend Lady Sanguinneah is one of the candidates," Mr. Fisalis said after pondering for a bit.

I'd just been thinking the same thing, so I was really surprised! *Did he read my mind?! But I guess I was right then and Miss Iris was a candidate, huh?*

"You mean Miss Iris?" I asked, just in case she had any sisters I didn't know about.

"Yes. Celosia mentioned it."

So it really was Miss Iris. He nodded when he heard her name.

"Wow... I hope he doesn't pick her."

"Since she's your friend, I agree."

For a while after that, an indescribable silence descended upon our carriage.

Just as Mr. Fisalis had said, the palace's hall was much less busy than last time due to the limited guest list. It was a cozy little gathering that felt almost home-like.

Though they had picked out several official candidates for the crown prince's bride, apparently it was okay if he took a shine to any of the guests, so ladies in his age range who were the daughters of earls or higher had been invited. The same was true for the princess, so men close to her age (and with parents of the appropriate rank) were also invited. *Really, why didn't they just straight up call it a matchmaking party?*

As always, Mr. Fisalis and I held hands as we headed over to greet the king. This would all be pretty normal, but of course Aurantia's crown prince—the star of tonight's party—was sitting right beside His Majesty! I *really* didn't want to deal with him, though. I was absolutely done with his piercing gaze and how aggressively he went after me.

Though I was already dead set on avoiding the prince as much as possible, it seemed as if the same couldn't be said for Mr. Fisalis.

"Your Majesty, thank you so very much for your invitation tonight. Your Royal Highness, a fine evening to you, as well." He must've been used to it, because he just flowed into a perfect knight's salute. *B-Beautiful*. I rushed to follow his example (without looking like I was rushing, of course!) and lowered my head.

"How wonderful of you to attend tonight, Duke Fisalis, Duchess Fisalis."

"Good evening, Duke and Duchess Fisalis. I'm glad to see you both again."

"Good evening."

The king returned our greeting with a big smile, but the crown prince and Princess Orangé gave absolutely normal greetings. It was kind of anticlimactic. The crown prince wasn't giving me that same laser-beam stare he did at the last party, but instead was just... normal. Had he really changed his tune like Mr. Fisalis said? For now, I just bowed deeply to him.

And now, the evening party had officially begun.

11. A Plain Party

Though he wasn't smiling brightly, the crown prince of Aurantia gave us a perfectly polite greeting with no sharp looks. His gaze today was mild. After we finished that anticlimactic greeting, Mr. Fisalis and I continued to hold hands as we walked through the hall.

Tonight was a bit more casual than a state function—more like a social gathering.

...Although I wonder if there's anyone who actually wanted to get closer to those siblings... Whoops, that was rude of me.

Since the event was also intended for the Aurantian siblings to meet with their officially chosen marriage candidates, I'd heard only young men and ladies had been invited, but something seemed off.

"...Hm? Isn't it a bit...*plain* in here today?"

"...You think so too, Vi? I'd just been thinking the same thing."

Ooh, what a coincidence! Mr. Fisalis and I were actually of the same mind for once!

None of the ladies or gentlemen here were sparkling like they usually would! Every girl who would usually have been decked out in the latest fashion and fighting to show it off were all plain for some reason. The colors were plain, and the designs were all fairly old-fashioned. Normally, a party would be filled with bright and bold hues, like a colorful flower garden. Tonight, though, everyone was in something muted, like an olive brown or maroon.

They're all so young, but their choices are so subdued! I was glad I ended up wearing a burgundy dress. I would've stuck out like a sore thumb if I'd come in blue or orange or something. *Thank you, Mr. Fisalis's uniform!*

And most shockingly, although normally everyone would be in the center of the room waiting for dance invitations, most of them were standing along the walls today. *Hey, wait! That's my sanctuary!* A few people were dancing, but once they were done they immediately retreated back to the walls. *Wow!*

Wallflowers sure are popular—they're in full bloom today! All the blossoms are so boring-looking, though... Isn't that weird?

It wasn't just the ladies who were plain tonight either. Usually I'd be seeing the men confidently inviting the ladies to dance, but tonight they were clumped up in little groups, chatting or whispering to each other.

Seeing the men all lined up, Mr. Fisalis kept muttering things like, "Huh? Did that guy always have glasses? And ones that are so unflattering, at that... I thought he put a lot of care into keeping himself stylish..." or "His beautiful blond hair was his pride and joy, but now it's a dull brown!"

What? So some people even came in disguise! And disguised as unfashionable, at that!

"...They're probably all trying their best not to stand out."

"Ah, that makes sense~"

Mr. Fisalis and I kept whispering to each other as we looked all around the hall. Even though some candidates had been picked out especially for him, nobody would have minded if someone else caught the crown prince's eye. That meant all of the ladies were doing their best to keep themselves hidden, in case he took a liking to any of them! The young men were probably thinking the same thing—what a nuisance it would be if someone like *that* Princess Orangé fell in love with them.

The both of us wandered the hall for a while as we observed, but...

"Duchess, may I have this dance?"

Though there were fewer than usual, people still approached us. This was my job as Duchess Fisalis. I was used to it now, since it happened so often. Resigning myself to my fate, I answered immediately. "Of co—"

Or at least, I tried to reply with my usual "Of course~", but I was cut off halfway through.

"I'll be keeping my wife all to myself tonight. Please excuse us," Mr. Fisalis turned down the offer *for* me, stepping in front of me as though to block me from view.

What?! I did a double take. Ah, but he had been acting jealous before we came! I completely forgot I had decided to be careful tonight.

Though I expected the noble that Mr. Fisalis shot down on my behalf would be upset, he responded, “Oh, I see! Please excuse me, then,” and gave me a tepid smile before walking away.

I was thankful that Mr. Fisalis had turned down the dancing, since I always get so exhausted prancing around all night, but what did he mean by “all to himself”? While Mr. Fisalis said that so boldly with nary a shred of embarrassment, I was there behind him shrinking in embarrassment. *I’m happy you turned the guy down, but couldn’t you let him down gently?!*

“Mr. Fisalis! It’s fine that you declined his invitation for me, but what do you mean by ‘all to yourself?’”

“Huh? You *are* all for me, aren’t you, Vi?”

“Wrong!” *You could’ve said it in another way!*

After that, every time someone came to invite me to dance, Mr. Fisalis shot them all down. *Was he actually jealous earlier?* All of this meant that I didn’t dance with anyone at all tonight, which was really unusual. *If I end up going all night without dancing, it’ll be a new record! Not sure of what, though.*

Just as I was thinking of sitting and having a cup of tea, I heard something surprising.

“Well then—may we dance for the first time in ages, Madam?” Mr. Fisalis asked me jokingly.

Ooh, a dance with Mr. Fisalis, huh? “Of course! Come to think of it, we don’t dance often in places like this.”

“You’re right.”

Our most recent party dance would have been at...the Argenteia’s evening event. *Not actually very far in the past, I guess.*

Giggling between ourselves, we joined the group of dancers.

“You usually don’t say anything when I dance, so why can’t I dance with anyone else—today of all days?” I asked him a silly question as we slowly

waltzed.

“I’m always watching you dance with other men, consumed with envy. That’s why I’m monopolizing you today: to make everyone *else* jealous.”

“Oh, you joker!”

“Hahaha!”

How does Mr. Fisalis always say things like that so easily, and without even looking the least bit sheepish?

He lifted me up gently and made a graceful turn that made the hem of my dress swirl out. *That really put us in the spotlight, huh?* Mr. Fisalis seemed to like doing that.

“I’m already always getting jealous stares from enamored ladies, you know!”

“No, they’ve just got their eyes glued on you—because you’re so wonderful.”

“Absolutely not!”

While Mr. Fisalis (who was being extremely sweet today) and I chatted and danced away, we suddenly heard the room start to buzz with conversation. While I wondered what was up, it turned out that the crown prince had come to the dance floor with a partner.

“His Royal Highness is gonna attempt dancing again today, huh? He’s incredibly awful at it. It was horrible trying to keep up with him.”

“Ohh~ You said it, Viola,” Mr. Fisalis said, laughing. *I was serious, though!* “His partner is... Lady Sanguinneah, apparently?”

“What?! Miss Iris?!” I couldn’t see them from my position, but it seemed Mr. Fisalis had a good view. He stealthily turned us a bit so that I could take a peek, and I did indeed see Miss Iris hidden behind the crown prince’s huge frame.

“Must be time for him to chat with the candidates.”

“Wow... Miss Iris looks so unhappy! Her smile is way different from usual.”

Normally, she’d narrow her almond eyes a bit and smile as if she was genuinely having fun, but today you could see how forced it was. The smile wasn’t reaching her eyes at all!

And what was with her dress tonight? It was dull pink and frilly, the kind of thing that might have been in fashion a while ago. She'd worn something like it when I first met her, but that style had been relegated to the closet lately. Color-wise, that dress had been a lot cuter too, instead of being so muted.

Ah, she must be trying to match Princess Orangé! Or not.

It was unthinkable for Miss Iris to cut corners like this when she used these parties to hunt for a husband. Like, she *really* wasn't putting any effort into this. You could just feel how much she absolutely did *not* want to be his queen. *But where did she get that dress? She's usually so gorgeous and beautiful, but today she's doing her best to act plain.*

"Ah, they just stepped on each other's feet." Mr. Fisalis nearly burst out laughing.

"She's usually great at dancing." Miss Iris was always a wonderful dancer, but she was stomping on the prince's foot and missing steps. She seemed to be quite upset, actually. No—she was probably doing it on purpose. Looking closer, she seemed to be stomping on his feet in response to him stepping on hers.

Speaking of the crown prince, he was still as awful as ever. *I know, it's really hard to keep up with him! I speak from experience.*

I couldn't really say it out loud, but when someone doesn't like their dance partner but can't turn them down (if they're higher rank, for instance), they sometimes fake being terrible at dancing or making conversation, to try forcing their partner to reject them instead. Miss Iris was doing just that.

No matter how you looked at it, their dancing was mismatched. Miss Iris didn't look happy, but the crown prince seemed to have lost what little interest he had in the beginning.

"Looks like he doesn't like her very much at all."

"You're right. Good job, Miss Iris!"

If this kept on, she'd never be chosen as Aurantia's next queen. I was relieved.

12. Things Get Going

After that, time passed, and before I realized it was quite late at night.

Unusually, I'd been with Mr. Fisalis the entire night. At every evening party we'd gone to up until this, we'd been separated most of the time we were there.

Since Mr. Fisalis was refusing every request for me, I hadn't had to dance with anyone but him, so I was a lot less physically tired than usual. The two of us just chatted a bit and took things easy. *If only every evening party could be like this~*

"It's pretty peaceful, huh?"

"I hope it stays that way."

And so our conversation went as we got some sweets to snack on and drinks, taking a little break. The sweets were all delicious, just as you'd expect from the palace chefs' hard work! *Ah, and yes—I had taken my usual medicine.*

Glancing over to the dance floor, both of the Aurantian royal siblings had partners, while the crown prince had changed from Miss Iris to someone else.

Smiling with absolute confidence, Princess Orangé was in another classic, super frilly dress today too. It seemed that no one had given her any fashion advice yet. She had a massive sparkling necklace hanging on her wide-open cleavage, with a huge teardrop-shaped emerald on the top. It was probably really expensive.

I'd mentioned *a couple of times* that the crown prince was an awful dancer, but this was the first time I'd seen the princess dance. And you can guess how good she was from her brother's skills...

"...I'm nowhere near good enough to lead *that*."

"Mr. Fisalis~!" Hold the sass! I mean yes, like her brother, she's a bit...very far away from the skill level needed to dance in front of others, but...

My husband sighed in disgust.

But ignoring all that, the two foreign royals both seemed to be having fun

dancing and chatting with everyone, marriage candidate or not. *I wonder if they'll hit it off with anyone. There's no accounting for taste, after all!*

While I was thinking all that and taking a break...

"Vice Captain Fisalis, a moment..." said one of the waiters as they approached. What did a servant need from Mr. Fisalis? Ah, looking closer, it was one of his subordinate knights that I'd met before. *Oh my. When did he switch jobs? Oh, he probably hasn't switched jobs at all... He's probably here on duty!*

Minding his surroundings, Mr. Subordinate whispered in Mr. Fisalis's ear while my husband nodded quietly.

Had something happened? Mr. Fisalis's job was full of secrets, though. I probably shouldn't have been watching, so I averted my eyes and looked around the room.

"Vi. Something urgent has come up, so I'll have to leave for a bit," Mr. Fisalis whispered in my ear this time. This *had* to be something to do with his job!

"All right." I gave him a small nod back.

"Listen carefully. Stay here until I come back," he insisted with a serious look. *I've never been shown around the palace, so I wouldn't be wandering around alone anyway, you know!*

"Okay."

"I'll be right back."

"Yeah. *I get it.*"

After seeing me nod, Mr. Fisalis and his subordinate casually left the hall. *Must be hard, being in the Royal Guard.*

And so, I was left all alone. What to do? Normally I'd move to the wall, but it was already at full capacity (wait...does a wall even have a capacity?). The ladies who were trying not to be noticed had all taken up positions there, so there was no room for me. *Boo hoo.*

Next, I tried searching for my parents, who would probably save me. But of course they hadn't shown up. Neither my brother, Thistle (age ten) nor my sister, Freesia (age eight) were of comparable age to the Aurantian siblings.

Much to my great relief, of course!

Then I thought of my in-laws and started searching. Luckily, I found them easily. They were in their usual special seats near the throne, so it was hard to miss them.

Father Fisalis was chatting with the king, while Mother Fisalis was with the queen. Her Majesty had apparently given up on dealing with the Aurantians! That was a good thing, though. *They should be putting their efforts into meeting people today. It's like she was leaving everything to us young'uns.* I definitely didn't have the courage to mix with the royals over there.

My next targets were the usual party four. Miss Iris had been dancing with the crown prince a while before, but she was freed immediately after. She'd probably reunited with the rest of the girls right about now. I looked for them with that in mind, only to see them all dancing with some young men.

Wow, they move fast! They're already back on the husband hunt! And since everyone here was of high rank, high office, and just the right age, I guess it was the perfect chance to get one. *If they find someone before they get chosen as one of the royal siblings' partners, they're home free! Two birds with one stone☆ ...Or not.*

Anyway, I shouldn't go bothering them. I'm married, after all. I know how to read the room.

I wandered in search of a place for myself. I was really feeling how few friends I had right about now. *It wouldn't matter if I had stayed a shut-in, but alas!* If I kept waiting in here, someone would probably invite me to dance, so I needed to find somewhere to belong fast. *Once you fall into the dance loop, you're dancing forever out of force of habit, after all.*

It wasn't as if I was opposed to dancing, exactly, but Mr. Fisalis had really seemed to not want me dancing with anyone else today. I thought it would probably be best to keep it that way.

As I wondered to myself what to do in the meantime, I found myself at the edge of the hall by the windows to the terrace, where you could see the gardens. Between the big glass windows was a door, so that you could easily go outside if you liked.

The only light outside was from the braziers throughout the gardens, so it was nice and dimly lit. I wouldn't draw attention there, and I didn't really want to talk or dance with anyone, anyway.

I'd been to the palace a few times, but I'd never had a chance to admire the gardens. I was always busy doing my job socializing, so I'd never had the chance.

Let's go get some fresh air! The terrace probably counts as "here" to Mr. Fisalis, right? There's only a single glass door separating it, so it's kinda like an extension to the hall.

Normally, I'd never even think of leaving the immediate area. I'd usually get through boring parties by using my special skill: Wallflower☆ But today, the walls were at full capacity, and there was nowhere for me to squeeze in. But if I kept loitering around, someone would end up asking me to dance. Mr. Fisalis really didn't seem to want to let me dance with anyone else, so I thought I should probably avoid it.

"Stay with me." "Stay inside the hall."

Mr. Fisalis had been sure to remind me of these things, but I ended up feeling arbitrarily safe in the garden because there was only a single glass window separating the area from the main hall. Though he wasn't currently with me, Mr. Fisalis *was* here, and his subordinate was here too, disguised as a servant. That must have been what made me lower my guard.

I casually stepped through the glass door and outside.

The curtain of night had fallen outside, covering the world in pitch darkness. The moon wasn't out, so the only light in the area were the braziers scattered around.

Just coming outside alone had freed me from the stiff emotions I'd still been feeling. I took a deep breath for a change of pace, and the cold but slightly floral scented air sure was refreshing! *Oka~y, I'm all ready to fight to the finish!* It was just as I took a few more and decided to go back inside that I overheard something...

"...It seems we successfully lured the Duke...away."

I could hear someone talking quietly a bit away from where I was.

...*Who was it?* Since they were keeping their voices down, I could only hear bits and pieces. I quieted my breathing and listened carefully.

Next, a different voice spoke up. “My! Things are going great! Just what I’d expect from my brother.”

“Of course.”

It was a woman’s voice, and I could hear it loud and clear since she wasn’t lowering it much.

...That’s Princess Orangé, isn’t it?! Then the other person should be the crown prince, right? I heard her say “brother.”

Realizing who the speakers were gave me quite a start. Looking surreptitiously over to try and get a glimpse of their faces, I saw them a short distance away on the same terrace, with one big burly body and one small chunky one faintly illuminated by the lights from inside—and their deeply chiseled features. It was definitely the Aurantian royal siblings.

I quickly hid in the shadows behind a nearby pillar that was holding up the terrace above us. Whew, never thought my keen wallflower skill would come in handy like this! I probably shouldn’t make any movements. I should just watch and go back inside after they do. I quieted my breathing even more as I looked on, and, “All that’s left is the kidnapping part, right? No oversights in our plan?”

“Of course not.”

They kept having their *very* interesting conversation without noticing I was there.

Who was the “duke” that they’d lured away...? I hadn’t heard a name, but could they mean Mr. Fisalis?! He *had* gone off somewhere after his subordinate whispered something in his ear.

Could the subordinate have been working for the Aurantians...? No, no way. Nothing I’d heard about Aurantia so far would suggest they could offer anything worth deserting over.

Anyway, after he left the hall, what had happened to Mr. Fisalis? And they

were gonna *kidnap* someone?! Lure him out and kidnap *him*?! I felt the blood drain from my body at the dangerous words. *Oh no...am I anemic? Wait...no.*

Wait just one second. I'm getting upset. Calm down, Viola. I quietly took a few deep breaths.

...Okay, I'm a bit calmer now. But no matter how I look at it, Mr. Fisalis is in trouble, isn't he?!

13. Confusion

The Aurantian royal siblings were planning to lure Mr. Fisalis out and kidnap him.

Whoa, I just overheard something huge! I was so shocked I stopped breathing for a second.

We were right outside of the big hall where the party was being held. Unlike the crowded scene inside with all the partygoers, the royal siblings and I were probably the only ones here. To make matters worse, I was sure things would go really badly for me when they found out I had (accidentally) been eavesdropping on their evil plot.

Now, I've just gotta use my carefully cultivated stealth skills to their fullest and become one with the wall. Doing my best to stay silent, I moved myself to an even darker spot. Thank goodness the moon wasn't out tonight. Aside from the light spilling out from the hall and the braziers scattered about, it was pitch black out there!

And so, I held my breath as I stuck myself as close as physically possible to the wall and disappeared into the darkness. I needed to listen in case they said anything else important! But despite all the care I was taking, that had apparently been the end of their secret chat. Both of the siblings just returned to the main hall without any further fuss.

"Whew~ That was a shock."

I took a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

...No, there's no time to waste waiting for yourself to calm down, Viola! Mr. Fisalis is in trouble right now! I need to tell him... Or actually, I need to tell anyone!

This time, I sneaked back into the hall myself. I couldn't let *them* know I had been outside up until now! I cracked open the glass door, observed the area for a while, and slipped inside once I was sure no one was looking. *Luckily, I did manage to get back inside without anyone noticing, but what should I do now?*

...There's no way I'm going to be able to handle things all on my own, so I should tell one of the knights. And thinking of knights I knew, Mr. Fisalis's subordinates from the former Special Operations Squad were the only ones who came to mind. According to Mr. Fisalis everyone had happily(?) transferred to the royal guard, so it wouldn't be unusual for them to be handling security around the hall.

Ahh, but they kind of have a special job ensuring public safety rather than guarding the royals specifically, so they might be taking care of the entire palace's security instead.

Oh, but the guy who came to fetch Mr. Fisalis a bit ago was disguised as a waiter. Wait...then... Could that mean the whole squad might be scattered around the entire venue in disguise?! Or maybe they're actually doing their cover jobs and guarding the important people here? Which one is it? Gah, you guys are making this way harder than it needs to be! Oh, I guess that's actually their job, so I shouldn't be complaining.

Anyway, if they were disguised, then I figured I should be able to find one in here. Once inside, I casually looked around the venue for waitstaff. There might not have been that many guests comparatively, but the crowd was still fairly large. That'd mean they'd need quite a few servants to take care of them all. In their uniforms with white jackets and navy blue slacks, they were easy to find in the sea of fancy dresses, but...

...I'd never seen any of these people before in my life.

The waiter (or rather, knight) that had whispered in Mr. Fisalis's ear had left the hall with him. I was pretty sure I examined the face of every single servant in the party venue, but I didn't recognize any of them. That must've meant that everyone aside from that guy was an actual servant—which also meant I shouldn't go blabbing super important things to them! I needed to take a different approach.

My next targets were the people who were very obviously associated with the knights, like the captain of the royal guard on standby beside the king, or a few others I could see. Since I'd never met them before, it'd take a bit of courage to go up to them, but this wasn't the time to be a wimp.

But... Though they were wearing burgundy uniforms and had swords at their hips, they were all positioned in really inconvenient places... The captain was right behind the king, while the other knights were behind the seats for the guest of honor. There was no way I'd be brave enough to jump in *there*!

Plus, since those were the guest seats, of course *those two* were sitting right there, as if they hadn't just been outside whispering to each other about some evil plan. *They're really pissing me off!*

If I went up and tried to whisper in the captain's ear, *they'd* know in an instant. And if they got suspicious, that'd put Mr. Fisalis in even more danger! *Wah... It's all over! I'm really in a pickle now.* My only option is finding someone from the royal guard outside of the hall!

Doing my best to hurry while still looking elegant, I cut through the hall on my way to the door leading out to the hallway.

"Miss Viola? Is something the matter?"

"Ah, I'm just a bit overwhelmed by all of the people... I'll just be heading outside for a moment to calm myself down."

I heard Miss Iris address me just as I was about to leave, but I just gave a simple answer since I was in a hurry. And because of that...

"There...really aren't enough people here to overwhelm you like that..."

Miss Iris's muttering didn't reach my ears.

It was easy getting out into the hallway, since people were coming and going throughout the whole party. Once I heard the footmen quietly close the doors behind me, I looked around for someone from the royal guard, but...

"Huh? Seriously?! Do they really not have *anyone* out here?!" I couldn't help but complain to myself when I saw the situation.

There wasn't a single knight out here guarding the doors! The hallway was completely empty save for the luxurious chandelier hanging above. The beautifully polished marble floors shone in the light, making the hallway seem even bigger.

Hey, don't slack on the job—oh, wait. The hallway *wasn't* actually completely

empty. The knight guarding the door just wasn't directly beside it, but instead standing a ways away where the hallway turned. *Maybe they don't want the party to look like it's too heavily guarded? I dunno.*

The knight was wearing burgundy, but they weren't one of Mr. Fisalis's subordinates. *Wah, I'm kinda nervous now. I'm not really shy, but it'd be easier to talk to someone Mr. Fisalis knows about something as delicate as this.*

But this is no time for hesitation! Gripping my hand into a fist and pumping myself up, I stepped towards the knight.

"Oh, if it isn't Duchess Fisalis. What are you doing out here?"

With excellent (or maybe horrible?) timing, the door opened behind me and someone started to speak.

Wait. I have nothing but bad feelings about this. An icy chill ran down my spine.

Since whoever it was called me by name, I had to respond. Grudgingly turning around, I saw the crown prince of Aurantia standing in front of the closed door.

I knew it! I was super careful leaving the hall, though, and you were in the middle of a conversation in the guest seats! What are you doing out here now?! You are absolutely the last person I wanted to see!

Freezing in place, I couldn't do anything but stare. He had a smile plastered on his rugged face, and our eyes met.

His lips are smiling, but his eyes sure aren't! He was smiling at me just like he had at the last party. *Is he trying to kill me with his gaze?!*

No, I can't let him get to me here. Danger warnings were going off loudly inside my head. *I gotta evacuate, stat!*

Forcing my face, which wanted very badly to contort into a grimace, to smile instead, I responded, "I, um, just wanted to go see the gardens!" I gave him a ladylike little bow as I tried to take my leave, but...

"The gardens aren't this way," he chuckled.

Ohh. That was a decent retort! I know very well that it isn't! Dammit, Viola! Think of a better excuse!

I thought I was calm, but I'm actually starting to panic right now... No, no, I don't have time for this.

"Ah...ah hah hah! Right! Here I am going the wrong way, since I'm not familiar with the palace. Okay, bye!"

"Are you feeling ill? You look a bit pale."

I tried to laugh it off, but he wasn't buying it. *I'm pale and grimacing because of you!*

"I'm just a bit overwhelmed by the crowd..."

"That's not good. Ah, why don't you have a rest in one of the waiting rooms they've prepared."

"I'm fine!" I replied quickly. *I don't have time to rest! Although, since I'm talking with one of the people concerned, it might be okay to take a tiny breather... Wait, no! Ahh, I really am panicking!*

Even if this guy (I'm not even gonna bother referring to him properly anymore☆) is here, one of his underlings might be going through with the kidnapping as we speak. And the guy was inching closer to me as we spoke. I really didn't know why.

"I'll be fine after I rest a bit—don't worry!" I tried politely... No, *very strongly* rejecting him while backing up to keep the distance between us, but he was having none of it.

"Oh, don't say that," he chided, reaching towards me.

He's not buying it! And at this rate I'll be caught, too! This is bad!

The royal guard at the corner had to have noticed our back and forth, and walked towards us asking, "Is anything the matter?"

"Um..." I couldn't really tell the guard that Aurantia's crown prince was planning on kidnapping my husband right in front of the prince in question, so I stood there flustered, trying to think of what to say.

"I'm just taking care of her since she feels a bit ill. Nothing's the matter," the prince answered, putting an arm around my shoulder and hiding me from the knight.

The guard isn't going to see that I'm actually Duchess Fisalis like this!

"I'll bring her to one of the rest areas."

"Oh...they're a bit farther in."

"All right."

After getting directions from the knight, the crown prince started steering me towards the rest areas.

Wait, wait, wait! At this rate, I'm gonna get kidnapped too! I mean, better me than Mr. Fisalis, but I wouldn't be able to tell anyone about the danger if that happened! I need to run!

Shaking his hand off my shoulders, I bolted off at my top speed away from him. *But wait! This is away from the royal guard!*

14. RUN!

Though it was all well and good that I'd managed to run away from Aurantia's crown prince when he was about to capture me, I'd actually ended up running the exact opposite direction from where the royal guard was standing. *But I'll run into another knight soon enough. We're in the palace, after all!*

The clacking of my heels against the marble flooring echoed through the halls.

"Why are you running?"

Because you're gross... Ahem, I mean, scary! I shot back internally.

I could tell he was right behind me, so I just ran like hell. Tonight's shoes had a thick heel, so they were quite stable and easy to run in. The stiletto heels I practiced in didn't have good balance, so I had to be careful as I ran.

But with these I might make my best time yet!

...Not now, Viola! Anyway, the heels on these shoes were half the height and double the thickness of my usual ones, and they had great grip! I could do corners perfectly in these.

Lifting the hem of my light, loose-fitting dress so it wouldn't get in the way, I sprinted through the halls. As I did, I should've run into at least one knight guarding the palace, but instead...nothing. *Really? I've gotta keep running until I get somewhere the knights will definitely be.*

As I thought that, though... I realized I actually had no idea where I was running! I hadn't spent much time in the palace up until then, so I had no idea what the inside was like! *Well, actually...it would probably be a big security risk if any detailed maps of the palace's interior were easy to obtain.*

Anyway, I could count the number of times I'd been here on one hand, and the farthest inside I'd ever been was the reception hall—which also happened to be right near the entrance. So basically, I'd barely been inside. The garden where I'd had tea with the princesses and the sanctuary where Mr. Fisalis and I had been married were outside of the building, after all.

I decided to aim for the gardens. If I managed to get out there, I'd be able to

follow the walls and find my way back to the hall! Mr. Fisalis told me to stay there, so I should go back to my starting point and calmly consider what to do.

Unfortunately, all of this thinking seemed to be slowing me down.

“You needn’t run... Ha ha ha!”

He nearly caught up to me. *That was close. And laughing while you chase me makes you sound even creepier! Ah, I said he was creepy☆* I ran through the long, straight halls as fast as I could, but suddenly hit a dead end. *Turns are fine, but why would they have sudden dead ends?! Ah...*

“I think I remember a book mentioning that the palace hallways were complicated in case anything happened...” *Wow... Bit late to remember that, isn’t it?*

As I wondered what to do about the sudden dead end, I heard the crown prince’s footsteps behind me.

“You’re...pretty fast...Duchess Fisalis...” He was closing in on me, despite the fact that I’d almost lost him back there.

But don’t underestimate my special duchess training! No, that’s not the whole story. Between housework, martial arts, and dance lessons, I’m quite confident in my stamina!

No, Viola, now’s not the time! Don’t stop now! We need to keep struggling, even if we don’t know where we are!

Turning on a dime, I dashed around the prince, rushing down a turn a ways back. Since he was so big, he couldn’t make sudden stops while running so fast.

“Ughhh!” he cried, falling.

Okay! I’ll use this chance to make more distance between us! Since the hallways are all well lit, they must go somewhere, even though there are no windows. This isn’t a dead end! Full speed ahead!

Unfortunately, I came to another dead end shortly after, and had to turn back yet again. *Ah, jeez, is this a maze or something?!*

After repeating this pattern a few more times, I didn’t make it to the gardens, but actually ended up going up a staircase! *What the heck are you doing going*

upstairs when you want to get outside, Viola?!

But what was done was done. I sped upstairs and started tearing through the halls at top speed again. *I needed to find another staircase down ASAP!*

My legs were starting to tire from all of those dash-stop-dash intervals. I might've been confident in my stamina, but even I had limits.

Plus, despite running through the palace so much, I hadn't seen even one single knight. *Isn't security a little thin, here?! Did they post too many knights near the hall? No—there was only one there, and I wouldn't be in this situation if there were more! This is just way too weird. I'm gonna complain to Mr. Fisalis about this!*

But from the fact that I hadn't seen any knights (or even servants) after all this sprinting, the chance of finding one while running aimlessly through the halls was slim. If I wasn't gonna run into any, then I decided I should start conserving my energy.

Okay, let's just hide away in a random room instead! That knight earlier said that the rest areas were farther in, after all. Deciding I'd just wait somewhere for him to pass me by before going back to the hall, I grabbed the handle of a nearby door.

Kerchack! I tried pushing, pulling, and sliding, but the door wouldn't open.

"Locked, huh..."

Every door I tried was locked. The knight had said that the rest area doors were open, but where the heck were they? Near the hall? Took me way too long to realize that! Anyway, not a single door around me was unlocked.

Jeez. If all the doors are locked, that means I have to keep running! And after rattling all of the door handles as I ran, I'd ended up at yet another dead end.

"I've...finally...caught up to you...Viola..."

Is this the end?!

A chill ran down my spine as I felt him approach. *Ahh, his gaze is boring into me again. I don't even have to turn around to know.*

Despite running my highest speed yet (estimated), he'd caught up. I was just a

bit shocked. This was all happening because I didn't know my way around the palace and had tried to get into every room I passed to hide. *Wahhhh! I regret all that time I wasted! When I get home, I'm gonna ask Rohtas to get me a blueprint of the palace! He'd definitely be able to get one.*

But anyway, this prince is pretty keen and nimble... I mean, given his huge size and all.

"A-Aha! I felt like getting a bit of exercise, but now I've got no idea where I am. Huuuuuh? Where's the garden?" I forced my words out as I turned, only to see the prince standing a bit behind me and blocking my path. His face was smiling, but his shoulders were heaving.

"I thought...I could show you...to the garden...but you ran...and I've just finally caught up... Oh...you're quite the fast one, Viola..." He sounded *really* out of breath. Although I was one to talk, with my shoulders heaving, too.

As he steadied his breathing, the prince slowly inched closer to me. *Yep, this is definitely not a calmly-lead-me-to-the-garden kind of attitude! Why are you getting closer?!*

In the dim lighting, his eyes were less piercing and more...locked on. This was bad. His hands were fidgeting and he was still getting closer... Any way you slice it, getting caught by this guy was going to be bad.

The distance between us shrunk as we glared at each other. My back was to a wall, and I was facing an enemy (the prince). *So...do I punch, or throw? My only option here is violence. Ahh, I really didn't want to have to actually use my skills! But this is an emergency.* Since I was alone with an enemy, I was the only one who could protect me! This wasn't the time for me to worry about appearances!

I quickly thought about how I could possibly make it through this situation, casting about for something that could be used as a weapon...but we were in an empty hallway. My only weapon was the ring shining on my left hand. The prince looked pretty solid, so no matter how hard my ring was, I didn't think my punches would do any damage. My attack would probably be on the same level as a swat from a kitten.

What about throwing him? He was definitely in the heavyweight class, even

heavier than Bellis... Could I do it? I wasn't very confident, but I had to try.

I steeled myself. *I'm gonna throw him!*

The twitching smile I'd had plastered on faltered, and I glared straight into the crown prince's eyes. My change in demeanor made him pause for a second in confusion.

Now's my chance! I've got an opening!

"Graaaaah!! You're heavy, fatty~!!!"

Taking advantage of his pause, I jumped towards him, quickly grabbed him by the collar, and twisted my body. In the same moment, I swept his feet out from under him, lifting him up before flinging him to the ground.

Damn, he's heavy! He's way heavier than Bellis! Please forgive me for getting so mean!



“Wahhh!”

“Huh?!” Just as he screamed, a loud thud rang out. *Did the building shake? No, that was just me.*

I might’ve gotten a bit (a lot?) unladylike with my screaming, but I managed to throw the heavyweight prince down on the ground. Might is right (wrong).

“Whew...” My shoulders heaved with every breath. Brushing off my hands, I looked down to my feet.

There was a crown prince passed out in the middle of the cold stone hallway.

Okay. I made it through that crisis! It was well worth enduring all of that grueling training. *Rohtas, Bellis, everyone, thank you! Viola managed to protect herself! I’ll send some knights to collect the passed out prince later.*

Come to think of it, it was one thing for me to run off, but...why did this guy follow me? From what I heard of his conversation with his sister, their target was Mr. Fisalis.

...Mr. Fisalis! I still need to tell the knights he’s in trouble! I completely forgot my original mission! Since there weren’t any knights outside of the reception hall, I decided it would probably be best to go back there.

Or so I thought, but I froze as soon as I turned around. I’d run around pretty randomly, so I had no idea where I was. *Where am I? Who am I? Where’s the reception hall?*

And there are no windows in this hallway, so I can’t even gauge where I am by finding the gardens! Wahhh, am I lost in the palace?! Is backtracking my only choice? I don’t remember where I came from, but I’ll look for a staircase first.

“Gwaah!”

I had no time to waste. I’d decided, so I needed to act immediately! Stepping over the crown prince—quite literally—I started to retrace my steps, but something stopped me.

“Oh my. How pathetic, brother.”

I heard a woman’s voice from the direction we’d just come from, and she’d

said “brother.” It was his sister!

Wearing her horrifically out-of-fashion dress and clicking her heels on the floor, Princess Orangé approached, fanning herself with her gorgeous feathered fan.

What are you doing here? She’s not out of breath—was she expecting to see me here and could take her time tracking me down? I don’t understand!

While I silently stared, she gestured to the unconscious prince and asked, “You threw *that*?”

Yes, she called her brother “that.”

“U-Um... I think he just suddenly fell ill, maybe?”

“...It certainly doesn’t *look* like he suddenly fell ill. Well, whatever. It’s a good thing I’ve prepared for *unexpected accidents*,” the princess said, smiling. *Oh no, her smile is so creepy.* I had nothing but bad feelings about her preparing for “unexpected accidents”. She slowly walked towards me. I tried to keep my distance, but my heels quickly reached the unconscious prince, and behind him was a wall. I had nowhere to go!

Do I take the princess out too? Hmm, but I don’t really want to hurt a fellow girl. I’d prefer to get through this peacefully, if possible...

While I stood still, racking my brain for some way out of this situation, Princess Orangé put a hand to the sparkling necklace resting on her chest and plucked the teardrop-shaped emerald out of it. *Oh, that came off easy!* She held it out towards me as I watched in shock and flicked the top with her thumb. With a nice little pop, a hidden stopper came right off. *Huh...what a clever device!*

“All right, you need to take a little nap now,” she said, waving her fan over the stone as I stood frozen in surprise. Suddenly, I realized—it must have been a vial of some drug *disguised* as a gemstone!

With every swipe of her fan, a sickeningly sweet smell spread around me. *What is this?* Before I realized it, I’d already gotten a good lungful of it. It was so sweet, I could barely think straight.

...So sweet... I'm gonna puke...

As my consciousness faded, I saw Princess Orangé put the stopper back on the fale stone while she held a handkerchief to her mouth and nose. *Saving yourself? Hey, not fair!*

15. The Trouble Continues

“Mmm... Mmph? Mmmphmmphmmn?”

Translation: “Huh, what happened?! Wha—I’m tied up?!”

I also happened to be gagged.

After playing tag with the crown prince and finally managing to throw him to the ground, Princess Orangé had appeared out of nowhere and knocked me out with some sickeningly sweet-smelling stuff from a bottle.

So, where was I now? I couldn’t see much since it was pitch black, but I was lying somewhere, gagged with both my arms and legs bound. Since what I was laying on felt soft—both in texture and squishiness—I figured I was probably on a bed somewhere.

They must be planning to stow me away in here to keep me out of trouble so they could safely(???) kidnap Mr. Fisalis! Well, not on my watch!

I wiggled and wiggled.

I tossed and turned. I was like a huge worm wriggling in the darkness...or something like that. What I was actually doing was trying to loosen my bonds. I thought back on all of my training about getting out of various knots. My maids had a merry old time tying me up, but where the heck did they learn all of those rope techniques? Whatever the case, getting them all untied had been great practice.

But seriously, I never thought I’d ever need to actually *use* my escape skills... Although that shoulder throw back there was really good, if I do say so myself. It was super satisfying, but I also never thought I’d be doing *that* outside of practice, either.

As I pondered, I never stopped wiggling my hands.

Man, the person who tied me up didn’t do a very good job of it. My training back at the manor had always had me bound up super tight, and it kinda—no, it *really* hurt! A few times I was sure I was going to end up dislocating my shoulder. I remember one practice where I just tried to brute force my way out

and got a few bruises in the process, and then Mr. Fisalis ended up seeing it. I'd been so worried it was from falling out of that tree.

The knot itself wasn't that well tied either. Just wiggling it out bit by bit like our servants taught me was loosening it. Whoo, I was getting close!

As I fought with the knot, I thought back on how I'd ended up in my current situation. I could recall up to the point where Princess Orangé had dosed me with that super-sweet drug that was hidden in one of the gems on her necklace. But the next thing I knew I was in here, tied up on this bed.

Grr~ Damn that princess! What the heck was that?! I can still smell whatever that cloying stuff was! Gross!

But of course, my cursing stayed inside of my head☆ *Can't be making any loud noises here~ Quiet, quiet...*

I had no idea where I was, since the room was so dark that having my eyes open or closed didn't make much difference. It didn't seem like anyone else was around, though. Had I just been shoved into some open room, or had I been taken out of the palace already? I didn't know if there was anyone outside the room where I was, but I was glad I was alone. *If I'd woken up to that prince's face, I might've slammed him to the ground again... Er, I mean, that would've been a nasty thing to wake up to.*

The bed I was lying on felt really different from my one at home, so I definitely wasn't back at the manor. That meant I hadn't been lucky enough to get rescued while I was unconscious.

How long had I been out, though? I wondered if Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws were worrying about my disappearance. *I need to free myself and get back ASAP*, I thought to myself as I sped up my efforts to loosen the knot.

This is all my fault for leaving the reception hall too. If only I'd been more courageous... The (probable) Royal Guard Captain had been right there behind the king, with Father Fisalis right beside him. All it would've taken was a tiny bit of bravery... Well, not just a tiny bit, actually. A massive ton of bravery. In my case, I'd probably need the same amount of bravery as I would in a real life-or-death situation. If I had just put a liiiiiiittle bit more effort in, I could've told Father Fisalis and everything would've been fine. Ahhhh~ Jeez, I'm such an idiot.

I wasn't thinking clearly at all!

But it was way too late for me to be regretting my actions. I needed to focus on getting myself out of the situation I was in now!

I mentioned this earlier, but the knot was super simple, so after some wiggling I managed to get it undone. The skin that had been under the rope was chafed a bit, but it didn't look like they'd bruise. They'd probably stay red for a while, though.

Seriously, though—to think that my training from the manor would actually come in handy... *Damn, palace life is scary.* As I undid my gag, my opinion of the royal palace definitely went down.

Next, I focused on undoing the bonds around my legs. Since my hands were free, that was a piece of cake. I got out of that even easier than I had my hands.

Once I was free, I searched for a window first. If I could see outside, I might be able to figure out where exactly I was! Squinting and looking around the room, I spotted a tiny bit of light streaming into the room. Since tonight was, unfortunately, a new moon, it should've been pitch black outside. The fact that there was any light at all meant that there was a source nearby. I could still be in the palace, or perhaps it was a light from the city. Either way, I needed to check.

Running towards that little bit of light, I very quietly opened the curtains. Outside the window was a dark garden. I shouldn't have been able to see anything because of the new moon, but there were little bonfires scattered around. And I recognized the shape of the braziers—they were the same ones that were in the palace gardens!

Seeing that, I knew for sure I was still in the palace—and in a room looking over the gardens, at that. Judging from the height of the room, I was probably on the second floor.

Was it just my imagination, or did the garden outside that window look super similar to the one right outside of the reception hall? Looking closer, I saw a spot of even brighter light a little distance away. Was that the hall itself?

I thought I'd run a fair distance around the palace, but apparently I didn't

actually get very far. Thank goodness!

Even better, I saw little shadows moving around in the light of what I thought was probably the hall. If the party wasn't over yet, I must not have been out for very long.

Whatever. Let's get over there!

I would've loved to just jump out the window, but I realized that'd be impossible. Instead, I mapped out where the hall should be in my head and quietly moved towards the door.

I tried putting my ear up to the door to see if anyone was there, but I didn't hear anything at all. *Lucky me! I can sneak out now!* Suppressing my excitement, I softly tried the door, but...

Of course, it was locked.

It didn't move an inch. I should have known. There was no way they'd just shove someone who could ruin all their plans in an unlocked room.

"Guess I've got no choice..." I muttered to myself, pulling out one of the pins holding my hair up before shoving it into the keyhole.

Heh heh heh, I've actually been doing tons of lockpicking in my spare time, so I'm getting pretty good~ Thank goodness my playtime was also practice! Although just as you'd expect from a lock in the royal palace, it wasn't an easy one. As silly as it sounds, I was pretty impressed with it.

After a bit, I heard a click and felt a reaction. *See, I got it in no time! I'm a prodigy!*

...Okay Viola, now's not the time to sing your own praises.

I slowly opened the door to check outside, and...

"So you're already awake."

Unlike the pitch dark room I'd just been in, the hallway was dimly lit thanks to the lights set up here and there. And standing right in front of me was the person I least wanted to see.

Oh, if it isn't the crown prince! ...Hah.

“I shouldn’t have underestimated you, should I? Not only did you free yourself, but you unlocked the door, too.”

“Just like a little thief!”

The prince was standing there with this nasty smile on his face, while Princess Orangé peeked out from behind him. *Well, I didn’t want to see you either. Had they been standing outside the door, holding their breath to keep quiet? Gross!*

I’d wanted to sneak off without being seen, but now that they’d found me, that was no longer an option.

Moving fully into the hall, I closed the door behind me. “Oh my! Was it you two that tied me up and left me in there?! And here I’d thought some ruffians must have snuck into the palace and kidnapped me! Ah, but I *did* suspect something was up after the princess wafted that strange-smelling whatever-it-was at me and I fainted dead away. I never would have expected that the two of you were working together!” I said, giving my best impression of someone truly shocked. *I’m such a good actress*☆

But no, I knew you two were the villains from the start, and I’m gonna tell it like it is!

The Aurantian royal siblings’ expressions turned scary at my barefaced jab, so I poured more salt on the wound.

“Unfortunately for you, I don’t think kidnapping me will do you much good. Mr. Fisalis wouldn’t care at all if I was gone, you know? I’m useless as a bargaining chip. Almost anyone could replace me. I’m just a contract wife. Using me for bait to try to lure him out won’t work at all.”

I told them exactly how little I was worth... And yeah, I did exaggerate a bit. *Sorry, Mr. Fisalis! He’d be so angry if he heard me say that. Well... actually, he might just start crying. But he’ll forgive my bluff, right? It’s okay, I don’t think that way anymore!*

I gave my best bluff while internally apologizing to Mr. Fisalis, but the prince’s response went in a completely unexpected direction.

“I’m not sure why you think we’re targeting Duke Fisalis. I don’t care about him. I just want to have *you*,” he said, giving a biiiiiig smile.

Huh? What did he just say?!

“Oh, Brother! It’s rude to say you don’t care about the duke! Madam, don’t worry about a thing. I’ll comfort the grief-stricken duke as your replacement—after *you disappear*,” Princess Orangé snapped at her brother before turning to me with the same biiiig smile.

What is she saying?!

And really? You’re doing all this in a foreign country, all for your own purposes?! You took a shine to me, so you decided to kidnap me home with you (because I’m married already)? And you’re aiming to marry Mr. Fisalis after I’ve disappeared (because he’s married to me)?

Do they really think that, as the losers in a war, they could seriously get away with this in the winning country? In our own royal palace, no less! There should be a limit on how stupid some people could be!

But... huh? Wait just a minute here. So they weren’t talking about kidnapping Mr. Fisalis? I’d thought he was in trouble, but it was actually me the whole time?! He’s gonna lose it when he finds out. Aurantia’s gonna get razed to the ground!

16. The Outcome of Our Game of Tag

I'd managed to escape the room I'd been locked in, but I'd run into the Aurantian royal siblings right outside. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh?

And to top it all off, were blabbering ridiculous things like "taking me for themselves" and "marrying Mr. Fisalis as his second wife after I disappear." I was honestly starting to doubt if there was anything inside their heads. *Are they crazy?! Do they actually understand words?*

I was quite sure that talking with them was a complete waste of time, so I went for some tougher measures...again. ☆

I'd managed to throw the crown prince once already, but he was *really* heavy, so I wanted to avoid doing it a second time. *I'm sorry, I just don't have it in me to manage a repeat performance.*

That meant the best thing I could do at the moment was using my ring to punch him. Yes, I'd learned all about how to throw a punch with my left hand and where to aim from the servants! Giving the prince a glare, I quickly ran through my best angles of attack.

He was unnecessarily bulky, so a punch to his solar plexus probably wouldn't do much. *Actually, I'd probably end up hurting my own arm, so hard pass on that one.*

What about his face, then? But he was tall too, so even if I aimed for his nose or forehead, I probably wouldn't be able to pack much power into my punch.

I settled on his chin. I could aim for that even from a lower position, so that'd probably work best!

Having made my decision, I did as Rohtas taught me and shifted my weight to the left, tightening my fist as I moved to strike the crown prince.

"That move again? Ugh!" Thinking I was going to throw him again, he lowered his body and squared himself off. But this just played right into my hand, since it lowered his chin well within my range as well!

Yeah, that's it! I needed to take advantage of the fact that he lowered his head and throw everything I've got into my punch!

"Wrong! This time, it's an uppercut!"

"Gaahh!" Paying attention to my ring, I tightened my fist and put my all into punching him in the chin! *Whoo, that was so great!*

The crown prince was so worried about getting thrown again that I caught him off guard and toppled him over. No way I was going to use the same attack twice! Just to be safe, I gave him a smack on the temple to knock him out completely.

"Eeeek—?! Brother?!" Princess Orangé screamed once she realized what had happened, and she moved to grab at the necklace resting on her chest like she'd done before.

She's gonna use that drug on me again! I couldn't let myself get knocked out again, so I needed to take her out too.

"I still don't know what that is, but thanks so much for letting me get a whiff of that weird medicine!"

"Eeeeeeeek?!"

She fell straight down after I swept her feet out from under her, smacking her head on the floor for me while she was at it. What an easy win!

Now that they're both down for the count, I need to get out of here!

I started running through the hallway and towards the reception hall. This time, I managed to find the staircase down without getting lost. How the heck had I gotten so stupidly turned around last time? Just thinking about it was enough to make me feel a little depressed.

Rushing down the stairs, I pictured about where the gardens should be and ran that way. I was pretty sure I was going in the right direction.

Believing in myself, I kept going, and found a glass door at the end of the hallway. And on the other side of it, I saw...the garden with the braziers! If I made it out there, I'd be able to see the reception hall, and maybe I'd even be able to get there without getting lost again!

I flew towards the door, but... Yep, it was locked. Of course it was! Pushing and pulling did nothing, so I shoved the hairpin I'd been holding the entire time into the keyhole.

Hurry, Viola! I needed to do this quickly, since I didn't know how long the crown prince would be out of commission!

This lock was a bit of a hard one too, but with a little effort I got it open pretty quickly. *Man, regular practice is so important, isn't it?* I was a bit overcome by my strangely intense emotions about this whole lockpicking thing.

But forget about all that. I pushed the door open and stepped outside. *If I go to the left and hug the wall, I should be able to get back to the hall... Huh?!*

Just as I was about to walk along the wall to my left towards the reception hall, I stopped dead in my tracks for a moment. There was a chest-height hedge blocking my way! Despite the darkness, I looked around at the braziers, and realized that the hedge seemed to be separating the area near the hall from the rest of the garden. If I wanted to get past it, I'd have to either get over the hedge somehow or find an opening in it.

Wahhhh, I couldn't see the hedge from the windows! Huge miscalculation!

"It's pretty high, so it'd probably be impossible to jump over... So I need to go under! Gotta search for a place I can wiggle through..."

I peeked at the bottom of the hedge, but it was beautifully taken care of with nary a hole in sight. It was covered top to bottom in dense green leaves, leaves, and more leaves! *The gardener does a great job! Yes, I'm still impressed despite my desperation.*

Then, is there anyone outside? Maybe if I yelled, someone would hear... But there's nobody around. Too optimistic of me.

There's nothing else I can do. *My only option now is to find an opening to slip through!*

Just as I was steeling myself up to run along the hedge...

"Stop!!"

Through the glass door, I heard someone yelling—and the sounds of someone

running through the halls! I turned towards the commotion, only to see Aurantia's crown prince! His aggressive-looking face was even stiffer than usual, and he was running towards me with a look of desperate rage.

"And I was so *nice* to you!" Completely unlike the creepily gentle tone he'd been using before, he didn't seem to care how he sounded right now—which was even worse! *And how the heck was he back on his feet so soon?! Didn't he recover kind of fast?!*

I shouldn't have spent so long dawdling around the hedge. I needed to get away quickly, because I felt like things were getting worse by the minute! I started to run along the edge of the bushes.

"I told you to wait!"

"What kind of idiot would actually stop when you order them to?!"

Crunch crunch crunch crunch. Our banter and the sound of our feet stomping through the gravel echoed through the gardens.

Running on gravel is actually pretty tough! If I wasn't careful, my heels would sink into the rocks, or I'd slip. I hadn't had any practice running on gravel before this.

No, Viola! I've got no time to cry about the ground, whether it be marble or gravel! I ran like hell, doing my best not to fall.

I had a brief moment of glee when I finally spotted an end to the hedge—only to realize that it was just a corner of the hedge, not an actual opening in it. The hedge actually continued to the left, towards the hall. *Let's go that way!*

I made the turn at the same speed, taking care not to slip.

"Ah! An opening!"

As I kept running along, I finally found a... Gap? Crevice? Entrance? to the area of the garden that surrounded the reception hall. I ran towards it, still being careful about the gravel...and finally made it to my destination. I could see the light coming through the glass windows. I was so close!

The crown prince was still behind me, though, so I sped up for one last spurt. As I did so, however...

“Whoa!”

My foot hit something with a loud *thunk* and I toppled forward. I quickly rolled to break my fall, so I wasn’t hurt badly, but I did smack my arm. It’d probably bruise.

But I’m so glad I’d had some martial arts training, no matter how rushed it had been. Without that, I would be covered in scratches and cuts on my bare shoulders and arms!

“Owwwww! What *was* that?!” Turning towards where I’d tripped, there was a tree root right there on the ground. That had apparently tripped me up. *The rest of the garden is so well taken care of. Did they just miss this one bit?*

Rolling to the side, I braced myself for another sprint. I had no time to waste, after all! But as soon as I put weight on my leg to get up, an intense pain shot through my ankle.

“Gaah?!”

It hurt so badly that I collapsed straight to the ground again. *Damn! I must have twisted my ankle on the way down! What should I do?!* The pain only got worse while I was thinking to myself, to the point where I couldn’t move my leg at all.

While I crouched there clutching my ankle, the crown prince finally caught up. *After all my efforts to get away. After using every skill I’d been taught. And I was so close to the hall! This sucks!*

Seeing that I wasn’t moving, he stopped running and instead slowly walked towards me.

Ahh, jeez! He’s seriously gonna catch me!

Crunch, crunch. The sound of the gravel as he slowed down was noticeably different from the noise we’d made while running.

Dimly lit by the braziers, his smirking face was absolutely revolting! He didn’t even seem to care that I was glaring at him, desperately wanting to run but physically unable to do it.

Then, he finally reached me.

“Oh, whatever could be the matter? Are you injured?” he drawled, dropping back into that disgustingly fake gentle tone of voice. *You saw exactly what happened, jerk! Don’t you smirk at me!*

“I’m fine! Absolutely fine!” I replied, trying to subtly hide my leg under the skirt of my dress.

“No, no, your ankle is terribly swollen! I’ll take you *back to your room.*” Apparently he’d seen my injury. If he brought me back to that room, I’d be right back where I started. All of my efforts would’ve been for naught.

Still smirking despite my glare, he reached out towards me.

I am absolutely not taking his hand! But what can I do? I’m out of options!

Just before his hand reached me...

“Stop right there, Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince of Aurantia. And step away from Viola, if you would.”

A deep, angry voice called out from the darkness of the garden, along with the noise of footsteps on gravel. It was...

“Mr. Fisalis!”

“D-Duke?!”

Mr. Fisalis, my savior, emerged from the night!

“Vi! Are you alright? Our *pest extermination* took a bit longer than we thought, and it took a while to find you,” he said, running over to me and pushing the prince out of the way. Then, he crouched down and gave me a gentle hug.

Just that was enough to drain all the tension from my body. My painfully pounding heartbeat changed into a happy pitter-patter now that he was here and we were together. My nose started to itch, and the corners of my eyes grew hot... *Wait, I think I’m gonna cry!*

“Yeah! I’m okay! Wahhhhhhhhhh, Mr. Fisalis!”

“Don’t cry. Everything will be fine now that I’m here.”

“Okaaay!”

Seeing him made me burst into tears with relief. I'd been so nervous! While I was sobbing, he pulled the handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped my tears. I caught sight of a cherry motif and his initials...and realized I was the one who'd embroidered that for him.



“Just wait one minute. I’ve gotta finish up my work,” Mr. Fisalis said, giving me the handkerchief to hold as he stood and turned towards the prince. “Crown Prince Osmanthus of Aurantia, we know everything you’ve attempted today. It’s ridiculous that you tried this in Flür territory—in our own royal palace, no less.”

He had his back to me, so I couldn’t see his face, but it was almost like there was a blizzard blowing out from behind him ...*Damn, he’s pissed.*

“Whatever could you be talking about? I was just taking a stroll in the gardens when I came across Duchess Fisalis and her injured ankle. All I did was offer her some help,” the crown prince said, playing dumb. *The idiot is still telling barefaced lies!* He was so shameless that my tear ducts completely closed up shop.

But, of course, Mr. Fisalis didn’t fall for it. “Oh? Really, Viola?” He gave a little snort of laughter before turning to ask me.

“No! I heard this guy and his sister plotting something terrible—they were gonna lure you out and kidnap you! Then, when I tried to go warn you, *he* found me and chased me. Princess Orangé dosed me with some weird drug that made me faint, and while I was out they tied me up with rope! Then, when I finally escaped, he chased me again!”

I’d tell Mr. Fisalis all the details later. For now, I just gave a brief rundown of what happened.

“And that’s my wife’s story.”

“No, we were plotting to kidnap *Viola*, not you... Ah!”

He really *was* a moron. He confessed in an attempt to correct my story. *Too late to cover your mouth now, Your Highness.*

Hearing that, Mr. Fisalis gave a low chuckle. “Huh...I see! So you were going to kidnap Viola. And you just admitted it yourself, Your Royal Highness.”

“Dammit!”

“You let the cat out of the bag, Your Highness. I’ve got a looooot of questions to ask, so I’ll need to have you come with me.”

The crown prince grimaced while Mr. Fisalis told him exactly how things would go with a sinister smile on his face. Then, the prince dropped his shameless dumb act and flushed bright red.

“How dare you get in my way! If you two would just divorce, you could marry my sister, and I could marry Viola, and things would’ve been wonderful for both Flür and Aurantia!”

He was still on about that at this point in the game. *Ugh, what a dumbass.* I stared at him silently out of disgust, but...

SNAP.

I think that sound was Mr. Fisalis finally losing it.

17. Punishment!

SNAP.

I shouldn't have been able to hear anything, but I absolutely know I did.

Mr. Fisalis is pissed!

You might not realize it because he looks like such a gentle guy, but he's a veeeeeeeery strong active duty knight! He's taken on five nasty thugs by himself before! Ah ha ha ha ha! I'm not responsible for anything that might happen now!

"—Huh?" *A little bit of a delayed response there, Mr. Fisalis.* It seemed that he was finally dropping the thin veneer of politeness he'd previously been using. "The hell are you saying?"

Whoa! He swore at a prince! I'm totally cool with that, but...he's really telling it like it is! Well, that might be understating it a little, actually!

"Me? W-What are you saying?! I'm being serious here!" The crown prince must've been shocked by Mr. Fisalis's change in demeanor, because he actually flinched.

"You want Viola and I to divorce so you can marry her, and I can marry your sister? Quit babbling. I've already very clearly refused that—publicly too. Do the two of you not understand words?"

"I refused too!" I chimed in.

"B-But..."

I hadn't exactly wanted to go along with it either, so I made sure to speak up! *Ah, but Mr. Fisalis really monopolized the conversation back then... Well, whatever. That's not the point. Marrying the Aurantian crown prince was never an option!*

"You heard my wife. So you decided to use force after she rejected you? What kind of dumbass *are* you?"

"Ghh..." The prince bit his lip, realizing that he was at a disadvantage.

“Whatever the case may be, you kidnapped and imprisoned my wife, a duchess of Flür. That’s a crime, even for a prince. I’m gonna throw you in jail, so have fun regretting everything you’ve done.” Mr. Fisalis’s eyes were ice cold. It was truly scary.

But when he heard the word “jail”, the crown prince’s expression changed entirely. “What?! I’m the Crown Prince of Aurantia! That’s worse than treason! It’d be an international incident!” He was making a last ditch effort to object, even as he found himself intimidated by Mr. Fisalis’s dangerous aura.

Are you serious? I was astonished he’d even say something so ridiculous.

Just then...

SNAP SNAP SNAP!

This is bad. I think I just heard Mr. Fisalis snap even more.

“You’re the one causing international incidents, you dumbass!!” he roared.

I felt the air around us tremble. Mr. Fisalis actually raised his voice! I’d never heard him speak so loudly before.

The crown prince took a few steps back in response to Mr. Fisalis’s anger.

“You tried to kidnap another country’s duchess to satisfy your own desires and now you’re throwing around words like ‘treason’ and ‘international incidents? Look who’s talking!”

“Seriously, don’t screw with us. Your ‘treason’ can eat shit!”

Mr. Fisalis was yelling in anger. I was pissed too, so I chimed in a bit at the end there. He slowly approached the prince as he tried to back away.

“I’d never let you be tried for treason, Vi. You were the victim here,” Mr. Fisalis said to me, giving his usual soft smile. *Thank goodness.*

“Dammit!” Having had all his points refuted and realizing that he had nowhere to run after Mr. Fisalis had practically screamed at him, the crown prince suddenly drew the decorative sword at his hip and squared up.

You’re gonna try to defeat Mr. Fisalis in a sword fight?! That’s a really bad idea... Really.

Seeing that, Mr. Fisalis grinned in amusement. “Oh my. Drawing your sword in another country’s palace? You really are a lost cause,” he sighed, unsheathing his own sword and pointing it at the prince.

When the crown prince backed away, Mr. Fisalis chased him. Before I knew it, they were facing off against each other just a short distance away from me. Their swords gleamed as they reflected the light of the braziers.

The prince looked to be at his wits’ end, while Mr. Fisalis looked calm and collected. They were glaring at each other, neither moving an inch.

“You attacked me after mistaking me for some ruffian. As I was suddenly assaulted out of the darkness, I was forced to kill you in self defense.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’ll be my story after I beat you.”

“...Hmm? You’re welcome to try!”

“That brave act won’t last for long!”

Oh no, every word out of the crown prince’s mouth is starting to sound like the grumblings of a loser...

Right after throwing out one last parting remark, the prince attacked—only for Mr. Fisalis to lightly parry with a laugh. The prince barely retained his balance before trying again with a desperate look on his face. He’d attack, and Mr. Fisalis would knock his sword away. The cold ringing of blade against blade echoed through the night gardens. The prince was putting his all into his attacks, but Mr. Fisalis barely moved and blocked easily.

Just looking at his size, you’d think the crown prince would have the upper hand. Had he never been trained in the sword? His hips were pulled back, and he was gripping his sword tightly with both hands. His stance looked absolutely awful.

On the other hand, Mr. Fisalis’s back was straight, and he wielded his sword as though it weighed nothing.

“You done? That was boring,” he mocked the prince, absolutely composed as he egged him on with a dark smile that immediately reminded me of the Le Pied

incident.

“What are you saying?! It’s not over yet!”

“Ah, so you can still fight? Guess I’d better get serious then.”

With a smirk, Mr. Fisalis changed his grip and squared up. In an instant, his face stiffened, and he came at the crown prince with a flurry of swings so fast that you couldn’t even see them.

Clang clang clang clang!

His movements were clearly different than before. He was going so much faster! Every time their swords met, you could hear a short, sharp clang.

The crown prince was entirely on the defensive against Mr. Fisalis’s speedy assault.

“Ughh...!”

“Too slow!”

Every time the prince tried to dodge one blow, the next was already coming for him. The number of shallow cuts on his hands and face was steadily growing.

Mr. Fisalis was doing this intentionally—he probably wasn’t planning on delivering a fatal blow. Despite looking as if he was doing an elegant sword dance with no wasted motion, he was mercilessly cornering the prince. *Way to go, Mr. Fisalis!*

On the other hand, the crown prince’s clothes were ripped here and there from the sword, and the grazes on his cheeks and hands were bleeding. He was a wreck.

“You’re awful. Have you ever even practiced at all?” Mr. Fisalis taunted without even missing a beat.

“I... I can still...!” And, of course, the simple-minded prince took the bait.

“Oh? Come at me, then!”

“Raaaagh! Whoa?!” The total dumbass ran at Mr. Fisalis with a roar, and then proceeded to trip on a tree root—the same one that tripped me—and took

himself down.

“Pfft...!”

It was so stupid that both Mr. Fisalis and I nearly started laughing. *Stop trying to make us laugh when we're in such a tense situation! Wait...he wasn't trying to make us laugh?*

“Don't mock me!” the crown prince cried, standing up and glaring at us, his face red with rage.

Oops, I shouldn't have laughed at someone else's misfortune! I quickly covered my mouth. *But wait, now's not the time for that.*

“You still wanna go?” Mr. Fisalis said with a chuckle, waving the tip of his sword a little in invitation.

The prince went for him again, having seemingly not learned his lesson, and was easily knocked away. Then once his stance was broken, Mr. Fisalis got in another blow... And that sequence of events just kept repeating itself. Little by little, Mr. Fisalis drove the crown prince backwards into the hedge, leaves rustling as he collided with it.

“Grgh...” the crown prince let out a low groan as he glared at Mr. Fisalis for cutting off his escape routes.

“Your back's to a wall. Checkmate,” Mr. Fisalis declared, touching the prince's nose with the tip of his sword.

“Dammit!”

While the crown prince's shoulders were heaving with every breath, Mr. Fisalis was absolutely fine. Their difference in skill was plain to see.

“Guess I should let the fun stop here,” Mr. Fisalis murmured, changing his movements from somewhat playful to seriously whacking the prince's wrist with the hilt of his sword. He must've hit just the right spot, because the foreign royal groaned and fell to his knees, dropping his sword. Mr. Fisalis quickly kicked it away from him.

SHING!

I heard the sound of a blade cutting through leaves, and looked over to see a

sword stuck into the hedge. Mr. Fisalis had stabbed his sword straight into it—right beside the crown prince’s face! It was enough that even this guy’s legs gave out and he slid down to the ground.

“Seriously, I was holding off on striking the final blow because I wanted everything to finish quickly, but you just didn’t take the hint. Want me to raze your country to the ground and salt the earth this time?” Mr. Fisalis grabbed him by the collar, threatening him.

“...Eeek!”

Just then, I heard more voices...

“I’m all for that!”

“Let’s do it!”

“I’ll give it my all this time around!”

Corydalis and Mr. Fisalis’s other subordinates chattered in agreement as they popped out from the other side of the hedge, dressed in their Royal Guard uniforms!

“When did you get here?!” the crown prince’s face stiffened at the knights’ sudden arrival.

“Ahh~ this is kinda our thing. Sorry, but we’ve heard your entire conversation,” Corydalis answered with a smile.

“Every single word of it!” the rest of the knights chimed in, all with sinister smiles on their faces.

“Sucks for you, huh, Your Highness?” Mr. Fisalis said while the others were busy tying the crown prince up. “You really got the wrong idea, thinking Viola was sweet and innocent. That was all just her being polite.”

He said it so coldly. When did he notice?!

...Wait, that’s not the point right now!

“Yeah! I was only polite because you’re an important diplomat!” I shouted, backing my husband up. The crown prince of Aurantia *was* a state guest. If he hadn’t been, there was no way I’d have put up with his terrible dancing or awful

conversations! *Ah, let my real feelings slip out there.*

“Really?” The prince slumped in disappointment. So this guy really didn’t understand the concept of “just paying lip service.” I didn’t even know anyone like that existed.

Mr. Fisalis grabbed the disappointed crown prince by the collar, and threaten —no, *reminded* him with a *very* creepy smile, “That’s right. And instead, you ended up trying to kidnap Viola like this. Don’t waste my time. I’m a busy man, so listen reeeeeeeal well. Vi is the only person I love, so I’ll never forgive anyone who hurts her—no matter who they are, and even if His Majesty forgives you. Remember that.” Then, he pushed the prince towards the waiting arms of Corydalis and the other knights, who caught and restrained the trembling foreign royal prince.

“And just so you know, the duchess here is the belle of Flüran high society. You try anything with her, you’ll be the enemy of most of our nobility,” Corydalis said, roughly dragging the crown prince to his feet.

“And she’s the belle of our chivalric order, too! Anyone who tries anything on her is *our* enemy!” the rest of the knights yelled in unison, pointing their swords straight at him.

Okay, that’s saying way too much! And watch your swords! That’s dangerous!

18. The Trouble's Conclusion "My job is done. Everything's okay now," Mr. Fisalis said after watching his knights take the crown prince into custody. Then he kneeled down beside me.

"Ahhh~ I'm exhausted~ I heard them whispering about a kidnapping, and I just couldn't let it go... I'm sorry!"

Finally having a moment to feel relieved after all the mayhem, I heaved a huge sigh and relaxed my shoulders. They were super tense since I'd been on the edge of my seat the entire incident.

"I never thought you'd leave the reception hall! I told you to stay there before I left, didn't I?"

"...Yes."

Yep, he sure did. And I remembered it later and suuuuper regretted leaving! I meekly hung my head.

"All of the servants in the hall were disguised Royal Guards, so you would've been safe if you'd just stayed there," Mr. Fisalis grumbled with a sigh.

Seriously? That came as a shock—my head shot up when he said that. So all of the servants were knights?! I mean, I knew the subordinates he'd had before transferring, but I didn't know any of the ones he'd gotten since then! Wouldn't that be obvious?!

"Really?! I knew the person who talked to you was one of your subordinates, so I'd thought the other servants might be knights too...but I couldn't find anyone that I knew so I figured I must've been wrong. I know most of the ones who've been with you since before transferring, but not anyone new. Jeez, you should've told me that earlier!"

"That was a mistake on my part... No, my *biggest* mistake here was underestimating your determination," he said, looking bitter.

"I panicked after hearing they were going to kidnap you. I wanted to tell a

knight as soon as I could, but I didn't see any in the hall, and I couldn't just push His Majesty out of the way to tell the knight who was with him. I got desperate and went out into the hallway, but I didn't see a single knight out there either."

"We had some stationed near the entrance, but you ran farther into the palace, didn't you? Nobody was out there at the time."

"Why?! Leave some stationed all through the palace! I ended up having to *super* run everywhere, and *super* do my best!" *It was super duper very awful! Oh yeah, I just remembered that I wanted to complain to Mr. Fisalis about the security.*

"Those rats were way smarter than we thought, and there were more than we'd expected, so it took a lot of time and a lot of men to get them all. I'm sorry for putting you through all that, Vi," Mr. Fisalis apologized, but I wasn't done complaining yet!

"I ended up using almost all of the skills I'd trained for back at the manor! That crown prince was really heavy!"

He was heavier than Bellis, but I'd managed to throw him after firing myself up. I really did my best!

As I proudly related my struggles, Mr. Fisalis furrowed his brow when I said the prince was heavy.

"Huh? Heavy... What did you do to him, exactly?"

"Threw him on the floor! And then I punched him using my ring! I won both times." *Not much of a thing to be proud of, but still*☆ I bragged about how I won with a smug look on my face.

"Pfft...! Ha ha ha! You did?! I'm gonna need to thank Rohtas for that!"

He'd looked at me in shock for a second before his brows unfurrowed and he burst out laughing. *This is no laughing matter. It was really hard!*

"Anyway, how is your ankle? It looked like you'd twisted it. Are you hurt anywhere else? Let's go find you some first aid," he said, taking off his jacket and draping it over my shoulders.

I hadn't noticed it with all the running I was doing, but it was pretty chilly out

here. Now that I'd calmed down, I realized my bare shoulders were freezing! *Thank you very much for the jacket!* It was still warm with his body heat, so as I wrapped myself up in it I felt like the danger had really passed.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't see the ground in the dark, so I fell pretty hard. I broke my fall immediately, so I shouldn't be that injured elsewhere, but...I've gone and dirtied my dress."

I couldn't really see where I'd dirtied my burgundy dress in the darkness. *It might be okay if it's just dirtied, but what if I ripped it? When I get home, I'll fix it myself!*

"Don't worry about the dress! If you're okay, that's all that matters!" Mr. Fisalis chided, giving me a hug.

"Ah, yeah—I'm okay." I wanted to comfort him too, so I hugged him back. *I don't know when things changed, but even though my heart still pounds when he hugs me, it's also comforting. Whenever I'm in trouble, he'll always come running, wherever it is. And he really did make things better when he showed up. He fixed it! My good old reliable husband!*

"Let's get back inside for now."

"Okay."

Easily swooping me up in his arms, he carried me back towards the reception hall. Inside, the crown prince and Princess Orangé, whom they'd apprehended at some point, were in front of the throne surrounded by all the nobility, including His Majesty the King.

When Mr. Fisalis and I walked inside, the prince's eyes quickly locked onto us. "It was him! He pointed his sword at me! It's not my fault! This is treason—no, this is an international incident!" he cried, pointing at us.

While he threw a tantrum like a child, everyone around him just stared, calmly and coldly.

His Majesty rested his elbow on his throne, looking at the Aurantian crown prince in disgust. "Your 'plan', or whatever it was, was leaked to us, so we knew what you were going to do. I've heard it all from the knights, so saying anything more on the subject is pointless. I'll have you explain *everything* to me later.

Captain Permam, escort the crown prince to his room and keep a close eye on him.”

“Yes!” The knight behind him—who was indeed the Captain!—and Corydalís and friends all hauled... I mean, *showed* the prince back to his room. By physically dragging him.

Princess Orangé was left alone, shaking with anxiety, as her brother was dragged off. Then, she glared at me, pointing and shrieking. “If it wasn’t for the duchess, the duke would have been mine!”

She really didn’t know when to give up.

“Even if Viola wasn’t here, I would never be yours,” I heard Mr. Fisalis murmur with contempt. He really did look unhappy...

As the princess worked herself up, I thought the nobles around her would just watch in cool silence, but...

“Oh my, has she ever looked at herself in the mirror?”

“Probably not.”

“If she had, she’d never say that the duke would be hers.”

“And pushing Miss Viola out of the way?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Miss Verbena, you have quite the mouth on you!”

“As do you, Miss Iris!”

“Ah ha ha ha~!”

I could hear Miss Verbena and Miss Iris roasting the princess, while making sure she could hear every word. *Scary! I feel like I’ve seen what’s under their masks...*

And it wasn’t just the two of them dragging her. All of the other young ladies had gathered beside them and were nodding along. Then, they all spoke.

“That’s right. Duke Fisalis would never even deign to deal with someone as nasty on the inside as her.”

“Are all of Aurantia’s mirrors too dirty to see anything?”

“No one could compare to Miss Viola.”

“What kind of nonsense does she have in her head that makes her think he’d pick *her*?”

“It’s shocking to see what an idiot she is!”

“...!”

They weren’t gossiping behind her back, but directly in front of her. *Girls are terrifying in groups!*

Dumbfounded by the ladies’ attacks, Princess Orangé stood silent.

The king had watched all of this play out, and once they were done, he spoke. “Bring Princess Orangé back to her room, as well. Keep a good eye on her.”

“Yes!”

This time, it was the bombshell trio gallantly replying before marching the princess back to her own room.

Once the two Aurantian royals were gone, there was a moment of silence before the mood in the room softened.

“Duke Fisalis, is your wife all right?” His Majesty asked Mr. Fisalis, back to his usual soft tone.

Ah, now that I think about it, Mr. Fisalis has been carrying me in his arms this whole time! Thinking it was rude to His Majesty, I tried to get myself down, but...

“Hey, you’re gonna fall if you struggle like that,” Mr. Fisalis scolded, not letting me back to the floor. Completely ignoring everyone looking at us, he carried me up in front of the throne. “I apologize for worrying you, Your Majesty. She’s safe, but as you might notice, she’s injured her ankle. If you’d allow us to borrow a room—” he continued, looking at my ankle.

“She would probably rest easier in your own home than here. You may leave for the night. Duchess, I apologize for having gotten you wrapped up in all this. Go and recover back in your manor,” the king said, not letting Mr. Fisalis finish

before he gave us the okay to leave.

“Thank you very much. Please excuse us.”

“Thank you very much,” I repeated, bowing my head a little.

“Leave the rest to us!”

When I looked up, I saw His Majesty with a complacent smile on his face. *Ah, I feel like I know exactly what’s gonna happen after this!*

As we headed towards the door, the aristocrats around us all moved to open a path for us. It was like walking down an aisle being carried in Mr. Fisalis’s arms... So embarrassing!

Under the watchful gaze of the Royal Guard, we hurried to our waiting carriage in the entranceway.

In the beginning, we had a contract marriage, both with ulterior motives. But so much had happened that we’d somehow ended up as a normal husband and wife, with no contract in sight. Calendula, whom he’d been head-over-heels for, was gone. I’d always wanted to avoid high society, but somehow we’d ended up famous there as the duke who really loves his wife, and the wife in question.

Why?

“Vi? Are you okay?” Mr. Fisalis asked after I’d been staring at his beautiful face, thinking back on what had happened between then and now.

“Yes, I’m fine, Mr. Fisalis,” I replied with a smile to keep him from worrying any more before quietly leaning my head against his shoulder.

“Vi?” he said again.

“Yes, Mr. Fisalis?”

“Vi.”

He was repeating my nickname... Why?

I tilted my head a bit in confusion. “Mr. Fisalis? What’s wrong?”

“Not ‘Mr. Fisalis.’”

Not Mr. Fisalis? And he was intently repeating my name...? ...Wait, does he

want me to call him by *his* name?

“...? Cer...cis?” Unsure of what he really wanted, I hesitantly used his first name.

And there was that smile of his. He looked really happy. *Apparently I was right. His beautiful smile was blinding up close!*

In the beginning, I'd been a wife in name only, just for show, and always second to his lover. But now, I'd ended up his one and only. He never hesitated to declare me the most important woman in his life.

I'd always been prepared for him to divorce me at any moment, but it didn't look like I needed to worry about that anymore.

And tonight, we passed by rows of nobles with him carrying me like a princess in his arms.

Everyone thinks of us as a lovey-dovey couple! When did this happen?

19. Home Safe, But...

When it had all begun, I hadn't had any idea how my panicked game of tag in the palace against the Aurantian crown prince would end. It was a long ordeal. Reeeeeeally long. I honestly thought I was done for!

But thanks to Mr. Fisalis riding to the rescue just in the nick of time, it was all over now. It was amazing seeing him so pissed off...and he looked so dignified sword fighting with the prince. The sight had made me realize just how dependable my husband was. *I'm so lucky to have someone that treasures and protects me!*

Anyhow, once the incident was finally over, the two of us left the party under the lukewarm smiles of the king and the rest of the nobility. Mr. Fisalis was carrying me like a princess after I'd twisted my ankle during the chase and couldn't walk. And so what? I was at the point where I didn't even care. It was well past time for me to give up.

After walking through the long palace hallways, we made it to the entrance. The Royal Guard stationed there reverently opened the doors for us. Past them, the Fisalis family carriage was waiting.

I was a bit surprised when we got inside. The seats were absolutely covered in soft cushions that definitely hadn't been there when we arrived. *When were they added? Because I'm super grateful.*

After adjusting the placement of the cushions, Mr. Fisalis carefully set me down on top of them before kneeling in front of me. *Oh, you're not gonna sit?* While I looked at him in confusion, he started to speak.

"Vi, how's your ankle?" he asked, looking up at me from his position on his knees.

"Hmm, it's throbbing, but I'm not sure." In reality the pain was getting worse as time went on, but I knew he'd get way too worried if I told him that. I gave him a vague answer instead.

But he didn't seem to buy it. "Excuse me for a moment," he said, lifting the hem of my skirt a bit and pulling out my injured leg.

Wait, what are you doing?!

“Eh? Huh? Mr. Fisalis?!”

I tried to pull my leg back, flustered, but he was squeezing a part that didn't hurt (namely, my calf—don't grab me there!), so I couldn't get away.

On top of all this, he wasn't impressed that I'd called him “Mr. Fisalis.”

“Mr. Fisalis?” he repeated.

Stop trying to overpower me with your smile! I've been calling you “Mr. Fisalis” for so long! Switching to “Cercis” all of a sudden is far too high a hurdle for me to clear all at once!

“Cercis!”

“Yes?”

“Wait, that's not the point!” I'd said it out of pure desperation, and he gave me a thrilled smile back... *Ah, jeez, that's not what we're talking about! Focus on my ankle!* “My leg! What are you doing?!”

“Yeah, it's twisted and swollen, but the bone...should be fine?” Mr. Fisalis completely ignored my panic, carefully examining my leg as he moved it around.

“...Really?”

“Well, as far as I can tell. Whatever the case, the swelling is awful, so we'll call for the doctor as soon as we get home.”

“All right. Thank you.” I hated to call a doctor to come over so late at night, but I quietly agreed to it. I was pretty sure they had one on standby at the manor already, in any case.

Once we got back home, Mr. Fisalis picked me up again and stepped out of the carriage to see all of the servants waiting for us. I'd thought the same thing a few days ago too, but seeing this really made me feel like I was home.

But tonight, the atmosphere was different. They all had dark looks on their faces, so I figured they must've heard about what happened at the palace.
Word travels so fast!

Even the usually stone-faced Dahlia was looking at us in concern. *I'm sorry for making you all needlessly worried!*

"Is Madam all right?" asked Rohtas, stepping out of the line of servants.

"She twisted her ankle, but I don't think it's broken."

"The doctor is waiting in the salon."

"All right, I'll take her in."

After that short conversation, Mr. Fisalis followed Rohtas inside. I was right about them having a doctor at the ready!

Once he put me down on the sofa, the softness made me feel so relieved to be home that I went totally limp.

"Vi!"

"I'm just so glad to be here..."

"Lean on me."

"Kaaay."

I was nearly ready to flop right down on the sofa, but Mr. Fisalis held me up and lifted my injured leg onto an ottoman that he'd gotten ready. Getting a good look at it in the light, Mr. Fisalis was right—it was horribly swollen. Plus, seeing it like this made it hurt even more... It even felt like it was kind of hot.

I was on the verge of freaking out a little bit when I saw how bad the injury actually looked, but my husband squeezed my hand. *Probably trying to calm me down. Don't worry, I swear I'm totally calm.*

"Oh my, that looks awful. Let me see," the doctor said, carefully taking my leg to examine it.

Mr. Fisalis and all of the servants were watching with bated breath. It was kind of (no, incredibly!) embarrassing having them all stare at my bare leg like that.

After twisting and stretching my foot this way and that with a concerned look, the doctor took a breath before returning to his usual gentle smile. "It is quite swollen, but the bone is fine. I recommend a poultice for the pain and keeping it

bandaged for a while to immobilize the ankle. There'll be no horsing around for you, Madam. You must rest in bed," he ordered, pulling a brown bottle out of his bag and pouring the moss green salve inside onto a piece of gauze. Then, he stuck it right on my injured ankle.

"Eeek~! That's freezing!"

"Hahahahaha. Cold, is it?" When I jumped at how unexpectedly cold it was, the doctor just laughed. "Doesn't it feel nice, though? The menthol should kick in soon and make it even cooler. That should help with the pain."

"Okaaaay."

"I'll leave this salve with Dahlia, so have your poultice and bandage changed a few times a day."

"Okaaaay."

"Understood."

The doctor's hands didn't stop for a second as he talked, and he wrapped the poultice down nicely with the bandages. Soon, my leg was totally covered in bandages. Mummy-style☆

"This will be hard to live with for a while..."

It hurt so bad I probably wouldn't be able to walk by myself, but getting a wheelchair seemed like it'd be blowing the whole thing out of proportion. *Maybe I'll ask Bellis to make me a cane...*

While I glared at my mummified leg and sighed, "Let's just be glad it's only as bad as it is... I'm so glad you're safe, Vi..." Mr. Fisalis said, resting his head on my shoulder.

"Yeah."

He must've been running around everywhere trying to find me. I really *was* thankful, and I tried to show just how much I was by stroking his beautiful dark brown hair. If he hadn't saved me, and I'd been kidnapped... What would have happened to me... Aaaah!

And it was all thanks to the servants that I'd managed to buy enough time for Mr. Fisalis to come save me. I'm grateful for all the self-defense skills they'd

beaten into me. So terribly grateful.

“But even if you’re safe now, I’m not going to be forgiving those two any time soon.”

Huh? That’s weird—I can feel this threatening aura radiating all around me. Mr. Fisalis probably looks super threatening right now!

I tried pulling my hand away from his hair, but he grabbed it tight. His change in demeanor made my heart pound.

“That’s quite true. We won’t be letting them off easily,” Rohtas agreed, smiling from his spot to the side of me.

Wait, Rohtas! Your face is smiling, but your eyes sure aren’t! I don’t want to see that terrifying smile of yours! And as I was sitting there worrying about the dark aura pouring off Rohtas too, they started talking with each other.

“Yes, what shall we do to them?”

“Why not set our duchy’s knights on them?”

“Our spies too.”

All of the servants started to chime in. *Okay, wait just one minute—did I hear them say spies?!* They were all smiling, but the rage radiating off of them was terrifying! And all of our servants are super high-specced, so destroying those two siblings is totally within the realm of possibility—but that just made it so much scarier!

I was totally panicking about the sub-zero atmosphere racing through the salon, and it seemed like I was the only one. Then, Mr. Fisalis hugged me from behind.

“Leave them to me. All of you just need to make sure to protect Viola.”

“As you wish. We’ll be waiting for good news.”

“I’m on it.”

Rohtas and the other servants nodded at Mr. Fisalis. *What kind of good news were they looking for here, though?!*

I saw my moment to speak up. “A-Ah, that’s right. What will I do about

moving around? The doctor said to rest, but I'm not sick or anything, so being in bed seems..." I tried to soften the atmosphere by changing the subject, but...

"I'll take care of you while I'm home, but the rest of the time you need to be in bed. Understood?"

"What?!"

"Oh, yes—if I'll be taking care of you, I should be close at hand. Rohtas, I'll be sleeping in the same room as Viola from now on. There's not much that will need moving, I suppose..."

"Huh?!"

"Understood." Rohtas, on the other hand, answered immediately.

The conversation ended up going in an outrageous direction! *Huh, what's with that smooth transition to saying we'll be pretty much sleeping together?! And Rohtas just agreed?!*

...Well, whatever. We've slept in the same room a few times before, but since then I've realized my feelings for him have changed... Oh no. Will I be able to stay calm?

After the doctor's examination was finished, our little meeting was broken up, and Mr. Fisalis princess-carried me up to the bedroom. *This must've been what he meant by taking care of me.*

No, wait. What am I gonna do about getting changed, or bathing? I'm not gonna be able to do those alone with my leg like this. Wait...he...he couldn't be intending to do that, could he?!

Once I'd thought of *that*, I got super suspicious. *He couldn't be meaning to "take care" of me to that extent, could he?! I could never let him go that far!*

"The bed's all ready. And your bath—" In contrast to my flustered state, Mr. Fisalis was acting completely normal, unruffled as ever while he checked the room on arrival.

"I will take care of Madam's bath. Now, Madam, let's wash away everything bad that happened today," Stellaria cut in. My savior!

"Oka~y!"

“...”

Normally, I would have refused any help bathing, but I answered obediently. *Mr. Fisalis, don't glare at Stellaria like that!* He did carry me inside the bathroom, but after that, he turned around and left. The door closed with a click behind him.

After my bath was finished, we called him back in and he carried me over to the bed. *Wow, he's basically my personal chauffeur now*☆ Oh, and by the way, he bathed in the same room as I did. We really were sharing a room now. He was still going to be changing in his old room, though, so all his clothes stayed there.

Anyway, at that point I was beat. I'd been worried a bit earlier about whether or not I'd be okay sleeping with Mr. Fisalis, but I took it back. No matter if it was him or anyone else in the room with me, I was absolutely sure I'd fall straight to sleep. *What about tomorrow? I'll think about it then. Zzz...*

Then, the next morning dawned.

Carried by Mr. Fisalis (again), we arrived in the dining hall only to see Mother and Father Fisalis waiting for us. We'd left the party before they had, after all. I don't know what had happened at the palace after we left, but I did know that they had come home after I was already asleep.

“How is your leg?”

“Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

They ran up to us anxiously, expressions clouding as they saw my bandaged ankle. They probably heard all about it from Rohtas, but they were still fretting about it. *I'm sorry!*

“Yes! I'm so sorry for making you worry. The doctor said it was just a sprain, so it should heal soon with some rest.”

“I'm sure it'll heal quickly since you're so young, Vi!” Mother Fisalis said to try and cheer me up, gently rubbing my ankle. It felt like she could make my injury vanish all by herself.

“She'll be on bed rest for a while, so please keep her company so she doesn't

get too bored, Mother.”

“Of course!” she replied with a wink.

But the next moment...

“Then what should I do?” Father Fisalis asked, pouting over not being chosen to keep me company.

Mr. Fisalis smirked at his father. “You’ll be coming with me to the palace for our strategy meeting, *of course.*”

Or at least that’s all he said about it...but he definitely got that evil look on his face again.

“Oooh~ I see! That *is* very important!” Father Fisalis said, smirking as well.

Both of your smiles are pitch black, you know? You’re definitely both planning something bad!

As I watched them both with a nervous look, Mr. Fisalis noticed and flashed me a beautiful smile instead of that creepy smirk. “I’ll be busy for a while, but I won’t be working the same long hours I was before. Don’t worry, Vi.”

“Ah, okay.” He said it with his usual gentle smile, so I replied casually as well, but...

From experience, nothing good comes from Mr. Fisalis being busy. The equation of “busy at work equals more military activity equals war” ran through my head. This has got to have something to do with the Aurantian royal siblings, and I’m involved...

Wait—we can’t go to war over this! I wouldn’t be able to handle it!

“You’re not...preparing for war, are you?”

“Hmm... You don’t have to worry, Vi. I’ve transferred, so I would never be sent off to the front lines again. Damn, being in the Royal Guard really has its perks, huh?”

“Oh no no no no no. You’re trying to change the subject, aren’t you?!”

Mr. Fisalis said this all with a smile, but he was absolutely dodging the question! I was about to try to hound him, but I was interrupted.

“Breakfast is served,” Rohtas announced as our breakfast plates were carried in, forcing me to drop the subject.

20. Before I Knew It

“I’m off to work, but make sure to get some rest. All right?”

“Okaaaay.”

After we finished our breakfast with my in-laws, Mr. Fisalis carried me back to the bedroom and laid me down on the bed before reminding me to *stay* there. He’d already said that exact thing loads of times on the way. Did he really trust me that little?

“Dahlia, Stellaria, you need to be careful too.”

“Understood.”

And he wasn’t just getting on my case, because he made sure to tell the maids as well. *And even if he hadn’t, my ankle is swollen and hurts. I can’t even walk on it, so I’m not exactly going anywhere! Jeez.*

“Cercis, if you don’t leave soon, you’re going to make Father Fisalis wait.”

“You’re right. I’ll be going, then. Make sure to—”

“I know already! Have a good day!”

Since I couldn’t make it to the entrance, I had to see him off at my bedside. I felt kind of bad for telling him to have a good day with my face screwed into a pout, but he deserved it for being so obstinate. He gave me an uneasy smile and a light hug before leaving the room with Rohtas.

Once I was sure the door was closed, I let out a sigh. “Mr. Fisalis tried to gloss over this, but...is everything really going to be okay?”

“What do you mean?” Stellaria asked as she arranged the pillows on my bed.

“I mean, he mentioned a strategy meeting, and that his work would be getting busy.”

“Er... I don’t know much about the matter, but it’s nothing for you to worry about, Madam. Leave all the difficult things to Master. You just need to rest and focus on healing your ankle,” Dahlia said, smiling awkwardly. *She probably just imagined him going on a rampage through Aurantia, too. It’s Mr. Fisalis, after*

all. It's pretty easy to picture.

"I can't concentrate like this! Nothing good ever happens when he's busy!" And the scheming looks on his and his father's faces! Those complacent smiles were terrifying!

I didn't know how their strategy meeting was going to go, but what would I do if there was another war? Especially if this was the catalyst for it... I prided myself on not being too self-absorbed, but this whole situation definitely revolved around me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I got the entire country caught up in a war because of all this! I could never put Mr. Fisalis or any of the other knights in danger. *Please, settle things peacefully!*

While I stewed in my own imagination...

"Oh, don't worry. Let's just keep an eye on things for now. We need to get your bandage and medication changed," Stellaria said, taking hold of my injured leg.

I couldn't exactly argue, so I just laid back against my cushions. Both of the maids hurried to work on the bandages. When they took them off, I saw that my leg was swollen to nearly twice its size. I definitely wasn't going anywhere on that leg. I was, in fact, completely stuck here.

My lunch was brought up to my bed, along with a huge pile of books to keep me occupied, but I really wasn't built for sitting around. After lunch, I was completely bored out of my mind.

"This is bad. I've been injured for half a day and I'm already sick of it."

"That's way too soon!" Mimosa, who was brought to supervise—I mean, keep me company—laughed. Since she couldn't do much else while she was pregnant, she was the perfect candidate for it. "Let's get you a wheelchair for when Master isn't home. That way, you could go for walks."

"Really?"

"Really! I'll have Bellis prepare one for you."

"Great! Thanks!"

I'd thought the night before that a wheelchair would be too much, but staying

in bed was horrifically boring, so I changed my tune pretty fast.

That night, Mr. Fisalis came home only a little later than usual. It was a bit of a let-down after he said he'd be so busy. *Did the meetings go okay? He didn't shirk his duties again, did he?*

"I'm home, Vi. Have you been good?"

"Welcome home. I stayed in bed all day! I'm bored out of my mind!"

He'd come straight to the bedroom after coming home, and asked about my day as he gave me a hug. Of course, I replied truthfully!

"But Mr... *Ahem*, Cercis, you aren't home much later than usual," I asked, looking him in the eye with the unspoken question. "You didn't dump your work on someone else, did you?"

"Yeah, I am. My job in the chivalric order is important, but nowhere near as important as taking care of *you* right now," he replied sweetly with a sparkingly happy smile.

Too sweet! I'm getting cavities, Mr. Fisalis! "I don't think so, but..."

"It was a joke. I was busy during the day, but we were just on standby through the evening, so I got bored."

"Really?"

"Really. I'll get changed quickly so we can go down for dinner."

"Okaaay."

Considering his line of work, I couldn't pry much. I was worried, but I'd have to back down for now. He'd probably tell me everything he could when he was ready.

After that, Mr. Fisalis carried me down to the dining hall. I felt bad for him having to carry me every single time, so I really hoped Bellis would get me a wheelchair soon. Although Mr. Fisalis seemed incredibly happy taking care of me...

Once we finished dinner, he carried me to the salon so we could have an after-dinner cup of tea before bringing me back to the bedroom for a bath

(assisted by Stellaria!). Afterwards, he changed my poultice and bandages, but...

“Stellaria can change my bandages for me~”

“But I *want* to do them. Don’t worry about it.”

“Huh...”

My complaint went in one ear and out the other. Anyway, he was so happy that I expected him to burst out into song, so I shut myself up. Also, he was actually really good at wrapping bandages!

And so that was how my life went for a week. My wheelchair was ready the day after Mimosa suggested it, so I was able to move around the manor without Mr. Fisalis’s help. I was so glad that I could go out into the gardens, but my glee only lasted a short while before I received some sad news.

There were going to be large-scale renovations done to the gardens.

“Why? The gardens are wonderful just the way they are,” I complained, looking out the salon window at all the servants busy outside. Rohtas was out there too, looking at some kind of blueprint with Bellis.

“That’s true, but a lot of the trees are reaching the end of their life, so they’ve decided to replant them all. Since there were so many, Master just suggested they do a large overhaul,” Stellaria explained as she pushed my wheelchair.

“So it was Mr. Fisalis, huh? I see.”

“Because of all that, there are holes all over the gardens right now. It would be too dangerous to bring you out in a wheelchair, so perhaps you should just watch it from the inside.”

“Okaaaay...” Since I couldn’t walk on my own two feet, I decided to just be a good girl. I didn’t want to cause any more trouble than I already had!

Despite claiming that he was busy at his job, Mr. Fisalis was coming home at his usual time. Once he was home, he’d come straight to check on me before going with Rohtas to see the gardens. Every. Single. Day.

“You’re really enthusiastic about the garden, aren’t you Cercis?”

“Yeah, just a bit. I’m trying to make sure it’ll be done by the time your ankle is

healed, so you just sit tight until then. All you need to do is focus on getting healed up.”

“All right.”

“Well then, I’ll be off to see to today’s garden work. Rohtas, don’t forget the plans.”

“I have them right here.”

After saying that, the two men set off for the estate grounds.

So I’ll be able to see the new gardens once my ankle is healed, huh? I hope that’s sooner rather than later.

I might not have been able to go outside, but I’d been having tea with Mother Fisalis in the salon more often since I could get around the manor just fine. She told me all kinds of stories to keep me occupied—things from the territories and things she’d seen on trips. I was jealous of the life she’d lived, free from worldly cares.

Today’s stories were all about when she was young—turns out she was the queen’s childhood friend—but I suddenly had a thought.

“What ever happened to the Aurantian royal siblings?” I asked.

Back on the night of the party, they’d been bound and taken away by the knights, and I hadn’t heard a thing about them afterwards—not even about them going back to Aurantia.

“Ah, they’re locked up in the noble’s jail!” Mother Fisalis replied lightly.

I see. So they’re still here... No, wait—there’s a special jail for nobility?!

“So they actually do send nobles to jail?”

Since I hadn’t had much to do with the palace, this was my first time hearing about anything like that. I didn’t even know that jail was split up by rank like that.

“Yep! They’re left over from long, loooong ago, back when Flür’s internal affairs weren’t all that peaceful. Some ancient royals were tragically caught up in a coup and imprisoned there. Unable to move on after their deaths, their

souls still wander the halls at night...”

“Gyaaaaaah! Mother Fisalis, please, stop!”

I wanted someone to talk to, but stop with the ghost stories! When I screeched and covered both of my ears, my mother-in-law laughed at me like this was all hilarious.

“Oh Vi, I’m making all of this up! You’re such a scaredy-cat! The noble’s jail is mentioned in royal history books, but I didn’t know they were anything but legends until now. There hasn’t been much use for them in such tranquil times, after all. But I think the commoner’s jail would be just fine for those two.”

Mother Fisalis, don’t grin so broadly! It’s still scary!

But I guess the two Aurantians really were being imprisoned. I mean, of course they were. It hadn’t looked like they’d be let off easy, with the king, Mr. Fisalis, and every other knight closing in on them...

“...Are they hostages?”

“Don’t worry about it, Vi!” she said, evading the question with another smile.

“But I’m really curious!”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Ah, wonderful weather we’re having today. I hope the garden renovation finishes soon!”

“...Yes, I do too.”

She very obviously changed the subject. That must have meant that she wasn’t going to say any more no matter what I did. *Yes, I successfully read the mood!*

Another peaceful week went by.

One day, Mr. Fisalis came home at the same time he always did. And, as always, he came straight to the bedroom to see me. But this time, he was in top spirits the moment he walked in, and he gave me an overly tight hug. *It hurts! Did something good happen?*

When I groaned from the too-tight hug, he apologized and let up.

“I’m home, Vi! And I’ve got a *big* present for you!” he said, grinning ear to ear.

A present? Did he bring some kind of delicious sweet for me?

“Welcome home. A big present?” I asked, seeing that he wasn’t holding anything.

“Yep! Our problems have been solved! Aurantia gave up without a fight!”

Oh, so it isn’t sweets. ...Wait.

Mr. Fisalis had a big smile on his face, but that news was even bigger! By “gave up” he meant “surrender”, didn’t he? Was the whole country gone?! What happened in the last two weeks?!

21. The Garden is Finished

“Aurantia gave up without a fight!” Mr. Fisalis told me when he returned home, quite pleased. *What the heck happened these last two weeks?!*

After telling me he’d explain in more detail with Father Fisalis, he led me to the salon.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“After the incident, we summoned the king of Aurantia here and had a goooooood talk with him. Basically we said: your kids pulled a quite the little stunt here—what should we do with them?”

“Little” is totally underselling it! “I see,” I replied, nodding.

“Their king seemed to understand the situation, so he begged for his children’s lives and offered to abdicate his royal authority.”

“It seems that since his queen died early in his children’s lives, he spoiled them rotten out of pity. I understand wanting to do everything you can for your children, but you *do* need to keep some control over them,” Father Fisalis explained, heaving a sigh.

“Control, hmm?” repeated Mother Fisalis with a sigh, glancing over to Mr. Fisalis. He looked a bit embarrassed in return. *Oh, it’s okay—your son is fine now!*

But it was great to hear they were able to talk with the king! He seemed quite different from those kids of his who ignore everything they hear. If the king of Aurantia was so reasonable, he should have stopped them from starting a war in the first place.

“It’s been agreed that Flür will be detaining both the crown prince and princess who stirred up a fuss this time, and the second prince in charge of their military who started the war in the first place. Then comes deciding what to do with them. With the country itself, the connections we made there during the war won us an easy and bloodless surrender.”

“Connections?”

“Yep. Corydalis and my other men worked hard to gather allies during the conflict, and they really helped us out.”

I see... So that's how that all went down. It was easy to imagine Corydalis and the other knights running around on Mr. Fisalis's orders. Thanks for all your hard work, knights!

“This time, our victory was mostly thanks to the Aurantian prime minister capitulating so readily. Our allies convincing people probably helped too, but the prime minister honestly seemed to have his head screwed on straight.”

According to Mr. Fisalis, there were many nobles and military members sympathetic to the royal family these days, so all it took to solve the problem was winning them over alongside our other allies. The prime minister seemed to prioritize the country's survival over the comfort of the royal family's, and when Flür's envoys answered their call, he and everyone else who wasn't completely in the royal family's pocket greeted them obediently. Flür had soldiers at the ready in case it was a trap, but there had been no need for them in the end.

I had been convinced the whole country had been annihilated, but actually it was just changing rulers. Aurantia would be merged with Flür, and our country would be sending a margrave to govern it.

“That prime minister is probably the whole reason the country kept afloat. It looks like he had his work cut out for him,” Mr. Fisalis commented with a faraway look before muttering, “I couldn't handle going completely bald over some dumb royals...”

So the Aurantian prime minister is completely bald? As in, the royal family caused him enough trouble that his hair actually fell out?! Wow... I guess that makes sense, with those royal siblings. Dealing with them must have been awful.

“Whatever the case, the incident is over. You don't have to worry about anything anymore. I want to say you can go outside again, but...first, how is your ankle?” Mr. Fisalis asked.

“The doctor checked it today and said I could try walking on it. No one let me, though,” I replied with a bitter look towards all of the servants, who

nonchalantly looked away.

“Her ankle isn’t swollen anymore, so shouldn’t it be fine? Vi’s going to get depressed if you keep her in bed for too long,” Mother Fisalis piped in, flashing a wry smile.

“That’s right... But I’ve been having a great time taking care of her lately. On one hand, I want her to get better soon, but on the other, I don’t want her to get better at all. What a dilemma...”

“Jeez! Cercis, don’t joke like that!”

“Ha ha ha! Do you want to practice walking a bit again?”

“I don’t need any *practice* to walk!”

“Then let’s walk.”

“Okay!” Taking Mr. Fisalis’s offered hand, I stood on my own feet for the first time in weeks.

“Look! Vi stood up!” Mr. Fisalis cried happily, but I wasn’t sure why he was making a big deal of it.

I could put weight on it without any pain or discomfort, so it seemed to be fully healed!

“That’s great! Since the Aurantia incident is over and Viola’s ankle is better, it might be time for us to head back to the territories.”

“You’re right! We haven’t seen our manor in Le Pied for an awfully long time.”

“We need to start doing something about public safety there.”

“You’re right. I’ll leave the matter of the community watch to you.”

Noting that the timing was good, my in-laws decided to head back to the territories. They’d been staying here with me since the war began, so knowing they’d be leaving made me feel a bit lonely. *I miss back at the beginning of their stay, where I was worried about them catching me working with the servants (or did I just enjoy the thrill?). Next time, I’ll be the one visiting them.*

A few days later, they gathered all of their things together and set off, back on the way to the territories. After Mr. Fisalis and I watched their carriage ride off,

we were about to go inside.

“The garden renovations are finished. Would you like to go see it?” Mr. Fisalis asked, suddenly inviting me out for a walk.

Oh yeah, he did say it'd be finished around when my ankle was healed. “Wow! It's done already?”

“Yep. I think you'll love it, Vi.”

“Let's get going then!”

“Ha ha ha, you don't need to rush,” he laughed as I hurriedly pulled his hand towards the gardens.

I was super excited to see the gardens again after so long—and after massive renovations, too! I looked all around with curiosity, but... At a glance, it didn't look very different at all. Certainly not enough of a change to justify all the holes I'd seen everywhere, at any rate.

“Cercis—is it just me, or has it not changed much at all?” I asked Mr. Fisalis as we walked together hand in hand.

“We didn't do much here—or rather, we didn't do anything at all here. The renovations were over there.”

“Over there?”

“Yep.”

Where was “over there,” though? I wanted to ask, but it seemed like Mr. Fisalis was avoiding the question, because he wouldn't tell me directly. He just quickly walked towards the cottage.

Wait, if they weren't renovating the entire garden, shouldn't it have been fine for me to go out? I glared at Mr. Fisalis suspiciously, but kept quiet and followed along.

“Ah, you can see the cottage better!”

Up until then, it'd been surrounded by high trees so you couldn't see it well from outside, but they'd been uprooted and replaced with shorter trees. Now there was a clear view of the castle from both the garden and the manor itself.

It had always seemed like a secret, secluded little cabin thanks to the tall trees, but now it had transformed into a wonderful, brightly-lit cottage.

Ah, so this was the bit he got renovated. I see. Digging up and replanting all of those old trees must have been an ordeal.

The view was wonderful, especially the bit of lawn facing the pond in front of the cottage—*yep, that used to be a wooden deck! Mr. Fisalis won't be able to do anything untoward here! Wait, that's not what I should be focusing on.*

"You can see the entire cottage from the gardens. Can you see it from the manor now, too? It'll get a lot more light now."

"Yep, and you can see the garden from the cottage now, too."

"It's harder to secretly peep...*ahem*, I mean, sneak a look at it now."

"...What are you talking about, Vi...?"

I said it with such a serious look that Mr. Fisalis just awkwardly smiled back.

Next, we went around to the back of the cottage. This was where *my* little garden was. My overgrown, wonderfully sloppy garden. I'd had a lot of fun in my modest little spot in the corner of Bellis's wonderful garden, and...

"Huh?! What happened, it's all nice now!"

What I saw there completely shocked me. My garden had been upgraded!

The first thing I noticed was the size. It was about twice as big as it used to be, maybe even more than that. Anyway, it was definitely bigger!

Before, it had just been a random little open spot, with no enclosure around it; I'd just been planting whatever I had after I'd gotten permission to do it. Now it had some proper shrubbery around it, so it looked like a real garden for once.

Plus, it had fresh soil in it so I could plant new seeds or bulbs whenever I wanted. And of course, the flowers that I'd filled it with were still blooming beautifully. It actually looked like they'd been left alone specifically for me.

There was a patch of grass for some space to relax in, and...

"There's a gazebo."

"Yep. Now you'll have somewhere to kick back in comfort."

The lawn was just the same as it had been before, but there was a *gazebo* in it! The octagonal structure didn't have walls, but instead had a waist-high fence around it with a triangular roof. The whole thing was decked out in classic white and looked quite cute.

"It's a wonderful gazebo! Oooh, there's a sofa, too."

Taking a leisurely look around the inside, there was a fluffy sofa. It was interestingly shaped to match the three sides of the octagon, and was more than big enough for three people to sit comfortably. *I'll be able to take an afternoon nap here when I get tired from working!*

Since the roof was large, there was lots of space under the eaves. I'd probably be able to avoid getting soaked during sudden rain showers underneath it. Despite the roof's size, it was still quite high to let in a lot of light.

As I looked all around the gazebo curiously, Mr. Fisalis (who had already taken a seat on the couch) pulled me by the hand and sat me down beside him.

"I figured it might be nice for you to take it easy in here. Of course, you can still lay on the lawn if you want to."

"Yay, that's great!" I liked the lawn already, after all. I was glad he had it left for me.

"Do you like it? I had it made with you in mind."

"Of course I do! Thank you so much!"

I could take a little break in the gazebo, and have lunch or tea outside. *Mr. Fisalis, thanks so much for having such a great spot made for me!* I was so happy that I gave him a big hug.

"Calling it a large-scale renovation was a lie to keep you from going out into it before it was finished. I'm sorry, Vi. I only kept it a secret because I wanted to surprise you," Mr. Fisalis told me, stroking my hair gently.

Oh, I get it now! Dammit, I'm gonna have to forgive him!

"I was surprised, but in a good way. Really, thank you so much, Cercis," I thanked him from the bottom of my heart, looking up at him.

He smiled happily back down at me before giving me a kiss on my forehead.

“Now that I’ve got you glad about the garden reno, it’s time for my next surprise,” he said, standing up and pulling me with him.

Hm? Another surprise? The first one was the gazebo, right? What was the second one? I had absolutely no idea, so I was practically radiating huge question marks.

“Take care of Vi,” Mr. Fisalis ordered, addressed to someone outside of the gazebo.

Who is he talking to? Rohtas? Dahlia? But wait, we should be the only ones here right now, shouldn’t we?!

And then, voices rang out all around us.

“All right! Leave it to us!”

“Now Madam, let’s get you back to your room for a little bath.”

“Then we’ll give you the *best* massage.”

“We’re going to get you looking beautiful today, too!”

All of those voices belonged to the happy little Spa Squad! *Wait, where were you all hiding?! I know we’ve been alone up until now!* “Okay, okay, let’s get going, Madam,” the smiling maids said, trying to pull me off somewhere.

“Huh, wait—wait just a second, what’s happening? What’s *gonna* be happening? Someone, explain please!” I panicked, trying to resist. But no one gave me any explanation at all. While I was all flustered, the maids got a good grip on me and dragged me away.

Most of the time, the Spa Squad was deployed for evening parties or social get-togethers. But today, I had no plans. All I was gonna do was take a walk with Mr. Fisalis in the gardens! *Oh no, is there some secret party or something coming up?! No, no, no—I’ve never heard of anything this last minute before. Really, what on earth is going on?*

“Cercis?!”

“Everything’s fine, Vi!” Mr. Fisalis said in response to my cry for help, smiling and giving me a little wave. While I was still busy panicking, he gave the Spa Squad some serious orders. “I’m counting on you. Viola is always cute, but

make her look exceptional today.”

What’s with the extra special plan? “Understood! We’ll work extra hard to doll her up!” the maids gladly replied to Mr. Fisalis’s order.

What, are they all working with Mr. Fisalis? Am I the only one out of the loop? What’s going to happen?!

22. Do-Over Surprise

The happy Spa Squad had taken me from the finished garden back to my room. I was glad I wasn't brought somewhere I didn't know. I was there terrified of what could be coming, but I didn't have to wait long to find out "First up is your bath! It's all ready for you, so get on in there! If you take too long, we'll come in and help you."

"Gyaaaah! Anything but that!" I cried, rushing into the bathroom away from the grabby hands of the maids. "Um~ I'd kinda like for someone to tell me what's about to happen, but...?" I poked my head out of the doorway to ask.

"We can't tell you yet. We'll just have to let you look forward to it. Come on now, if you don't hurry, we'll come wash you ourselves!"

"Kyaaaaah! I'm getting in, I'm getting in!"

The maids turned the tables on me, barely containing their laughter. Once I'd gotten through my unavoidable bath, there was more.

"Next is your massage! We'll get you smooth, sparkling, and even more gorgeous than usual," they told me, getting in their massage stances and pulling me to the bed.

"It's been so long, I'm gonna go all out!"

"Mimosa! When did you get here?!"

"There's no way I could sit idle while you're getting all prettied up, Madam!"

Mimosa had suddenly joined the battle!

I was stretched and squeezed from my head to the tips of my toes by the gleeful Spa Squad, given a massage that was gentle but firm when necessary. I was in heaven. But just when I was about to drift off to sleep...

"Ah, Madam, don't go to sleep! We can't do your makeup if you're drowsy!" Mimosa warned me stiffly. *How cruel, to tell me I can't sleep when I feel so great!*

Once my massage was finished, next up was Stellaria, who had been on

standby in front of my closet, bringing out my dress. *Et tu, Stellaria?*

“Please wear this today,” she said, presenting a dress I didn’t recognize. Even when she spread it over the sofa, I couldn’t remember it at all.

“When was this made?” I asked, since I didn’t remember putting in any orders for new clothes either.

“Very recently. We and Master decided on the design without having you measured... Ah, that was a secret. Oho ho ho!” So they did it behind my back! Although Stellaria just blabbed the whole thing.

“...”

“Come now, let’s get you changed.”

“Okaaay,” I said as I stood at the ready, only to feel a bit sad that I put on their dresses on reflex now. After putting on the precisely-tailored dress and standing in front of the mirror, it finally dawned on me.

A pure white dress. Is this...

“Um. This dress kinda looks a *lot* like a wedding dress.”

“Oh my, really? It’s just a white dress,” Stellaria said, looking away. She was obviously lying!

The dress’s simple silhouette matched my taste perfectly. It looked as if it was made of simple white fabric at a glance, but it was actually embroidered with roses in the same color. The dress was probably made by Madam Fleur, since she liked subtle details like that.

It was off-the-shoulder with a *way* open back, but that must have been done to emphasize the accessories. And finally, it had Mr. Fisalis’s latest favorite back style: the big ribbon. *Seriously, how obsessed is he? It looks cute from behind, though.* And by the way, the gloves had the same kind of ribbon on them, too.

The trail of the skirt was long, making it a bit hard to walk in. If I didn’t pay attention, I would probably trip and fall on it. Finally, we had the shoes: pure white high heels.

Okay, seriously though—there is no way to see this as anything but a wedding dress! “What is this, what’s going to happen?! We’re not having a wedding, are

we?” I begged my maids for an answer, but...

“Okay, okay, let’s get your makeup on.”

“What will we do for Madam’s hair? Should we put it up or leave it down?”

“Let’s put it half up with a cute little bun at the top.”

“Great idea!”

“Ah, leave the accessories for after we do her hair and makeup. Get the jewelry ready~”

“Got it!”

Not a single one listened to my plea! Things were promptly prepared with Mimosa and Stellaria at the helm, but why did I feel so left behind?! Before I knew it, my usual hair and makeup for special occasions was totally done.

Damn, my maids are always so fast.

My jewelry, as I’d grown accustomed to, was a Viola Sapphire, but... Huh?

“Is this necklace new?”

I’d never seen the necklace that Stellaria placed on me. It wasn’t the one we’d had made of the Viola Sapphire samples. Even in the mirror I could see how beautiful it was. The previous gems were nothing compared to this.

When I asked, Stellaria stopped and lifted it up to my eye level. “Yes, they finally found a ‘Viola Eye,’ so Master had this made. Can you see how the color and sparkle are completely different?”

I took a veeeeeeeery good look. “Oooh... So they finally found one of the highest quality ones.” I was afraid to even touch it, so for now I just looked.

But it was so high quality that even an amateur like me noticed the difference! When had it been dug up, and when had it been processed?

Once the sapphire was on me, I was ready.

“Let’s get going!”

“Where?!”

“Yep, let’s go!”

“I’m serious—where?!”

Stellaria led me by the hand and out of the room while another maid carried my train. None of them would tell me where we were going. *I don’t care about the surprise—just tell me!* I had to walk slowly since the dress was so long, and then...

“This is... Oh, my Viola is so wonderful!” Mr. Fisalis cried from where he stood downstairs, looking at me as if he was deeply moved. He was wearing his Royal Guard uniform.

Oh jeez, this really IS a wedding ceremony!

I walked down the stairs carefully so I wouldn’t step on my dress, and Stellaria handed me over to Mr. Fisalis.

“...This has been a whole string of surprises.”

“I *wanted* to surprise you, so it seems I did a great job.”

When I glared up at him, he smiled happily back. *Guh, I took his sparkling smile at point blank range!*

“This is absolutely a wedding dress, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“You’re not about to tell me we’re going to the palace’s head sanctuary, are you?!”

“Ha ha ha! Of course not!”

My heart was pounding as I asked him that question, but he just laughed it off. *Thank goodness. I asked because knowing him, he’d do it.*

Once Mr. Fisalis and I started walking together, Stellaria handed me a bouquet. It was small and round, and looking closely... “Wow! These are flowers from my garden!”

The bouquet was made of the flowers Mr. Fisalis had bought for me in Le Pied, the cute flowers with heart-shaped leaves—andreanums. It was completely adorable, with the leaves serving as accents to the floral arrangement.

“Bellis made it!”

“Bellis has so much girl power...”

“Oh my! I’m jealous of his skills...”

Both Stellaria and I got a little depressed, thinking about how great his work was.

...No. We should be proud of Bellis’ skills! I kind of wanted to see his expression while he put these arrangements together... No, don’t get me wrong—I’m still happy about it!

“I’m glad. Thank you!”

Holding my andreanum bouquet, Mr. Fisalis and I started walking with our hands linked. It seemed like we were only going to the garden after all. Thank goodness it wasn’t the palace!

“Nothing’s gonna surprise me anymore!”

“Ha ha ha! Watch your step.”

“Okaaay.”

We chatted as we walked in the direction of the cottage...but then we passed it, instead heading to my garden.

Weren’t we just here?

I’d been there with Mr. Fisalis, just the two of us (I still have no idea where the happy little Spa Squad had been hiding) earlier, but now every single servant was waiting there! From the ones that worked inside the manor to Bellis’s team of gardeners and even the duke’s knights. It was a full line up. *I said nothing would surprise me anymore, but I take it back!*

“Everyone is here...” I murmured, staring in dumbfounded amazement.

“This wouldn’t mean anything if they weren’t,” answered Mr. Fisalis. What did he mean by “wouldn’t mean anything”? I looked blankly up at him as he led me by the hand to the gazebo. We didn’t go inside, but just stopped right in front of it.

“I wanted to redo our wedding ceremony. Not with fake vows, but real ones

—in front of everyone. I want them all to be our witnesses,” Mr. Fisalis declared and kneeled in front of me.

Taken aback, all I could do was stare at his face as he stood back up, took my hand, and slipped off my glove.

“I, Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, promise to love and protect Viola Mangelica Fisalis alone till the end of my days,” Mr. Fisalis promised, kissing the back of my hand.

This was his second time giving me a real vow. He’d said the same thing on Montjuc Hill in Le Pied. Back then, I couldn’t answer since I hadn’t quite caught up with my own feelings, but he’d been considerate and waited patiently. *But I’m okay now! I’ve steeled myself!*

Mr. Fisalis always thought of me first. He was the type who tried his best to end an entire war quickly, just because he wanted to return home to me. He would always come to save me if I was in danger. He’d go on about how he loved me right in front of other people without a care in the world.

Honestly, it would be hard for me *not* to fall in love with him.

I actually spent a little too much time thinking about that, so Mr. Fisalis was staring at me, worried. *Whoops, shouldn’t keep him waiting!*

“I, Viola Mangelica Fisalis, promise to love Cercis Tinensis Fisalis alone till the end of my days.” I slowly, but clearly, repeated the same vow, taking his hand and kissing the back of it.

When I looked back up at him, his worried look had disappeared, replaced by a splendid smile. I counterattacked with my own twenty dollar smile!

And then, just as I was wondering why his handsome face seemed really close, it happened.

Smooch.

Hm? Something warm just touched my lips? Huh? What?!



H-he kissed me!

Before I knew it, Mr. Fisalis had actually kissed me. My face was burning. Once he pulled back, I was stuck there red as a tomato and blinking, while Mr. Fisalis looked completely calm and collected.

“Viola, you’re so cute when you’re blushing. Now that I know how you feel, we can finally be a real husband and wife.”

What the heck are you whispering in my ear for! The servants all saw us kiss. My *first kiss* was right in front of all of the servants. If there was a hole available, I would’ve crawled into it out of embarrassment, but in the absence of one I just buried my face in his chest, getting a tight hug back.

“I’m so happy right now. Hey, Vi, are you happy too?”

“...I am.”

When he whispered, I whispered back. The embarrassment was still winning this round overall , though!

“We’ve heard both of your vows in full. I pray that the two of you will be happy for years to come,” Rohtas said to us.

“May you be happy!” cried the rest of the servants in blessing before showering us with flower petals. It was beautiful seeing the sun through the blossoms strewn into the air!

In a wonderful dress I loved, and in our manor rather than the palace sanctuary, we had been blessed not by the royal family or other nobles, but the manor servants who were like family to me. Everything about the day was different, but the most important thing was that I was much happier this time. The event felt as warm and joyful as the feelings that inspired it.

“Now you’re completely mine, Vi! You’d better prepare yourself.”

“I know, I know!”

Side Story: Let's Explain What's Going On Behind The Scenes

1. The Reason For The Rush

Once it was decided that the Crown Prince of Aurantia and his company would be visiting Flür, the Chivalric Order of Flür suddenly became quite busy. The front line knights were guarding both outside of the palace and the city of Rozhe, while the Royal Guard would be in charge of the security inside the palace and defending important individuals.

Duke Cercis Fisalis and his men were all part of that, but his unit didn't have the regular responsibilities of the Royal Guard. Instead, they shouldered the responsibility of public security. As a result, they ended up mainly watching the Aurantian's movements.

Within the knight's quarters, Cercis was in his office. He was sitting at the ready at his desk, long legs crossed, as he glared at the documents on his desk and tapped his finger angrily against it.

"You're sure pissy. Is it because you've been getting home so late you keep missing Madam?" teased Corydalis as he brought a new stack of documents.

His superior usually did all the paperwork in silence, but today he wasn't getting much done at all. Instead, he was deep in thought with his brow furrowed.

"Every single person is asking me the same thing..."

"Wait, that was the first time I've asked, wasn't it?"

"...I've told Viola that I'll be busy, so we are *not* missing each other! I just haven't seen her *awake*, is all... Wait, I guess that's not actually the issue here."

"Hm? Then what is it?"

"It's all fine and dandy that Aurantia is coming here, but... They won't stick to a number of knights and servants coming with them..." Cercis told him, still

glaring at his paperwork.

“Huh? Didn’t they say fifty yesterday? That’s the number we used to determine our postings at yesterday’s meeting, wasn’t it?”

“Yes—that was yesterday. But we just got word of a correction putting them at forty.”

“Huh? I mean, fewer people means less work for us, but...”

“The thing is, this isn’t their first correction. They’ve sent us a few already.”

“Ah, yeah, I remember it was twenty at the beginning, then up to seventy...”
Corydalis hummed, touching his chin with a hand as he thought back to their negotiations.

“It’s hard to call going from twenty to seventy just a mistake... Well, whatever. Why are they flopping their numbers all over the place?” Cercis said, furrowed brow deepening.

Corydalis picked up the document Cercis had just been looking at, quickly reading it over. “...Wonder which number is the real one.”

“I don’t know... But it’s fishy.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Go report to Royal Guard Commander Permam that our security plans need to be looked over again. They’re planning something.”

“Understood.”

“Remember it’s urgent. After that, get our spies to give us as accurate a count as they can.”

“Great idea,” Corydalis nodded, immediately turning around. Then, he left the office on his way to quickly put his orders into action.

“Dammit, I’m gonna be late getting home again...!” Cercis grumbled in frustration, looking at the door shutting quietly behind his subordinate.

2. It’s Fine That They Came, But...

Just around the time Viola was being readied...or rather, *getting ready* at the

ducal manor for the welcome party, Aurantia's crown prince and his entourage reached Flür's palace after noon.

"You've done well to come all this way on your trip."

"It was quite fun—this is my first time traveling here. Unlike our country, Flür is quite verdant."

Having come to the palace entrance to greet them, Flür's king shook hands with Aurantia's crown prince, smiling.

Both the crown prince and his sister Orangé had come in a heavily decorated carriage, which was extravagant but not very classy. After them came more carriages, with their attendants arriving separately. Then came the guards on horseback who had been protecting the group of carriages, and then after them the soldiers on foot.

"...Their numbers were definitely off," whispered Corydalis into Cercis's ear, having snuck up behind him and Commander Permam. They were all already lined up behind Flür's royal family.

"What do you mean?" Cercis whispered back, still facing forward with an expression that betrayed nothing.

"We did a rough count when their group went through the gates, but there are even more than they confirmed."

"Dammit!"

"There's also the chance that they have even more agents hiding in the carriages."

"...Once their attendants get out, inspect the insides immediately. We need to get an exact number ASAP."

"Right."

After their quiet conversation, Corydalis stealthily headed back to his post.

This dumbass just had to go and give me more work! Cercis swore internally. The attendants... Well, they don't really matter, since they can just be shoved into rooms at random, but what's the deal with all these additions to the entourage? We'll have to strengthen our surveillance. We'll need to assign more

men to monitor them. I suppose I can switch that one group from guard duty to surveillance... I guess we'll have to fill in the gaps by borrowing from other units...

His brain was in overdrive, thinking of what would be next. *We'll need to check their numbers, increase surveillance, search for their weak points... Dammit! Will I even be able to see Viola at tonight's party? Even if she's with my parents, I don't want her to spend the whole night alone when she's gotten all dressed up! My Viola will probably be exceptionally beautiful tonight. All kinds of people are gonna be approaching her, just like they always do... Damn, just thinking of it is pissing me off!*

I need to stop whining and get my work done so I can see Viola! Cercis swore to himself.

3. Emergency Fisalis Family Meeting *Just After the Welcome Party* The welcome party for Aurantia's crown prince and his entourage had just begun. There, the main guest, the crown prince himself, had done something as ridiculous as propose to Viola.

Though everything had settled down thanks to Cercis popping into the party after finishing his work, Cercis, Viola, and the former Duke and Duchess Fisalis all returned home quite upset.

Once they reached their manor, Viola collapsed in the entranceway, all of the tension in her body finally being released.

It must have been a lot for her, if the usually energetic Viola was that exhausted. I'm getting really angry again! What should I do with that dumbass crown prince?!

After carrying Viola to her bedroom to rest, he returned to his own room and changed into a more casual outfit. In this room, Cercis was ready to discuss the events of the night, as well as what would happen next, with his father, Rohtas, and Dahlia. Just after he finished changing, they all arrived "It seems that tonight's welcoming party was quite stormy," Rohtas said, probably having heard what had happened from the former duke on their way there.

“Yeah. Did Father tell you?”

“A cursory explanation of it. But the more I hear, the less I understand what went on inside His Royal Highness’s head.”

“Don’t say it so bluntly. He might be an idiot, but we don’t know what he may do. My men are sticking close to them.”

They had discreetly separated the maids and attendants that the crown prince’s entourage brought and replaced them with other caretakers for their stay in Flür—knights stationed in place of maids and attendants. They were, of course, dressed as palace ladies-in-waiting or chamberlains.

“You’ll be hearing reports of those on surveillance tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yes,” Cercis nodded at his father’s question. “Though my men have been assigned to them, that dumbass prince keeps exceeding our expectations. Rohtas, raise the security level of the manor.”

“As you wish.”

“Don’t let in any suspicious people like that crown prince.”

“Of course.”

The ducal manor’s security was always perfect, but Cercis made sure to confirm things with Rohtas. After being sure Rohtas understood, he looked to Dahlia next.

“Dahlia, how is Viola?”

“She’s quite tired, but she should be all right with Stellaria at her side.”

“I see. I’ll leave everything pertaining to Viola’s affairs to Stellaria.”

“Understood.”

He directed Dahlia to take care of Viola, but didn’t stop shoring up their defenses all around.

“Father, Mother, can I ask you to come to the main building from the cottage and stay with Viola?” Cercis asked his parents.”

“Yep! If anyone shows up, I’ll drive ’em off!” the former duke announced, thumping his chest.

Their defenses were fortified, and so were Viola's surroundings. But this wasn't enough to prepare for all the what-ifs running through his head.

"Drill more self-defensive techniques into Viola, just in case," Cercis ordered Rohtas, who raised his eyebrows.

"With all due respect, Madam already has quite the mastery of martial arts and swordplay, and other skills as well..." the butler said, a look of "you want me to do more?" in his eyes.

"I know, but she needs *more*. Even more than that."

"...Understood."

"This is all for her sake, so be even more thorough than you have been."

"That's true," nodded Rohtas obediently, deciding that if it was for Madam's sake, he would do his best.

4. The Bombshell Trio's Job *The Aurantian Siblings' Secret Meeting* After all the trouble at the welcoming party, at about the same time as the Fisalis family meeting, the rest of the knights were hard at work.

After the Aurantian royal siblings had cleared the room so they could speak with each other, the Bombshell Trio were busy watching them through a one-way mirror from the servants' waiting room next door.

By order of Captain Permam and Vice Captain Fisalis, every servant assigned to the siblings was a knight in disguise. Angelica, Alkanna, and Chamomile were all dressed as palace ladies-in-waiting, and they would be taking care of the Aurantians' personal needs (AKA, monitoring them).

Additionally, all of the servants that the siblings had brought with them had been told the following: "You must be exhausted after your long journey. We're celebrating *your* visit as well, so please relax during your stay. We'll take care of your masters, don't worry." They were also all invited to a servants' welcoming party and separated from the siblings and the foreign minister they'd arrived with.

“This was truly fate. Viola is such a wonderful woman! I need to make her mine.”

“Who cares about Viola? Although I guess that if she *does* become yours, I’ll get the duke.”

The crown prince paced around the room, gesturing in excitement while his sister lounged on the sofa and watched.

“...They’re really idiots. Whoops, said that out loud☆”

“Jeez, Chamomile! I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“Yep.”

The special guest rooms that the siblings were staying in had been equipped with one-way mirrors and particularly thin walls, so that they could be monitored from the servants’ waiting room next door. The Bombshell Trio were there, and naturally they were quickly getting annoyed at their surveillance targets’ chatter that was just laden with misunderstandings. Despite the fact that they were supposed to be spying on them, they just couldn’t help but take a few honest digs at everything the pair was saying (in a whisper the siblings couldn’t hear, of course).

“It doesn’t look like the duke wants to divorce Viola right now. How are we going to split them up?”

“I have no idea what he sees in her. I’m much more attractive~ And that girl is an idiot with no taste if she doesn’t understand how desirable you are. But if you’re that interested in her, I guess I have no choice but to come up with a battle plan.”

“Nononononono,” the three knights all quipped again, shaking their heads. They all wanted to know which parts of the prince, exactly, were supposed to be so attractive.

“We’ll cause a disturbance at the party in three days’ time in order to lure the duke away, and then kidnap Viola while he’s distracted.”

“But isn’t there a chance that he won’t bring her to the party after what happened tonight?”

“Hmm, you’re right, Orangé.”

Though the crown prince came up with a plan off the cuff and explained it to his sister, Princess Orangé immediately pointed out the problems.

Seeing that, the knights continued their running commentary.

“The sister seems to be the smart one.”

“She’s the one we should be worrying about.”

“Her brother is just too much of a dumbass.”

All three members of the Bombshell Trio made a mental note to keep careful watch on the sister.

“We won’t be able to do a thing if Viola doesn’t come back to the palace. That’s why you need to feign an apology to the duke tomorrow and make him drop his guard.”

“I see.”

“Hmm... Maybe tell him that you’ve given up on her.”

“Yes, yes.”

“That way, they definitely won’t have any excuse for her not to attend a palace-sponsored party for state guests.”

“Yeah, that’s right!”

“Put on your best fake sincerity, all right?”

“Of course!”

While the princess hashed out their plan bit by bit, the crown prince just nodded along and agreed with everything.

“...The sister seems like she’d make a way better heir to the throne...”

“You’re right... But she’s a woman! She’d definitely be way harder to deal with as a ruler than that dumbass prince, though.”

“The brother hasn’t got any pride, or a spine.”

The trio’s sass ran wild. They actually started feeling a bit sorry for the crown prince, since all he was doing was agreeing to and following his sister’s plan.

The siblings didn't seem to be finished talking, so the trio quieted down and listened closely, but...

"I'll apologize to the Duke as soon as I see him tomorrow. *And* for the disturbance we'll cause at the party—"

The conversation suddenly stopped. Looking through the mirror, they saw that the Aurantian siblings had their backs turned to them and were writing something down on a piece of paper.

Wait, don't write it down. Say it out loud! Signaling to each other with their eyes that they'd have to get that paper sometime later, the Bombshell Trio went back to their surveillance.

"I never expected the soldiers we brought to catch Flür off guard would come in handy like this!" they heard the crown prince say.

"So that's why they wouldn't settle on a number for their attendants!"

"We need to crush them!"

"So that was their plan. I thought something was up..."

Snapsnapsnap... All three of the ladies audibly ran out of patience.

"Shhh. They're talking again."

"Let's listen in."

"Sanctions can come later."

They all had to calm themselves down. Taking deep breaths, the lady knights focused on their duties.

"In the palace, here, there, and—"

"We'll find a suitable place outside, without many people—"

"I wish we had a floor plan—"

"For the trap, we'll—"

The royal siblings were pointing out places on their map of the palace and discussing details, but the trio could only catch bits and pieces.

After a while, the siblings finished their discussion and looked around.

“Is anyone there?” The crown prince called for some servants. And, of course, the “servants” who were within earshot were none other than the Bombshell Trio themselves, dressed as ladies-in-waiting.

“Oh, hey. That’s us!” The ladies looked at each other and nodded, then walked out of the secret door that connected their hidden room to the one on the opposite side. From there, they went out into the hall.

“Did you call for us?” they asked, looking totally innocent as they opened the door to the special guest rooms.

Incidentally, all of the actual Aurantian servants were in the middle of their own welcoming party thanks to the efforts of the knights, so there was no chance of anyone else answering the siblings’ call by mistake.

“What is it that you need?”

“Prepare the baths and our beds.”

“Understood.”

Chamomile headed for the bathroom, while Alkanna moved to the bedroom. While they were gone, Angelica feigned tidying up as she went to go collect the paper the siblings had been writing on.

There was a pen and a notepad on the desk, but the page itself was missing. One of the siblings must have taken it with them to hide the evidence. How annoying that for once the pair *hadn’t* slipped up, thought Angelica as she grit her teeth.

Looking carefully for anything else that might be useful, she realized that the top sheet of the notepad had spots where the ink had soaked through. She wasn’t sure if it would be useful, but she nonchalantly ripped it off and took it just in case.

5. The Royal Guard’s Morning Meeting Just about the same time that Viola had been overpowered by the intensity of Rohtas’s smile and was starting her martial arts training at the ducal manor, Cercis’s squad was having a meeting in the knights’ quarters quarters about the Aurantian sibling’s scheme.

“Last night, the two of them had a private talk after they returned to their rooms. They planned on making the vice captain lower his guard by falsely apologizing for what happened last night, and are planning to do something at the party the day after tomorrow.” Alkanna gave a concise report of what they’d overheard.

“Fake an apology...! They really are trash,” Cercis scowled, after he’d heard what the knights had discovered.

“Hm... Anything else?” Royal Guard Captain Permam asked, pressing Alkanna for more information.

“Yes. They began discussing some kind of drawing very quietly about halfway through their conversation, so we were unable to hear everything they said. One of them also took the drawing, or whatever it was, with them, so we were unable to retrieve it. I did manage to get this, though—it’s the piece of paper that was under whatever they were writing. I’m unsure if it will be of any help, though,” she replied, submitting the paper she’d taken from the special guest room the night before.

The captain took it, and both he and Cercis looked it over.

“Is this... A map or something?”

“It doesn’t look like writing.”

They could faintly see a series of squares touching each other with certain parts circled; where the lines overlapped, the ink had bled through onto the paper below.

“It doesn’t look much like our castle...”

“It resembles the layout a bit if you squint... It’s too badly drawn to tell for sure, though.” Though the captain thought it may have been a map of Flür’s palace, it was just too vague to be certain.

“Whatever the case, we’ll get it analyzed by our document specialists. Lantana, bring it to them. Meanwhile we’ll try to predict the Aurantians’ movements.”

Despite the fact that Captain Permam had ordered one of the squad members

to take it, Cercis stood up and held out his hand.

“I’m going to go see His Majesty to lodge my complaint. I’ll drop it off on my way.”

“Thank you,” Permam said, handing the paper over.

And so, Cercis excused himself from the meeting and headed to the king’s office to complain about what happened the night before.

*

A while later, Cercis returned, silent.

“Welcome back. How did it go?” Corydalis asked with a wry smile, seeing the grim look on the vice captain’s face.

“The crown prince was there when I went to lodge a complaint with His Majesty. He gave me a quick apology for last night. He said he was super remorseful so please forgive him, he’ll give up on Viola, etcetera etcetera.”

“So he said exactly what his sister told him to say last night!” Angelica piped in.

“At least change it up a bit!” Chamomile quipped.

“I guess he did look repentant on the surface, then?”

“Yep.”

Both Cercis and Corydalis shook their heads.

“Now that he’s apologized in front of His Majesty, you can’t be stubborn and say you won’t let Madam go to the next party... Just like they planned.”

“Right,” Cercis replied, a sour look on his face.

“So what are you gonna do? Bring Madam anyway?”

“I’ve got no choice. But that will make them think we’re not expecting anything, right?”

Corydalis didn’t miss the fact that his superior’s face had morphed into work mode. “I see. Which in turn will make *them* let their guard down.”

“Right. We’ll catch them when they inevitably slip up.”

“Then we’ll have to up security to keep Madam safe. Why don’t we have our knights dress up like hall waitstaff?” Corydalis suggested, realizing how torn Cercis must have felt having to use his beloved wife as bait.

“Our squad probably won’t be enough, so let’s get some people from other units too,” replied Cercis, asking for more men.

With that, their defense plan for the party was in place.

6. Emergency Fisalis Family Meeting *Before Dinner* At the moment, Viola was enjoying her pre-meal tea while waiting for Cercis and her in-laws, exhausted from Rohtas’s hellish training Cercis, meanwhile, had called his parents and Rohtas into his study.

“I’ll give you all a short explanation of what happened today—” he announced, summarizing everything—the Aurantian sibling’s secret chat the night before and the crown prince’s apology in front of the king.

“...So he has no remorse whatsoever. I suppose if he had enough brains to regret what he did, he wouldn’t be dragging his country into a useless conflict and financially ruining it in the first place.”

“Right?” Cercis nodded at the former duke’s jab.

“And since he gave his touching little apology in front of His Majesty, you can’t just bluntly reject it.”

“No.”

“And because you’ve ‘accepted’ his apology, you’ve got no choice but to bring Viola to the party like you originally planned.”

“That’s right. I hate that I have to bring Viola along as if I don’t already know they’re planning on doing something bad to her,” grumbled Cercis with a frown.

“Oh my, but you have a plan, right?” his mother cut in.

“Of course I do. We’ll have my knights disguised as palace servants guarding the party venue.”

“I see. You’d better keep Vi perfectly safe. If you don’t, I’ll have you sent to live in Le Pied while we move back in here. And of course, Vi will be staying with *us*,” the former duchess threatened her son with a smile as she cracked her knuckles.

“Come on... Don’t make our relationship long-distance!”

“Then show me that you’ll protect her no matter what!”

“I will,” Cercis replied tensely. “I’m planning on keeping venue security tight, but it’ll be an issue in the unlikely event that something disrupts that. It’ll be fine if I’m with her the whole time, but we need to plan for the unexpected. That’s where you come in, Rohtas.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Turn up the intensity of Viola’s self-defense training. Teach her close combat.”

“In case they attempt to kidnap her inside the palace itself, I gather.”

“Right.”

“Please excuse my saying so, but Madam is already quite proficient with swordsmanship and martial arts.”

“‘Quite proficient’ isn’t enough. Assume that emergencies other than hand-to-hand combat may occur.”

“Understood,” Rohtas said, nodding at Cercis’s orders.

“...You always go easy on her, after all,” muttered Cercis.

“Really?”

“Yep. Really easy on her. You treat her way differently than me!”

Rohtas tilted his head exaggeratedly. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely! Ahem. Whatever. Listen, Rohtas. Even if Viola whines about being tired or says she can’t do it, don’t let her off easy.”

“Understood...”

“You’re being hard on her for her own sake.”

“...Of course, sir,” Rohtas agreed after a pause, seemingly getting the point.

7. Rohtas's Melancholy

At the meeting the night before, Rohtas had been ordered to help Viola grow stronger—after all, she'd be going to the upcoming party.

Since she was forced to attend even though they were well aware that the Aurantian royal siblings were targeting her, it almost seemed like Viola was *bait*. Cercis said that he'd be shoring up the security, but he ordered Rohtas to make sure that Viola could protect herself too, just in case.

What do you expect me to do in a single day?! Rohtas was at a loss, but he pulled himself together. Madam has already become quite skilled thanks to all her earlier training, so let's just have her brush up on everything she's learned. Bringing her somewhere that we know she'll be in danger just doesn't seem right to me, though. I'll need to harden my heart and beat the skills into her, if necessary!

This is all for Madam's sake, he swore to himself.

In particular, he taught her to use anything she could as a weapon.

“What?! My ring?!” Viola went silent as she looked at the ring on her finger that perfectly matched her husband's.

Knowing Madam, she's probably afraid that the ring will break if she uses it to attack, and that it would be a waste. Rohtas found it charming how he could tell exactly what she was thinking from her expressions and movements.

The jeweler had made the ring with all the skill he could muster. It was beautiful, of course, but it could also take a few hits in the unlikely event that she had to punch someone while wearing it.

“It won't be damaged easily. It was designed with this use in mind.”

“O-Okay!”

Rohtas had to resist the urge to laugh when Viola's face screamed, “How did you know?!” after he'd basically read her mind.

So I was right. Oh, Madam!

...No, I mustn't be distracted.

His heart was almost warmed, but Rohtas had to hold himself back. After telling Viola in detail about all the weak spots on the human body, he requested that she practice what she had been taught on Bellis, who had been called to be her partner.

“No, but... I can't punch *him*!” Viola faltered after being told to hit Bellis, whom she had become very attached to.

There isn't time for you to say that! This is for your own sake, Madam. You must master these skills!

Rohtas steeled his resolve. Normally, he'd just let her off easy, but he couldn't afford to baby her today.

“*Do your best!*” he said—strongly, clearly, in a very easy-to-understand manner and with a lower tone of voice than usual.

Even Viola could get the hint. “Wahhh! I'm sorry, Bellis!” she screeched, aiming a swing at Bellis's temple.

8. The Rat's Trap

Finally, the night of the party arrived. In the royal palace's reception hall, the matchmaking party...or rather, the *partner-search event* for the crown prince of Aurantia and his sister, the princess, had just begun.

Inside the palace room they were using as an interim office to head off any problems, Corydalís was glaring at both a report and a single piece of paper.

The analysis of the paper collected from the royal sibling's room had finally been finished. The results showed that it was indeed a rough floor plan of the palace.

“So it *was* a map of the palace after all. They've probably got something in place at all the locations they marked.”

“Probably.”

Since the analysis had taken so long, the knights had only received the results after the party had already begun. Knights were posted all over in accordance

with their security plans, but since they had predicted danger at these spots, they couldn't just leave them. Corydalis redeployed knights to the circled locations ASAP.

Just as he'd reached a resting point after ordering the deployment changes, he heard a voice.

"Excuse me! Platoon Captain Pulcherrima!" One of his subordinates that had been on security dashed into the room.

"What's up? Has something happened?"

"Yes. According to reports from the scene, they smelled smoke after hearing some kind of loud popping sound. When they went to check what was happening, there was something like a bomb left there, smoldering."

"Got it. I'll go take a look for now." After the knight gave him a rough rundown of the situation, Corydalis left the room to check the actual scene.

Bombs? Could the Aurantians even do that? he thought as he listened to the explanation.

Flür had the technology to create and use bombs, but Aurantia shouldn't. They hadn't used any in the previous war, so why would they be using them now?

Though he was suspicious, once they arrived and had a look, it all became clear.

"...This couldn't even be called an unexploded bomb."

"...Yeah."

There was a black ball sputtering smoke on the floor, with something that looked like a fuse sticking out the top. Though they could tell from the smell that there was gunpowder in it, it was so crudely made that it hadn't ignited at all, much less exploded.

This isn't even worth bothering with! It's like a kid's prank or something! Corydalis thought. And while he stood there, steadily getting angrier, he heard a voice.

"I've just received word that there are more of these in other locations, and

that some of them have ignited successfully!” reported another of his subordinates who had been busy guarding a different spot.

“Then hurry and extinguish the ones that did! Take anyone around who looks suspicious into custody. Have all our men dispatched to search for other ones! They should be—” Corydalis briskly barked out orders based on what he’d seen on the paper taken from the siblings’ room. *No way I’m letting the palace burn down because of some worthless little fires!*

As he did so, information kept pouring in.

“We’ve found another fire!”

“There was a bomb found near the edge of the garden!”

More and more knights kept coming with reports.

How many of their crappy soldiers did they bring?! Corydalis figured that they must have secretly brought even more than they’d reported. Was that why they kept raising and lowering the number of people they expected to come with them? Had they been planning something like this from the beginning?

It was too late to regret their lack of research, though. The knights’ first priority was catching the rats to prevent any further damage. But with the damage reports piling up one after the other...

“If they’ve done this much... I’m gonna have to report this to the higher-ups. The Royal Guard Captain is with His Majesty, so we can’t pull him away... We’ll have to get the vice captain instead. He’s off today, but this is an emergency,” Corydalis decided.

9. Catching the Rats

While Corydalis and the knights were busy dealing with the rats’ traps, the party was in full swing, and the Aurantian royal siblings were dancing with their marriage candidates in the reception hall.

Normally, evening parties would be gorgeous and dazzling, but all of the attendees were wearing plain clothing in the hopes that the siblings wouldn’t notice or (even worse) fall for them. The light music and elegant exchanges

were all just as normal, but the mood was less than upbeat.

Viola and Cercis were both watching the other attendees.

As they did, a knight called Lantana approached Cercis, dressed in a palace servant's uniform under orders to report the situation to the vice captain, and whispered in his ear.

"The rats have set up more traps than we expected, and they're trouble."

Corydalis should have been able to handle the job easily, but if he'd been forced to report directly to Cercis, Lantana must be telling the truth—they really were in trouble. Cercis decided he'd have to go see for himself.

"Vi. Something urgent has come up, so I'll have to leave for a bit."

"All right."

"Listen carefully. Stay here until I come back."

"Okay."

"I'll be right back."

"Yeah."

After giving Viola some strong instructions, he left the reception hall.

Objects too crude to be called bombs were exploding(?) and putting out smoke around the palace, mostly in isolated places and in the corners of huge gardens. Some of them had actually managed to ignite, surprisingly enough, causing small fires.

"It's good that there aren't any large-scale explosions, but this is still pretty irritating."

"Seriously. How stupid can they be? Trying to use gunpowder when they can't even get it to work right?"

Cercis and Corydalis both heaved disgusted sighs as they stared at one of the bombs.

"So did you catch the rats?"

"Since there are more than we expected, it's taking a little while. I apologize."

“It’s only a matter of time, but get them collected as soon as possible.”

“Understood.”

Even if I cut things short here and go back to the party, all of this would still be bothering me. Viola should be good back in the hall, since it’s being guarded by knights dressed as palace servants.

Thinking that, Cercis decided to prioritize giving orders on the scene, but he’d soon regret his choice.

10. Find Viola!

Around the time where they’d put out all the fires, found all the traps, and caught most of the rats.

Cercis was ready to go back to the party hall since things were slowing down, but then he received a very concerning report: “Duchess Fisalis has disappeared somewhere—chased by Aurantia’s crown prince.”

“I told her so many times to stay in the hall!”

“Ah... Madam is quite lively, after all.”

Corydalis smiled awkwardly as he watched Cercis get angry.

“You said she’d disappeared after being chased. Why weren’t they followed?” Cercis hounded the knight for an answer.

“I apologize. His Royal Highness hid Madam’s face so they didn’t realize it was her. They only realized after a disguised knight came to check on her,” the knight apologized.

“...So? Where is Viola now?” asked Cercis, having given up on blaming the knight for things that had already happened.

“They ran farther inside the palace, away from the entrance. They haven’t been seen since.”

“And when was this?”

“Just in the middle of our rat catching.”

So right when security was at its thinnest! All castles have knights guarding

them—they obviously had to have been planning to mess with security from the very beginning.

They'd been able to deal with the bombs quickly since they were aware of the Aurantians' plans beforehand, but they hadn't accounted for Viola.

To think that she'd leave the hall! Why did she do that? Everything would have been fine if Viola had just stayed put. Cercis regretted not heading back sooner.

But there was no time to mope.

"We need to search for her."

"Right." Corydalis and the other knights there all nodded at their tense vice captain.

"There don't seem to be any witnesses...so we'll have to be thorough. We'll split into two groups. One will check the royal's rooms, and the other will search the palace."

"Got it!" All the knights moved on his orders.

Cercis, the Bombshell Trio, and a few others headed towards the Aurantian siblings' quarters, only to find Princess Orangé unconscious in front of the door. The knights had no way of knowing that Viola had swept the princess's legs out from under her and she'd hit her head.

Angelica squatted down and poked Orangé, but there was no response.

"...She's out cold."

"And she's sprawled all over the place. She's breathing, so she's still alive."

"Who did this, anyway?"

"It couldn't have been Madam, could it...?"

"Hmm...?"

The knights all pondered who had knocked out the princess. After a brief pause, Cercis cleared his throat.

"Ladies, secure these dangerous items. While you do, the rest of us will search inside," Cercis told the trio before walking into the room and leaving them outside.

“Got it! Wait, dangerous items?!”

Despite getting a giggle out of it, the Bombshell Trio followed their orders.

“Damn, this princess takes a lot of rope to tie up thanks to her size.”

“You can’t just *say* that!”

“Let’s get her tied up already. Chamomile, help me lift her up on the count of three. I can’t do it on my own! Alkanna, you’re in charge of tying her up.”

“Okay!”

Angelica and Chamomile moved to the princess’s sides to lift her while Alkanna readied the rope they’d brought along for the arrest. “One, two!”

“She’s soooo heavy!”

“I’m gonna throw out my back!!”

While the other two women worked together to lift the princess, Alkanna tied her upper arms tightly.

While this was all happening, Cercis and the other knights were searching the room. When he looked in the bedroom, he saw evidence that the bed had been recently occupied, but no sign of Viola.

“So she’s not here...”

Then where is she? She hasn’t been taken somewhere else yet, has she...? He thought.

Getting a bad feeling about the situation, Cercis opened the curtains and looked around the gardens, dimly lit by evenly spaced braziers. And then...

“Viola!”

He spotted Viola running through the gardens, with the crown prince not far behind.

“I found Viola! She’s in the gardens! Ladies, take the princess to the hall. Everyone else, go alert Corydalis! I’ll start the chase. Meet me in the gardens!”

“Understood!”

All of his subordinates were used to emergencies, so they split up to follow his

orders.

The way Viola was running was towards the hall. Please, hold out until I get there! Cercis prayed, hurrying to the gardens.

Side Story: I'll Be The One To Protect Viola

Having seen Viola (and the crown prince chasing her) in the gardens, I ordered my men to meet me there before chasing after the two.

Opening the glass door leading outside, I jumped out into the dimly lit gardens.

Where are you, Viola?! Where did you go?

Searching for her, I moved along the hedge. There would be no way to find her if she'd headed deeper into the gardens, but I figured she must have been aiming for the reception hall. So...to the left! Just as I was deciding which way to go at a crossroads, I heard something startling "Whoa?!"

Viola had let out a short scream. It was...to the left. She must have been heading towards the hall, then.

I've gotta follow her voice! I thought, jumping through the gap in the hedge. As I caught my breath, I saw Viola sitting on the ground, with the crown prince inched closer.

"I'm fine! Absolutely fine!"

"No, no, your ankle is terribly swollen! I'll take you *back to your room.*"

While Viola snapped at him, the crown prince's nasty hands were about to touch her.

Don't make me angry.

I thought I heard something snap inside of me.

"Stop right there, Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince of Aurantia. And step away from Viola, if you would."

Even I was surprised at how low my voice got. I must have been even more pissed than I thought.

I could see the tension in Viola's face soften when I appeared. *You must have*

been so scared. I'm sorry I took so long! They always say that heroes show up late, but I promised I wanted to find you faster than I did! Please believe me, Viola!

Pushing the crown prince who had been closing in on her out of the way, I gave her a hug. That calmed me down, at least a tiny bit.

Viola was so relieved that she clung to me and cried. She almost *never* cries. Actually, that might have been the first time I'd ever seen her cry. She must have been truly terrified!

Unforgivable.

The crown prince was blabbering something stupid. *I can beat him up now, right?*

I was angry, but I held myself back. It'd be trouble if I pulled my sword on him first.

"Dammit!" Swearing, the crown prince drew the decorative sword that had been hanging on his hip and pointed it straight at me.

What a lucky break. He drew his sword first, right? Now this was legitimate self-defense—I had to protect myself and Viola.

"Oh my. Drawing your sword in another country's palace? You really are a lost cause," I drawled, pulling out my own sword. Honestly, I wanted to thank him for making the first move.

He took a few steps back, and I made up the distance. I was glad that we'd moved away from Viola naturally. I didn't want to get in a swordfight with her right nearby. I didn't want her to get hurt.

But damn, the crown prince's stance was awful. It was so bad that I nearly started laughing. His hips were pulled back, and he was holding the hilt with two hands. It was clear that he was actually terrified. Flür's crown prince (only five years old) was probably better at this than him, and of course he'd only just begun to learn. And was he seriously going to attack me with a *decorative* sword? Was he making fun of me?

The crown prince was putting all his weight behind each swing, but since his

center of gravity was off, it was easy to knock him away and off balance. He was so bad. If I got serious, I could get behind him and take him out with a single slash, but I didn't want to subject Viola to such a violent scene.

I kept toying with him as he came at me, forcing him to waste his strength.

"You done? That was boring."

But even with my mocking, "What are you saying?! It's not over yet!"

Seems he still wanted to go. "Ah, so you can still fight? Guess I'd better get serious, then."

Don't think I'm gonna let you off easy for making Viola cry.

I switched myself to serious mode. *I'm a knight who trains daily. Don't underestimate me.* Plus, my sword felt especially light today.

I was at my fighting best, while the crown prince struggled to just deal with my blows. Actually, he was barely even doing that. As we fought, he was getting covered in small scratches.

Finally, I'd backed him against the hedge. Playtime was over. I smacked his wrist with my sword's hilt and made him drop his weapon, then I quickly kicked it away from him as it fell to the ground.

Next.

I stabbed my sword at his head—or, more accurately, right *beside* his head.

I'd done this because judging by what I'd heard from Chamomile and the others, and what I'd seen from him so far, this guy was a dumbass. And just as I expected, his legs gave out immediately, and he slid down to the ground.

"Seriously, I was holding off on striking the final blow because I wanted everything to finish quickly, but you just didn't take the hint. Want me to raze your country to the ground and salt the earth this time?"

"...Eeek!"

Just as I'd grabbed him by the collar and given him a piece of my mind...

"I'm all for that!"

"Let's do it!"

“I’ll give it my all this time around!”

I heard Corydalis and the others. *So they finally showed up... They’ve definitely been listening to the whole thing from the other side of the hedge. That’s fine though, since it’ll give us some objective testimony of what the prince said and did.*

The next day Corydalis would say, “Huh? It’s not like you needed us to save you. Plus, you wanted to get revenge yourself, didn’t you? That’s why we stayed in the shadows and watched the crown prince’s every move instead!” with a smile.

Leaving the Aurantian royal siblings to His Majesty and my men, Viola and I were allowed to leave.

She was injured, but at least Viola was now safely in my arms. She gave me a big smile to keep me from worrying before resting her head against my shoulder. The fact that I actually felt *happy* feeling that weight meant I was already head over heels for her. No... I had been that way for quite a while.

Feeling lonely at hearing her formally calling me “Mr. Fisalis”...

“...Not ‘Mr. Fisalis,’” I told her, really putting on the pressure with my best smile.

“...? Cer...cis?” Eyes upturned, Viola called my name.

Oh no. My wife is too cute!

I was truly glad that I was able to protect my adorable, precious wife. From now on and forever, I’ll be the one to protect her.

Side Story: Afterwards A few years passed in an instant— “Lettie, Lettie!”

While I’d only stepped away for a moment, my daughter Lettie—or rather, *Violet* had run off somewhere. Since Mr. Fisalis was going to be home soon, I was searching for her, but...

“If you’re looking for Little Mistress Lettie, she is in the garden reading picture books with Daisy and Quince,” said Rohtas, informing me of her location.

Daisy was Bellis and Mimosa’s daughter, and Quince was Rohtas’s adopted son. The boy was a distant relative who had nowhere else to go, so Rohtas had taken him in to train him as a butler.

Lettie absolutely adored them and stuck to the pair like glue. That being said, since Quince was usually away at school, she only saw him on holidays. When he wasn’t there, she played with Daisy every day.

“Thank you! Where in the gardens?”

“In *your* garden, Madam.”

“Got it! I’ll go see.”

Once Rohtas told me, I quickly headed to my personal garden.

“—And the beautiful princess lived happily ever after with the gentle and wonderful prince. The end.”

By the time I got there, Quince had just finished reading the picture book to the girls. The little girls sat on each side of him as he held the book open wide so they could see... It was too cute!

“Is Big Brother a prince?”

“Miss Lettie, Big Brother isn’t a prince.”

Lettie, who was two, and Daisy, who was three, were like sisters, while the eleven-year-old Quince was like a much older brother to them. Quince gave Lettie an awkward smile after her innocent question.

I was just dying from the cute scene.

“Ah, Madam~ Are you finished with everything you needed to do?” Mimosa called out to me when she noticed I was there. She had become Lettie’s personal maid (more like a nanny, actually).

“Yep, I’m done. I came to get Lettie since Daddy should be home soon.”

“It’s that late already? Miss Lettie, Quince, Daisy, let’s all go back inside.”

“Okaaay.”

“Lettie, do you want to hold hands with Mommy?”

“No, I wanna hold Big Brother’s hand.”

I thought I’d hold Lettie’s hand while we headed back into the manor, but she turned me down. *I see... She wants to hold Big Brother’s hand instead...*

“...”

“I’m sorry, Madam,” Quince apologized guiltily, having noticed me bitterly watching the two children hold hands.

Mr. Fisalis arrived home just as we made it to the main building.

“I’m home. Vi, Lettie,” Mr. Fisalis said, reaching out towards our daughter. She let go of Quince’s hand and ran full speed towards her father. *Thank goodness. It’d be awful dealing with a depressed Mr. Fisalis if she said she wanted to stay with Quince again. Dear Lettie, thank you for reading the room!*

I stood for a moment appreciating just how adorable it was to see my husband giving Lettie a big hug and nuzzling their cheeks together.

“How are you feeling, Vi? What did the doctor say?” he asked.

Yes, my business today was seeing the doctor. My tummy was just a liiiiiiittle bit fat right now, since I was expecting our second child.

“Everything’s fine. He told me I needed to eat more, since my morning sickness has passed.”

“You’ve always been slender, Vi. Let’s get Cartham to make you something nutritious.”

“Hmm~, please make sure it isn’t too rich, though.”

I was never that great with super nutritious food, since a lot of it was pretty filling... Although I’d mostly stopped getting gourmet food poisoning, thanks to eating such high-quality stuff every single meal of every single day.

And that wasn’t the only thing that had changed. Despite the fact that I’d originally come to the ducal manor only wanting to improve my servant skills (for when I was inevitably divorced and sent home), I had all the skills of a proper lady drilled into me with strict lessons. Ah, but my servant skills are still perfect☆

Nowadays, I was universally recognized as Duchess Fisalis. My nickname had gone from “The Illusory Madam” to “The Happy Wife.”

...I’ve come pretty far.

But forget about me—Mr. Fisalis has changed the most!

“Were you a good girl, Lettie?”

“Yep!”

“That’s great.”

Mr. Fisalis was having a happy chat with Lettie but...

We’d started with a contract marriage for show that could’ve been called off at any moment, but somehow we’d ended up with such a happy family! And he’s a great dad too!

Not a single person could have imagined this all happening. Certainly neither of us did. How?

Can someone please explain what’s going on?!



Afterword

To everyone who picked this series up and read it to the very end: it ended up being pretty long, but thank you so much for sticking with it.

In the beginning, my plan was to write about 10,000 characters or so with this plot, but after it just wouldn't end I just decided to start serializing the thing. I never even dreamed that I'd get this much encouragement. I've only come this far because I hoped people would enjoy it, even if just a little bit. And most of all, everyone's warm wishes gave me the determination to write until the very end. Thank you all so much!

And I can't thank all of the people who worked to publish my story enough. I could never have come this far on my own.

I'm so grateful to all of you!

And finally, to everyone who picked this book up, and those who had a hand in it, my thanks and love!

徒然花
Tsurezurebana



Congratulations
on finishing
the series!

Can Someone
Please Explain
What's Going On?!

~A Silen-on-the-Line Wedding Story~

I'm Rin Hagiwara, the one in charge of the illustrations.
We're finally on the last volume of this three-year long book series.
I'm so happy to have contributed to such a wonderful work.
They've given me a whole page for my afterword,
so I'd like to take this chance to thank the author Tsuredurebana,
my editor and everyone else in the editing department,
everyone involved in making the series, and every one
of the readers from the bottom of my heart. Thank you!


萩原 凛



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Can Someone Please Explain What’s Going On?! Volume 6

by Tsuredurebana

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~A Sign-on-the-Line Wedding Story~

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