

A vibrant anime-style illustration of a wedding scene. In the center, a young man with brown hair in a dark blue suit with gold embroidery and a white bow tie stands next to a young woman with long pink hair and blue eyes in a pink dress with a white collar. They are both smiling. In the background, three other women are visible: one with long blonde hair in a purple dress, one with brown hair in a green dress with a white bow, and one with long white hair in a teal dress with her hands clasped. The setting is outdoors with a large building in the background, orange flowers in the top left, and yellow and red flowers in the foreground. The title is written in large, pink, bubbly letters at the top right.

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

3

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

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“Oh! Goodness!” I must have startled her. “You didn’t need to come all the way up here, Madam.” She tried to sit up, but Bellis quickly stopped her.

“Sorry for surprising you. You don’t have to get up; I’ll come over to you. I came to show you how my look turned out. So, what do you think?” I did a little whirl to show her the full extent of my transformation.

“You look absolutely stunning! Nnnrgh, I wish I could have done it myself!” Mimosa replied, eyes sparkling as she bit the corner of her quilt in frustration. *I knew she’d like it!* I felt my face turn warm seeing her like that while knowing what Dahlia had told me.

“So, do you think I’m set to go to the party?”

“But of course! You’ll be the prettiest one there!” *All right, I got her seal of approval.*

“It’s a shame you couldn’t help me this time, but I’m excited for you to be able to for the next party. So, um, I hope your morning sickness goes away quickly!”

“M-Madam...” Now it was Mimosa’s turn to blush. It must have been a little hard on her to have cycled through so many emotions in the short time I had been in her room.

“Oh ho ho, I heard all about it, Mimosa! Congrats! On that topic, personally, I’d like you to stay here with me, but what is it that you want to do? Would you like to go to your parents’ house?” I asked her, thinking back to what Dahlia had said.

“I’d like to stay here, too, but...” her mood suddenly turned gloomy, and she looked down at her hands as they tightly gripped her quilt. *She’s really not feeling talkative today, huh?*

“Well, then I’d like you to stay. Even if you’re just as my companion. That way you wouldn’t overexert yourself.”

“You really mean it?!” Mimosa sat up, her face aglow with joy.

...And at the very same moment, I felt an icy cold stare shoot through me. When I nervously turned to the source of said dagger-like stare, I swear I saw

blue flames flickering in Bellis' eyes and felt an aura like a blizzard billowing off of him and his little chair. *Oh, jeez, there I was, making her overexert herself.*

"Of-Of course!" I assured her, as the arctic chill seemed to seep through my clothes and into my very bones. "And, uh, I can always ask another maid to be my gardening buddy! And another to do my hair and makeup when I need it done in a rush! You won't have to lift a finger, I promise! Ah ha ha ha!" *Oh, gosh, I hope he doesn't need any more convincing.*

"That sounds reasonable," Bellis said, his voice a low grumble.

"Er, well, we can talk about it more when I get back. I have to get going now, off to the Royal Palace..."

"Try to have a good time, Madam! I know you'll be fine! I'll be waiting!"

After we all said our goodbyes, I saw myself down to the entryway, ready to go to the Royal Palace.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 4, Cercis' Perspective— Cercis' Dream Romance ◆ ◆ ◆

"Welcome home!"

Viola is there to greet me as soon as I return from work. Her gentle smile makes my stress and exhaustion melt away. That alone causes me to blush, but... I need more.

I reach out to her, longing for her touch, and pull her into a tender embrace.

"Cercis?" She looks up at me in a daze from where I have her trapped in my arms.

That's cheating, looking at me with those eyes.

I let reason override my desire to simply scoop her up into my arms. I permit myself to merely bury my face in her hair, the fresh scent of soap teasing my nose. There's no harsh or artificial smell to her at all.

Just her usual soap, sweet cakes or candy, and flowers.

She smells like sunlight.

I can tell how she spent her day by her scent. That, too, makes me sigh.

Ohh, my dear Viola...

"....so what do I need to do to make her love me like this, Corydalis?"

"What do you think you are, a poet or something? You sound like a lovesick teenage girl. Freak. Don't tell me you don't let your own *wife* call you by your first name."

"Just shut up."

I was trying to have a serious conversation with Corydalis, but all he did was glare at me, and I could not for the life of me figure out why.

Anyway.

It was absurd that I was so far from the one I loved. But as soon as I could return home to Viola, I swore...

“...Ahem. For now, anyway, I fear I have reached my limit for how long I can remain away from you. Therefore, I am doing my utmost to end my part in this war as quickly and decisively as possible.”

“There we go, now you’re in gear! Hmm, well, the first half didn’t really grab me, but I approve of the second half.” Corydalis was still glaring at me, but at least now I had his approval.

“To that end, I will have to take the enemy by surprise.”

“Well no kidding, pal. Oh, that reminds me, we just got some intel in earlier that the enemy has begun to set up camp in secret,” Corydalis commented as he looked over the report written by our subordinates scouting in the field. The enemy had constructed their base at the foot of a sheer cliff—natural fortification. It seemed they thought that was an easy way to protect against a rear attack.

Or, so you would think.

Oh, how naive they were.

I dare say we *predicted* that they would build their base there based on our investigation. Not to mention, considering they were boxed in and that the planning stage for our operation was already completed—with our attack, travel, and escape routes all decided—all we would need to do when we arrived was arrange the troops.

I informed Father of this in secret. Although it was a report, what was written in it was still subject to censorship, so I let him know via an old tradition: a delivery.

It is written in our history books that a married woman sent a tightly tied hemp sack of fruit as a gift to her younger brother who was off at war in order to notify him that a commander said to be loyal to their side was a double agent, and that the brother’s troop was to be besieged by the enemy—trapped like a rat in a bag, as the saying goes...

And because the woman had married into the traitor’s family, she sent the fruit without a letter in order to avoid suspicion. ‘You’re just like this fruit,’ was the message. When I used fruit from the southern regions, my own message

was clear, that it was the enemy nation in the sack.

Furthermore, the historical event I referenced was rather obscure, so I could be sure that only Father and Rohtas could interpret it correctly. That, and I tied the cords very, very tightly! I probably did not need to go that far, though. At any rate, by using this method, Father would have understood the situation on the front lines and would have been able to reassure Viola that everything was all right.

To return to my main point, however, we were going to raid the Aurantian stronghold.

“We’ll attack from the rear.”

“What?”

“We’d have the high ground from that position.”

Corydalis remained silent.

“The enemy will only be watching their front. Let’s look into routes leading into the rear.”

“Oh, by rear, you mean near that vertical cliff. You’re right, they won’t expect a rush from behind. You... you’re quite the fiend... So what was with all that mushy, girly talk a minute ago?!”

17 — Socializing for Beginners

My mother-in-law arrived at the entryway just seconds before I came downstairs after paying Mimosa and Bellis a visit in their room. It turned out that my father-in-law had attended the deployment ceremony in Mr. Fisalis's place, and had left a long time ago. Thank goodness. He said Lady Fisalis and I could follow him to the military rally.

Lady Fisalis gave me a gleaming white smile when she spotted me.

"Aaah, Vi! You look lovely! Oh, I'm so lucky to be able to walk there with a cute daughter-in-law! I wish I'd had a nice daughter like you, rather than that unsociable son of mine," she said excitedly.

Oh, no, I only look like this because of Mimosa and the maids' hard work! My true form is much, much different.

"Oh, thank you. Ha ha," I replied awkwardly, glad that she was pleased with my post-transformation look. *I mean, I'm not sure I'm that gush-worthy... Wait, don't think that way—this is no time to be pouting! I should tell her the good news about Mimosa! Wouldn't want to forget that.*

Collecting myself, I turned to my mother-in-law.

"I have some news for you, Mother Fisalis."

"Oh? What could that be?" she asked, her star sapphire blue eyes opening slightly wider in curiosity.

"Mimosa is pregnant."

"Mimosa? Pregnant?!" Her eyes widened even more, this time in surprise. I was impressed by how quickly her expression changed when I told her.

"Yes. She was unwell this morning, so I sent her back to her room and had the doctor come to see her. I only just found out myself.

"Ahh, that's wonderful to hear! Bellis must be very happy, too." She clasped her hands in delight.

"Yes, I think."

“You think?”

“He seemed really focused on her condition when I saw him, so I don’t think he was in a ‘happy’ state of mind quite yet.” *I wasn’t too surprised, after all—he doted on her they were children (and still does!). And right now, he seems mostly worried about her feeling unwell, but I’m sure his brain will catch up with what’s happened, and he’ll be overjoyed. It’ll dawn on him slowly once he calms down a bit.*

“Ah, I see. Now I understand,” my mother-in-law grinned as she nodded. It looked like she found that scenario quite easy to picture.

No sooner had she said so, however, than Rohtas politely cut short our conversation to say, “Pardon me, but seeing as we are pressed for time, would you mind continuing your conversation in the carriage?”

Oh, he’s right. We’ve gotta get to the Royal Palace! I nearly forgot. What do you mean that’s something I keep doing?

I followed Rohtas and Lady Fisalis out the door to where the carriage was waiting. We chose to sit across from each other inside, Lady Fisalis elegantly waving goodbye to the manor staff as they all performed their flawless ninety-degree bow and called out their goodbyes to us. My wave was a great deal less refined. *I just don’t think I’ll ever get used to them doing that when they see me off. Yeah, that day is never going to come.*

With Rohtas’ closing of the front door as its cue, the carriage departed for the palace.

The first thing my mother-in-law asked as the carriage rattled down the road was, “So how is Mimosa faring?”

“She seemed better when I went to see her just before I came down to leave. But Dahlia said that she might not always be feeling her best... She won’t be able to work for a while, but she wouldn’t be able to rest if she were to go home because her parents run a store and don’t have any helpers. So I was thinking that Mimosa and Bellis could stay here in the manor, in their room. What do you think? Maids who are off the clock would be able to check on her, and on days when she’s feeling up to it, I thought that a little bit of work might make for a nice distraction,” I explained, hoping she would give me some

advice.

“That sounds like a fine plan. Having maids who are close to her around will be convenient and give you some peace of mind,” she said, easily agreeing to Mimosa staying at the manor.

“That’s what I was thinking. I’ll enjoy having Mimosa nearby, too.”

“We Fisalises have always said ‘you should treat your servants like family,’ so I’ll let her know that she’s more than welcome to stay.”

What a noble thing to say! The manor really is a nice place to work, isn’t it? I mean, I sometimes hear rumors about it, but working at the manor sure seems like less work than working at the Royal Palace. I can see why so many of their employees stay if this is how warmly they’re treated. It’s no wonder they’ve got such a good workforce made up of the loveliest people.

Ah, but I’m getting off-topic.

“Oh, thank you!”

“Then again, considering my husband and I are retired, you could have made that decision all on your own, Vi... You don’t need to ask for my permission,” Lady Fisalis giggled.

“I wasn’t sure if it was alright for me to make decisions on my own without Mr. Fisalis here.” *I mean, it’s not my house.* I was too shy to say my thoughts out loud, though.

“But, Vi, dear, you’re a *duchess*. Have more confidence.”

I didn’t say anything back to her. I could only stare, a little aghast, but inside, I did reply. *You, my lady, are asking for the impossible. Thank goodness for brain-to-mouth filters!*

I still hadn’t fully escaped the mindset that I was just a “show wife.”

“I guess I’m not used to it yet...” I replied humbly, hoping that would satisfy her.

“Heehee, I am not surprised to hear that from you. You normally get lessons from Rohtas and Dahlia, do you not? They’re rather thorough with you?”

“Huh? Er, yes, very much so.” *On rainy days in particular. I can always expect a hard day’s work ahead when I wake up to rain.*

“I thought so. After all, you move so gracefully now, even when you’re doing mundane things. So have more confidence in yourself.”

“You really think so? Thank you.” *My mother-in-law complimented me! Surely being a long-recognized, socially-revered duchess plays a part in being confident. There’s no reason for her to feel like she needs to flatter me, either... Not that she’s the kind of person who would do that, anyway. So I think I can take her word for it.*

“You’re very attractive in terms of appearance, too, Vi. I really don’t understand why your self confidence is so low.”

“But... I’m just a plain Jane.” The moment the answer left my mouth, though, my mother-in-law laughed out loud.

“A plain Jane! Oh ho ho ho! You’re not plain at all! You’ll make an enemy of any lady you meet if you go around telling people *that!*”

“Oh, no, that’s the last thing I want to do. I already have enough enemies simply by being Mr. Fisalis’ wife.”

“What’s that? There you go again! Oh ho ho ho!” she replied as her body shook with laughter.

Did I say something weird?

“Even when you’re not dressed up, you always look so bright and fresh. Since you *are* dressed up today, you’ll be absolutely unrivaled.”

“But I only look this way because Mimosa and my maids cleaned me up.”

“Well, there wasn’t a lot for them to clean up in the first place!” Lady Fisalis pointed out, echoing what Mimosa had said earlier. “It doesn’t matter how hard one tries—if one hasn’t got the natural looks, that’s as far as they’ll get: ‘they tried.’ *You* have what it takes, though. Do you understand?” she pointed straight at me as she told me all this, clearly not about to take no for an answer.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” The sheer power in her voice made my back straighten, and I answered like I was back in school.

“Good. Have more confidence, my dear, and you’ll have no enemies!”

“Alright!” I nodded earnestly, but couldn’t help but feel like I’d been tricked, somehow.

“Goodness, there’s no need to be so enthusiastic about it. At any rate, it is our job to advance our husbands’ careers through socializing.”

“That sounds hard.”

“Well, over time, you’ll learn how to do hard things. For now, though, I suppose listening to what people are saying and observing are the most important things.”

Even I could do that, introducing myself and then just listening to the conversation. And I already like people-watching!

“I see, I see.”

“When you’re listening to someone talk, are you able to tell what sort of person they are?”

“Kind of.” *I can tell if they’re arrogant or mean... stuff like that.*

“Even a tiny detail like that can prove useful to our husbands.”

“Oh, that’s right.” *Hmmm. I don’t have to be the one to start the conversation, then. Phew.*

“I guess you could call those my socializing tips for beginners,” my mother-in-law said with a giggle.

It might be more accurate to call them socializing tips for dummies, though.

18 — Off to the Royal Palace

As soon as my mother-in-law was finished giving me her socializing advice, the conversation returned to Mimosa.

“So, it sounds like Mimosa is having some bad morning sickness.”

“It seems so. We only just found out she is pregnant, though, and she wasn’t in poor health before.”

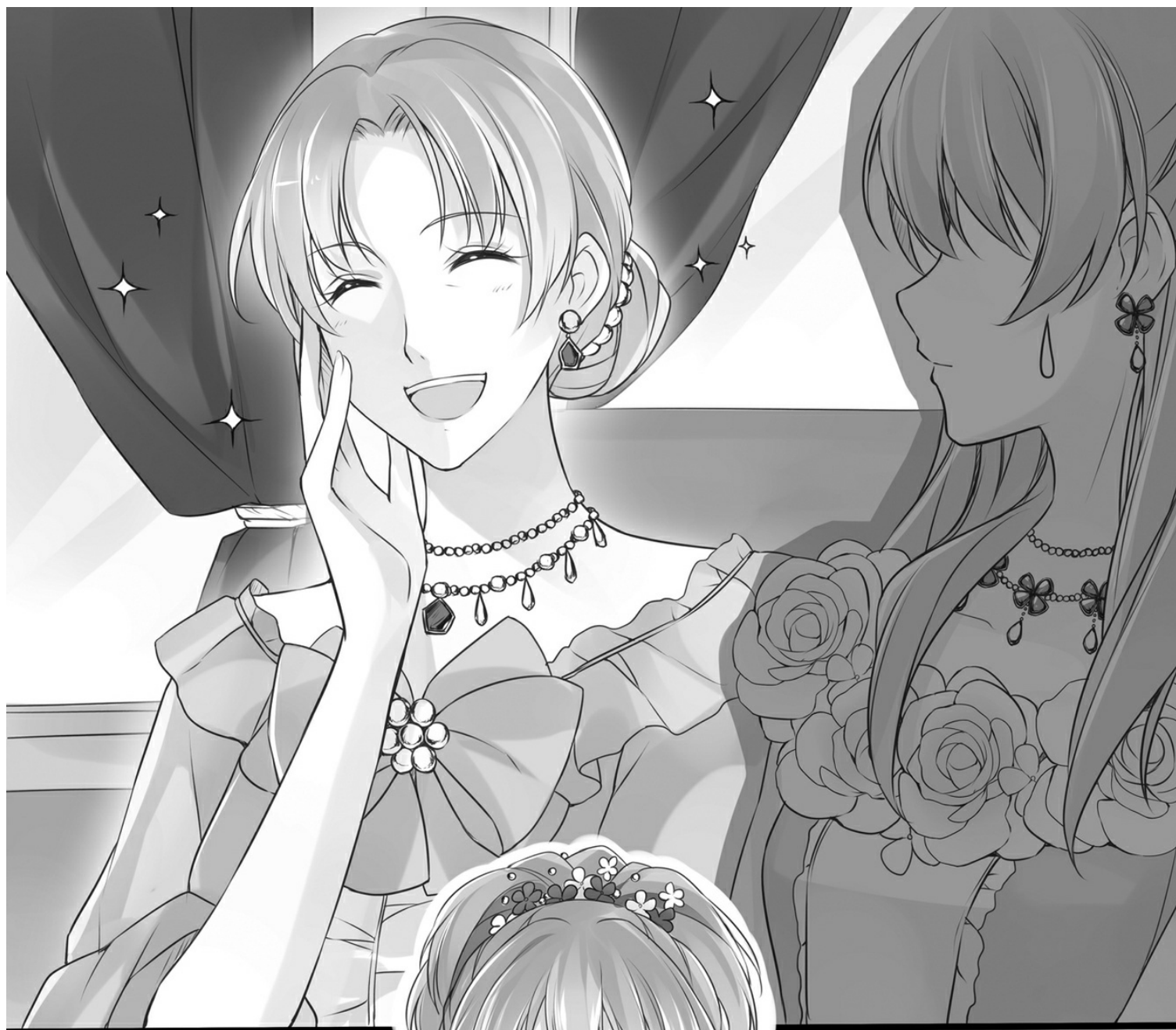
“Ah, it does happen like that sometimes. If you only just found out now, she’s probably at least two months along. There will be plenty of difficult days ahead,” Lady Fisalis explained. I nodded along as she bestowed upon me the wonders of the creation of life. *This is probably old hat to her at this point!*

“I bet there will be.” *Sorry, but there’s not much more I can say about that, considering I’ve never had children and don’t know anything about the process.*

“There certainly will. Nausea from simply smelling food, sudden bouts of dizziness...! Ahh, you’ll understand, too, someday, Vi!” she smiled so brightly I swear I could hear her teeth sparkle.

I couldn’t help but feel like the conversation had delved into a sensitive topic and that she was implying something. I mean, the way she looked at me certainly suggested she had certain... expectations. *Is this her way of asking for grandchildren?! Now that I think of it, where are we in terms of children in our agreement? When we renewed our contract, we essentially rewrote the whole thing, after all, so I guess we can’t go by the original anymore. Forget grandkids—I don’t even consider Mr. Fisalis and I to be a real married couple...*

When I timidly looked at my mother-in-law... Yup, she had a wide smile across her face. *Run! Run for the hills! Or at least pretend like you don’t understand what’s being implied!*



“Whatever do you mean? Ah ha ha ha!” I deployed a very fake laugh.

“Oh, that’s right... Dahlia stayed here, too, when she was pregnant,” Lady Fisalis said unexpectedly, which made me realize something else unexpected.

For a brief moment I was relieved that she didn’t continue to focus on me, but then I did a double-take; that was the first time I’d ever heard that about Dahlia.

“Huh? Dahlia did? She’s never mentioned it before, though.” *Not to mention, I had no idea she had children!*

“Indeed she did. She and Cartham have two children, a girl and a boy. They were born at the manor and raised there, too. Since both of their parents worked and lived at the manor, the place became something like their home, too. Their parents had help raising them, and it was better than them living at either family’s home while both of their parents worked. Now that I’m on the subject, Rohtas did make a good companion for them when he was young.” My mother-in-law continued to giggle at me in amusement as I digested what she had told me.

I had no clue! But then again, I didn’t even realize they were a couple at first. Dahlia has kept her private life very separate from her public life from the start, so it’s no wonder I didn’t know she had children. She’s made sure that all I know about her is that she’s married to Cartham!

“So they have children! I had no idea until now! And two children, at that!”

“Yes. Their daughter works at the Royal Palace, and I believe their son is training to be a chef, somewhere,” she told me after a moment of thought.

“Woahhh. What does their daughter do at the palace?”

“She is a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Truthfully, she had planned to work at the manor as soon as she finished vocational school, but then she was called to the palace. She probably figured that since Dahlia had once rejected an invitation to work at the Royal Palace herself before coming here, it would be needlessly cruel to reject them a second time. So for now, she is on temporary loan, you could say, to the palace, and she is working to further her career there.” Shocking new information seemed to pour from Lady Fisalis’ lips.

And is it just me, or is she kind of making the Royal Palace sound bad in comparison? Regardless, Dahlia's daughter sounds amazing! I bet her grades in school were amazing, too. The palace wouldn't have called on her personally if they weren't. This is the first I've heard of Dahlia refusing an invitation from the palace herself, too. That's incredible.

"So, anyway, Mimosa is more than welcome to stay at the manor, as well."

"She'll be thrilled, I'm sure, when I tell her." I'll have to tell her right away when I get home!

The Royal Palace came into view while we were chatting in the back of the carriage. This would mark the third time that I had been there. It should go without saying that the first time was my wedding, which had been over six months prior at that point. The second time was that 'add-on' party. *Wow, it's been so long. But then again, I don't have any reason to go to the palace myself... nor do I find myself actually wanting to go very often.*

Given that the day's event was to be a garden party, the carriage dropped us off at the gate to the garden. The garden at the Fisalis manor was gorgeous to be sure, but the Royal Palace's garden was truly befitting of, well, a palace. *Er, no... maybe ours is actually prettier,* I thought to myself, but I knew that to say so out loud would be an offense against the crown—even if I did really believe ours was better.

But enough with the flattery.

In terms of size, the palace's garden was obviously bigger. And in that expansive garden were crowds of women dressed in multicolored dresses, but they all paled in comparison to the Women's Corp who had come out in full regalia.

It was easy to tell who was in the military, as they were all wearing knight's or soldier's uniforms. They were the most important people there that day. Apparently, you could tell their rank by their lapel pins. I say "apparently"... because I sure couldn't. I was never good at remembering that sort of thing.

Nevertheless, there was a huuuge crowd out that day. The weather was on our side, too, with not a cloud to be seen—perfect weather for a garden party. The mood of the gathering was nice, too—less 'off to war, men!' and more

simply pleasant.

So this is a military rally...? It's awfully calm, isn't it? Just a regular garden party.

No sooner had Lady Fisalis and I alighted from the carriage and entered the gate to the garden than: "My, if it isn't Duchess Fisalis!"

"How wonderful to see you again!"

"How long has it been since you moved to the countryside?"

"Oh, my mistake, you're the *former* duchess, yes? Your son's wife is such a lovely girl." In a split second, my mother-in-law was surrounded by (I assumed) old friends.

"My word, it has been a while since I've seen everyone. Are you well? Yes, the current duchess is Viola here. I suppose that makes me the 'ex-duchess,' oh ho ho." The open and friendly attitude Lady Fisalis had shown me inside the carriage disappeared, and she transformed into the elegant and refined Former Duchess Fisalis. *It was like flipping a switch!* She also made sure that everyone gathered around her understood that I was the current duchess, not her, but she was smiling all the while.

She did not seem startled by the swarm of ladies who rushed at her, and I couldn't help but be impressed at how she calmly greeted each of them. *Her energy's completely different now. This must be what "advanced" socializing looks like! Complete with a bonus real world example, mother-in-law included! I'd better watch and learn.*

I positioned myself just behind Lady Fisalis and watched respectfully.

"Since it's been so long, why don't we all chat over there?" someone in the group of women suggested, at which point Lady Fisalis was swept away by the crowd, leaving me all alone before I could even comprehend what happened.

La—?! Lady Fisalis?! What am I supposed to do now?!

I looked around but didn't see anyone I knew. I could not even look for Lady Fisalis; I had lost sight of her in the thick crowd. My parents were supposed to be there, too, but after I looked around for them to no avail, I assumed they

had not arrived yet. I was hoping to catch sight of Miss Iris and my other friends, whom I had also heard were attending, but I could not find them, either.

So much for that. It looks like the time has come to deploy my most powerful secret skill, cultivated through years of practice: Secret Ritual: Hidden Wallflower!

Oh, wait. This is a garden. There are no walls.

19 — Once a Wallflower, Now a Rose Among Daisies Dun dun DUN!

My happy place, my promised land—WALLS are nowhere to be seen!

Please forgive me for bringing down this sun-drenched, laughter-filled scene. I'm just processing my shock.

Fortunately, I snapped back to reality when the other guests filing by started to glance my way.

Oh no, I'm probably weirding people out standing here frozen in terror by the gate! This is not the way Mimosa wanted me to stand out! And I want to avoid standing out in any fashion at all costs!

Taking the drink I was offered as I entered the venue proper, I scolded myself for getting in the way earlier, and walked over to the area where the party was being held.

Parasols dotted the crowd under the warm midday sun, and chairs had been provided at tables. It looked like a good spot for chatting, snacking, and also taking a break from chatting and snacking. Not that standing and talking was out of the question, of course.

There was also live music provided by an orchestra, and people who felt so inclined were dancing.

There were a great many bigwigs from all over the kingdom—especially high-ranking knights and soldiers—mixed in among the guests, but the garden was big enough that it did not feel cramped. Everyone was scattered about in different spots in groups of two or three.

There were food and drinks set out next to the garden entrance near the palace, where you could pick whatever you wanted. You could also ask one of the servants floating around to bring you something, but I still wasn't used to the idea of doing that, so I went and helped myself.

Oh, wait, I should watch how much I'm eating today, huh. Wouldn't want a stomach emergency in a place like this, I thought to myself. I nonchalantly

scanned the crowds for my parents, but it looked like they still weren't there.
You were the one always telling me not to be late, Father!

But now that my last ray of hope, my mother-in-law, had been abducted by that mob of noblewomen, I had to find somewhere to hide myself away. I listened to her advice about socializing, but there was no way I could make small talk with anyone there by myself when I didn't know anyone, much less if someone asked me to dance! *I'm just not cut out for this.*

...No, no, no. Stop thinking like that. Just relax. No one expects you to do that. The important part is that you're here. You already fulfilled your obligation to show up.

Okay, now that you've calmed down, look for a place to hide!

Yes, I'll set up camp at the table farthest from the center of the crowd and let myself vanish into thin air.

So with that goal in mind, I set out to find a seat. Unfortunately, all of the seats had already been taken by elderly people deep in conversation with each other. I wasn't so determined to disappear that I'd hassle an elder out of their seat—after all, it was common courtesy for people my age to *give up* their seats to older people. Thus, Operation Table Takeover came to a sudden end.

I walked around the venue, drink in hand, as I searched for some cover I could use in place of a wall. *Just how many people are here that I don't recognize a single one of them even after all this searching? There's too many, look harder! ...Yeesh, now I'm mad at myself.*

Meanwhile:

Multiple ladies and gentlemen who recognized me from the previous three parties I had attended said hello to me, but I, tragically, did not recognize a single one of them. Please forgive me.

"How good to see you again, Duchess Fisalis!"

"You look as beautiful as always. May I ask you to dance with me to the next song?"

I gave these lovely people the best replies I could manage—that is to say,

lukewarm ones—as I wandered the party venue. Then, I spotted Miss Iris and some other ladies a ways away.

Finally, someone I know, said a voice in my head, but...

“Which unit might you belong to?”

“Oh, I belong to ○○ unit.”

“Ah, so then you’re to depart for the battlefield. I wish you well.”

“Thank you, it’s an honor to have a lovely lady like you worry about me.”

Just my luck. Upon closer inspection, Miss Iris and the other ladies had been approached by a handsome knight. *She’s very forward, that Miss Iris! I see she’s just as outgoing today as ever!*

The three ladies with her were talking to other people as well, and it seems like they were having a good time. So naturally, I gave up on going over to say hi to them. *I know how to read a room, at least! ...Usually.* Besides, it felt kind of nice to just watch them in secret for a little while.

Keep up the good work and you’ll be a lovely wife in no time, Miss Iris. Er, that sounds more like something I should be telling myself.

So, there were no empty seats, nor any walls. With nowhere else to turn, I made my way toward the edge of the venue. It looked like the best spot for people-watching, even though people-watching was not what I was supposed to be focusing on. For the time being, however, finding an inconspicuous place to stand was my top priority, so I stopped there for a moment and looked around.

“There you are, you pretty young thing. You had me quite confused back there when you suddenly disappeared, my beautiful little fairy.”

Whoawhoawhoa! What—What’s going on?! Whoever’s saying that is even sappier than Mr. Fisalis, I gagged when I heard the sweet nothings come from directly behind me. The voice sounded like it belonged to a man, low and sultry. *I could understand if it was an evening party, maybe, but... what is he thinking, using his bedroom voice like that in broad daylight?!* Oh, sorry, I just felt a chill run down my back.

Whatever it was that was unfolding behind me sounded like a young man laughing seductively and an enthralled young woman. *For that reason, I think I'm going to inch away, absolutely not peeking over my shoulder... and then once there's some distance between me and them, get back to people-watching!*

Once I had crept far enough away that I couldn't hear them anymore—*Who does that in the middle of the day? Ew!*—I surveyed the crowd one more time. When I saw a new promising inconspicuous spot, I decided to make a break for it, but...

"Excuse me, Miss. There's something I'd like you to hear," said someone, just as they grabbed my upper arm.

Hold up. That's the gross whisperer, isn't it? What could he want with me? Does that mean that sickly-sweet smooth talk from a minute ago was aimed at me?!

"...I think you have me mistaken for someone else," I replied, cheek twitching as I tried to smile, running over what I'd just heard in my mind.

"No, I was talking to you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I don't think I've seen you before." It was indeed a man, tall and slightly tanned, wearing a knight's uniform. His pearly white teeth sparkled when he smiled.

Who the heck is this guy? I wondered, shaken up yet again. *I can't keep letting this happen.* Dahlia would scold me for letting myself get bent out of shape all the time: 'a proper lady doesn't lose control of herself!' *Ugh, I don't want to be thinking about Dahlia now, too!*

Er, we're not talking about Dahlia now, though. We're talking about this guy.

I gave the shady knight a once-over, but was positive I'd never met him before. *Well, he did say this was his first time meeting me. It's no wonder: when it comes to my social life, I'm practically a ghost! I don't like going out, and since I have a statement in writing from Mr. Fisalis saying that I don't need to, I've been whiling away my days as his happy hermit bride, so of course this man hasn't seen me before.*

That wasn't something I would admit, though, so I said, "I don't come out to

these events very often..." and gave a vague little laugh. I gently brushed his hand off of my arm and tried to walk away, but apparently I had misread him, and he put his hand back. He was a persistent one. I pushed his hand harder.

"The same goes for me," he continued on smiling. "I'm just a knight, so I'm no good at parties like this, either."

Hey, no, don't you sneakily put your other hand over mine while I'm still trying to peel your first hand off of me! I glared at him reproachfully.

In terms of appearance, he was a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes, tall and slim of build. But the way he talked—utterly vapid, insincere flattery—came off as unpleasant and coercive. Unfortunately for him, it engulfed his otherwise striking figure in a stinking miasma of disappointment.

Do you feel me clawing at your hand? Take a hint, buddy. Fortunately, he doesn't hold a candle to my good-looking but good-for-nothing husband. I guess there is some benefit to spending so much time with Mr. Fisalis.

Argh, that cursed man is too attractive for his own good. Whenever I meet a man now, not only do I inevitably compare him to Mr. Fisalis, but Mr. Fisalis always comes out on top! And Mr. Fisalis is more than just a pretty face. He's the kind of person who writes letters mushy enough to make even career inspectors squirm! Can you do that, mister? ...What? Yeah, I'm bragging about how terrible my husband is. What're you gonna do about it?

Okay. We're going to pretend you didn't read that.

The man's uniform was a different color than Mr. Fisalis', so I was sure he was in a different division. In contrast to Mr. Fisalis' navy blue uniform, this man's was mostly deep green. Not to mention that Mr. Fisalis' entire unit wasn't even in town. Plus, the people in his special division already knew me, so they wouldn't say something like 'it's a pleasure to meet you,' even if I didn't recognize them... and more importantly, they didn't call me 'miss.'

I could easily tell, based on his uniform and everything else that... er, no, that's presumptuous of me. I only really noticed that his uniform was a different color.

"Oh?" I replied vaguely. *You say you're no good at parties? I can't imagine wh*

— My train of thought was interrupted when another knight wearing a uniform the same color as his appeared out of nowhere next to him.

“Yowza, ●●! That’s a pretty little lady you got there!”

The smooth-talking knight scowled briefly at the other before schooling his features back to how they were before.

“I just met her. She was just so cute, I couldn’t stop myself from talking to her.”

“Ohhh. Yeah, we’d definitely remember a face like yours if we’d met you before, even just once. Haven’t seen you around. I’m ●●● from the First Company. I’m the □□□, and I do all the △△△. This fellow’s in the same company,” the second knight said, introducing himself.

“Uh huh.”

Seeing an opportunity, the smooth-talking knight introduced himself, too.

“My apologies for not introducing myself. I ××× for the same company he does. I am ○○○. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Uh huh.” *I didn’t ask.*

I wasn’t listening too hard to what they were saying, so most of it went in one ear and out the other and all I really caught was ‘First Company.’ It wasn’t my fault that I did not care to make their acquaintance. They said their names, too, but I didn’t catch those, either, focused as I was on wondering when they would let me go.

“Oh, hey! A cute girl!”

“Looks like you caught yourself a lovely little lady!”

One by one, more knights in the same uniform were gathering around us.

“You can call me ×××!”

“And I’m △△△!”

They each introduced themselves, but by that point, I was at my limit and just wanted them to disappear. Before I knew it, however, I was surrounded by men in deep green uniforms. They were all rather forward, too. *What I wouldn’t give*

to be surrounded by the lovely ladies in the Bombshell Trio right now.

Unable to blend into a wall or escape to the edges of the party, I had become a flash of orange in a sea of green.

Aaaaah! This must be what it feels like to be popular! ...I hate it! Mr. Fisalis always stepped in and saved me when I got ambushed, but now he's not here and I have nowhere to run. Whaddaya know, I thought of something else nice about him.

"Oh, speaking of which, we haven't asked the young lady her own name yet," the smooth-talking knight said, as though he only just now noticed. Putting his hand to his chest and elegantly bowing in the knight's salute (I had gotten used to seeing it after all the messages the lady knights delivered!), he asked, "Might I have the privilege of knowing your name?"

I wanna gag! His words are like a sticky bun caught in the back of my throat! He's actually giving me heartburn! His words had the opposite of their intended effect on me; rather than swoon, any passion in my body turned to ice.

I don't want to give this sorry excuse for a man my name! I screamed in my head. But alas, I didn't get the sense that they'd let me go without me telling them my name. Just when I feared I wasn't going to make it out alive, however: "There you are! I found you, Duchess Fisalis!"

My savior has arrived!

The wall of green around me parted like the Red Sea and on the other side I spotted the face of a man I recognized.

...Er, who are you again?

I knew I had seen him before, but couldn't remember his name. It was like my brain was in a fog.

"Consul Argenteia!" someone within the green wall shouted.

Ohhh, that's right! That's where I know him from! Way to go, Random Knight!

"Oh, you're Duke Argenteia's...!" I still couldn't remember exactly what his relationship was to the Argenteias, so I left my sentence unfinished in a way I hoped read more as surprise than forgetfulness. However, I was pretty sure he

was the second eldest son of the family. I had a vague memory of meeting him at the Argenteias' soiree.

It was Miss Verbena who had made the strongest impression, so all I could remember of her brothers, more or less, was that they were present that night, although I recalled that they spoke to Mr. Fisalis like they knew him well.

Oh, yes, I think he was a childhood friend of Mr. Fisalis, right? But of course I can't remember his name!

"The former duchess lost track of you and has been looking all over," Consul Argenteia said pushing the knights aside and cheerfully striding up to me.

"She has?" I asked, staring a little out of sheer relief at seeing a familiar face, as he ripped the smooth-talking knight's hand from my arm. Thank. God.

"...Duchess... Fisalis...?" Shock and fright were written across smooth-talker's face, as well as those of the knights beside him.

"Yes, that's me. I'm Cercis Tinensis Fisalis' wife," I asserted, a little embarrassedly, but glad that I managed to remember his full name. *I didn't want to tell them my own name, so I just used his instead. They should know who he is.*

"Don't tell me you didn't know who she was? This is the wife of Duke Fisalis, the commander of the Special Ops Division," the consul said, extricating me from my green dungeon and shooting the smooth-talker a cold glare.

"This is the first time I've met her, so..." he said as the color drained from his face.

"Oh, really? Ah, well, he, *the duke*, doesn't exactly force her into the limelight," the consul smiled meaningfully as the wall parted for him again.

He definitely intentionally emphasized 'duke' there even though I'm technically the one choosing to stay out of the spotlight. I really had no room to complain, though, so I didn't say that out loud.

I know I said it before but, Consul Argenteia wasn't exactly wrong: I rarely went out, and although Mr. Fisalis' coworkers had been at the few parties I had attended, those gatherings had been nowhere as big as this one. So there had

to have been some people at the rally who knew of the duchess (i.e. me), but wouldn't recognize her.

"Th-This girl... this lady is... the rumored Duchess Fisalis..."

"No way! This is the first time I've seen her up close."

"She's like everything you'd ever want in a wife!" they all whispered. *What's with everyone calling me a 'dream wife' or whatever? I wish they'd give up on that joke!*

The mere mention of the duke (complete with a knowing smirk on the consul's part) seemed to have an immediate effect—everyone, not just the smooth-talker, turned white as a sheet and said: "I-I'm very sorry, Madam!" before scattering like baby spiders.

They have good reason to. I'd be embarrassed, too, if I called someone a 'dream wife'!

20 — A Little Dissatisfied

“It’s good to see you again, Madam.”

“And you as well.”

“I’m terribly sorry about how my sister behaved last time.”

“Ah heh heh heh heh...”

“I never thought that Cercis would be this devoted to you, honestly.”

COUGHCOUGHCOUGH

I followed behind Consul Argenteia as he led me through the crowd toward where my mother-in-law was after he’d kindly freed me from the smooth-talking knight. Make no mistake—I was glad he had come to my rescue, but I could have done without his casual reminder of Mr. Fisalis’ obnoxious bragging episode at the Argenteias’ soiree. He didn’t need to look so wistful about it, either.

“Er... which way did my mother-in-law go again?” I asked him, deciding to change the subject as I was unable to bear rehashing more of my dark past. I looked this way and that for her as I trotted along behind the consul, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s at a table reserved for nobles. When she saw you surrounded by those jerks, she sent me to help you.”

“And that you did! Thank you very much! Those men said they were knights, but their uniforms were a different color than Mr. Fisalis’ ...Is there some sort of meaning to the colors? You’ll have to forgive me, I’m quite ignorant when it comes to military matters,” I inquired, thinking back to what they had said as we headed over to the nobles’ seats.

“So the special division that Cercis is in wears mostly navy, the frontline troops wear deep green, and the Royal Guard is in burgundy,” he explained with a kind smile, without making fun of me for not knowing despite being married to a commander.

“Oh, I see. But isn’t the Special Ops Division a part of the frontline troops? They’re already on-site as an advance party, I mean,” I inquired further, a little worried that it was a silly question.

“Ah, you’re asking if they see actual combat? The special division goes in first to set things up, and then the frontline troops go to war following their instructions. You can think of the special ops as the brain—the ones giving directions—so that’s why they’re the first ones out there, but they don’t actually fight. Hence the different-colored uniforms.”

I get it now. So navy means you’re the brains and deep green means you’re the brawn. The Royal Guard are primarily in charge of guarding the palace and the royal family, so they wouldn’t go to the frontlines.

The consul’s explanation was much appreciated. *Mr. Fisalis never told me about all those things, so this was very insightful.*

“So that’s how it works. Thank you for explaining.”

“Not at all. Oh man, their faces when they found out who you were! They looked like frightened rabbits! I think they’ll find themselves of use down there,” Consul Argenteia said, his bright smile morphing into a smirk.

“Huh? You do?” *What could he mean by that? How weird that his smile turned dark all of a sudden, too.*

As we were talking, we made it to the nobles’ seating area where my mother-in-law was waiting for me. Yes, there were seats reserved just for nobles... They were at the highest point of the garden, overlooking the rest of the venue.

That explains it. Lady Fisalis must’ve seen those knights swarming me from up here. This must be where the term ‘high status’ comes from... No, wait. There’s nowhere to hide up here. This is exactly the opposite of what I was looking for! She called for me specifically to get me to sit up here, didn’t she?!

His Majesty the king was sitting smack dab in the middle, the queen at his side, and opposite them were the princes and princesses. The nobles’ seating started to the sides of the royal family, with the Fisalis family occupying the seats closest to them, since they were the highest ranking in the whole kingdom. I felt a little lightheaded when I spotted Lady Fisalis sitting right next

to the queen. *Seeing her that close to royalty—both physically and in terms of how intimate they are too, really leaves no room for doubt about how elite the Fisalises are.*

“Ahh, Vi! Over here!” Lady Fisalis motioned for me to come over, her radiant smile shining all the while, when she saw me. *I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t redirect everyone’s attention to me like that, but okay. Like, the queen. Who is sitting right there. I guess I’m obligated to come over now. I should have known you’d find me eventually.*

I was reluctant to join them, but in order to keep that from being glaringly obvious, I came out from behind the consul and said, “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Good day to you, Your Highness,” putting Dahlia’s etiquette training to good use.

“How do you do? You look lovely today, Duchess. I do believe you are becoming more beautiful every time I have the pleasure of seeing you,” replied the queen. Her feminine smile was very becoming of her glamorous image.

“Isn’t she just?” agreed my mother-in-law beside her. “She makes us all so proud!” she said with a look of satisfaction. *I don’t think you were supposed to take the queen at her word, Mother Fisalis.*

“You hate to see them grow up so fast, but were our own son a little older, maybe he could have a bride of his own!” the queen lamented as the prince cutely bit the corner of her handkerchief. *Your Highness, your son is five. It’s obvious you’re just flattering us. I’ll be a tacky middle-aged housewife by the time your son is grown up.*

...What am I getting worked up for? These are just pleasantries. Aristocrats are accomplished flatterers! I decided to observe the charade, of sorts, unfolding between my mother-in-law and the queen.

“That *is* unfortunate, tee hee hee. Viola is ours, though, and we’re not sharing! Oh, Vi, that’s right, I’m sorry for leaving you alone back there! You cannot be too careful around pests. Cercis will be furious when he finds out,” she said with a shrug, unamused.

“There’s no need for that, I’m perfectly fine. This garden is just so big, I got lost, is all. Thankfully the consul was able to help me out.”

“So you found Celosia to be of use, then?” she replied with a knowing chuckle. *Oh, that’s right! His name is Celosia! I won’t forget now!*

“Yes. He even showed me here. He was a big help!”

“Glad to hear it! Oh, that reminds me. Your parents are sitting over there.” My mother-in-law pointed to the seats for the lowest ranking aristocrats, right at the very edge of the tables: my much-desired wallflower’s paradise! *Figures my parents would be seated in the best spot at this whole party*, I thought as I looked their way, enviously. My parents just waved for me to come over. *I was going to come over either way!*

“Oh, yes, there they are. I’ll go say hello to them; it’ll just be a moment, Mother Fisalis. Please excuse me, Your Highness.” *I actually don’t plan on coming back here, but I’m sure you sensed that already.* I didn’t say that part out loud, of course.

I didn’t particularly get the impression that Lady Fisalis and the queen would mind if I stayed with my family, anyway, given that they were already good friends and back in conversation with each other. It would be a relief to not feel like the ugly duckling anymore next to those two high class women. I hightailed it to the table my parents were at.

I never would have imagined that my parents would be in reserved seating for nobles, even if they were the ones for the lowest ranking. *...Hmm, Father’s clothes look nicer than I remember. Did Mother own that dress before? Did I overlook them earlier because they were wearing nicer clothes than I expected?*

“Father, Mother, what are you doing here? I never would have thought to look for you in a place like this!” I’d just found them, and here I was already complaining.

“Someone led us here. We were just as surprised! Isn’t that right, dear?” said Mother. She looked more dignified than when I had last seen her, and was wearing a dress in a suitably dignified shade of dark burgundy.

“We were indeed! I guess we’re getting special treatment because you’re the bride of the Fisalis family head,” agreed Father, looking somewhat uneasy. Seeing him looking very classy there in a gray-blue suit coat made me wish he’d dress up more often.

“That must be it, otherwise impoverished nobles like us would never be invited to sit here.”

“Yep,” both of my parents agreed with me.

I was finally able to relax once I sat down with my parents. Even those seats had a good view of the grounds, too. They really were the best seats in the house, er, garden.

“Hmmm. You’d never guess there was a war going on, looking at this view,” I mumbled in a voice so soft that only my parents could hear as I looked out over the festivities. All I could see were people laughing and dancing, eating delicious food. The whole garden was an image of tranquility, drenched in warmth as the sunlight poured over it, accented by chirps and tweets from the little birds looking for crumbs.

...Mr. Fisalis and everyone in the special division is on the frontlines right now, though. Remembering that makes me... a little depressed, somehow.

“No, you never would. But then again, this rally is all to send a bunch of knights putting on their bravest faces off to fight, isn’t it?” Father said, trying to calm me when he sensed my gloom.

“Mr. Fisalis and his unit didn’t get a rally like this. They only had a secret ceremony, and then they had to leave in secret, too. It’s the same war, so I don’t see why they had to be treated differently,” I grumbled. *It wouldn’t have to be anything fancy—just so that they weren’t shuffled away in the dark! They’ve all been down there giving it their all for over a month. That’s a month more than all the people here! ...Heh, I’m probably being unreasonable. Arrogant, even.*

“There, there, Viola. Simmer down. A rally even grander than this awaits them when they come home. There’s no reason to be upset, see?” Father said with a concerned smile.

Huh? Another rally? That was the first time anyone had mentioned that to me, so I was a little perturbed that I hadn’t heard about that until then.

“...An even grander one?”

“Of course. The frontline troops owe everything to the advance parties’

efforts, after all. They've always had events for the advance parties afterward."

"You mean like prior to this war?" *Now that I think of it, I remember hearing somewhere that there's a 'repatriation ceremony' for when soldiers and knights come home from war and that the aristocracy is obligated to attend it. Which would mean that Father has been to one before, even though we're basically nobodies. That must be how he knows.*

"Exactly. Did you not know about that, Vi?"

I didn't say anything because *of course* I hadn't known, so I just stared at my shoes.

I mean, all the other times he left were just like business trips, so I didn't know there'd be some sort of ceremony like this. What was I supposed to do? Heck, I only learned about deployment ceremonies this morning! Even Mr. Fisalis never said a peep about these things. And there was even a war right before we got married, I angrily explained to absolutely no one but myself.

"...so you didn't know, then?"

Stop staring at me, Father!

The rally came to an uneventful end while I whiled away my time with my parents, and the next day, the frontline troops marched out of the capital to much fanfare.

The lady knights continued to deliver messages even after the deployment ceremony. Up until the frontline troops marched off to the front, I had been receiving letters from Mr. Fisalis at a laidback rate of one every three or four days, with each letter about three full pages long. After the troops left, however, the system changed; I began to receive not letters but oral reports every other day. No matter which knight relayed the information to me, she always said she felt like she was racing back and forth between the capital and the front lines. They were certainly very busy and working very hard.

Mr. Fisalis himself seemed to be completely unchanged.

"The commander was grazed by an arrow on the front lines the other day!" Alkanna, the lady knight with the bronze hair, reported to me that day over tea.

So it sounds like there was a brief brush with the enemy, then... but I thought that since Mr. Fisalis was part of the 'brain,' he wouldn't be involved in actual combat?

"Er, may I ask you something? I thought Mr. Fisalis was stationed in the war room, since he's part of intel. He's not actually going to fight, is he?" I asked her timidly.

"Uh, well, he's stationed there *for now*." Alkanna's smile turned strained as soon as the question left my mouth.

"What do you mean... 'for now'?" I asked with a tilt of my head, hoping she would clarify.

"Er, yes. So, Commander had been saying that he wanted us all to finish our work quickly so we could come home early... but then he rushed off to the front lines."

"Uh oh..."

Mr. Fisalis had foolheartedly decided to go on a one-man mission away from the war room. And then Corydalis and the others had followed. ...*Actually, that's not hard to imagine.*

"And it was that battle where his chest was grazed by an arrow..." Alkanna said, cutting her sentence short with a meaningful drop to her voice.

...What? What did you say? An arrow grazed his chest?!

"Um, but he's fine, right? He's not hurt, is he?!" *I couldn't possibly imagine someone as confident as Mr. Fisalis getting hurt, but Alkanna paused at a weird place, and it's just making me really worried! An injury on your chest would be very serious, right? Oh no, what if it knocked him off his horse?!*

Now extra nervous, I pressed Alkanna for even more details.

"Erm, it seems that he had been carrying a letter from you in his breast pocket, and that's what the arrow grazed. So his uniform was ripped, but the commander himself wasn't so much as scratched. He was livid that your letter was torn, and that anger is driving him now."

Oh. My. God. How could you put my letter in your breast pocket of all places,

Mr. Fisalis! And to go out there without a single piece of armor, wearing just your uniform coat! It doesn't sound like you take WAR very seriously! Aren't you supposed to be smart?!

I let out a sigh of relief and let my shoulders unclench when I learned he was alright, but I was pretty perturbed to hear what he'd been up to and embarrassed to hear he'd carried a letter of mine with him.

Just... Focus on the fact that he's not hurt. That's the most important thing... right?

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 5, Cercis' Perspective — On the Frontlines ◆ ◆ ◆

"Hmph!" I sneered, without really meaning to.

The letter that had just arrived was from my childhood friend Celosia, the second son of the Argenteia family. He was a consul—a high-ranking civil servant—at the Royal Palace.

The letter briefly described the military rally that had been held the previous day at the Royal Palace. He said that some guys from the First Cavalry Company had been unknowingly hitting on my wife.

She is, of course, undeniably adorable. At first glance, she seems sensitive and fragile, but her smile almost blossoms across her face, overflowing with tender care, her bearing elegant and fluid like water. She usually dresses in a way that enhances her natural light, and sometimes I am moved to speechlessness by her beauty.

Having said that, those men had no right to be speaking to her like that. *Don't you look at her! She's mine.* You couldn't help but run into other nobles at a military rally, but still, that sort of behavior is upsetting. And I can't help but be furious as well, knowing that Viola had been exposed to their coarseness.

Thankfully Celosia had also included the names of the men who'd harassed her. Atta boy, Celosia. I guess there was something to you memorizing the list of peerage for fun after all. You can count on a consul's memory.

So, the cavalry. And the First Company at that.

I was just wondering what I would do for frontline troops for the attack. I see. The First Cavalry Company, then. The scope won't be too broad, and the unit is more than capable.

Hmm.

I think I'll use them for this operation.

I felt myself being watched as I thought about the upcoming operation after

reading Celosia's letter. When I looked to see who it was, my lieutenant commander Corydalis was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost. *What're you looking at me like that for?*

"What do you want, Corydalis?"

"Nothing. It just looked like you were reading a nice letter, and I was curious."

Ah, so he thinks this is what I look like happy.

"I guess it is funny in its own way."

"In its own way?"

"You want to read it?"

"Am I allowed to?"

For god's sake, don't pretend like you don't.

"Yes. It's from Celosia. It's just about yesterday's rally at the Royal Palace."

"Celosia...? Oh, you mean Consul Argenteia. I didn't expect a report already about something that happened only yesterday."

"That's Celosia for you," I said, tossing Corydalis the letter. He skillfully caught it and examined the contents.

A dark grin spread across his face as his eyes tracked over the words. *Heh, I see you're pissed, too.*

"Heh hey... that *was* pretty funny. Those bastards. That's just bad form, flirting with someone who obviously isn't interested in you," Corydalis smiled.

"Of course it is. We'll have to work them to the bone here to retrain them from the ground up," I said firmly, a dark smile of my own slowly appearing on my face.

"Yikes, I don't wanna know what's got the commander and lieutenant commander smiling like that."

"Yeah, that's the look you get when you're thinking of something really wicked."

"I bet they came up with some absolutely brutal strategy for the attack."

“Something positively evil, even.”

“Gyaaaah! Reading it over is going to be a nightmare! Oh, what do you know, I think I feel a stomach ache coming on!”

“You what now?!”

The members of our unit stood around Corydalis and me, shaking in their boots as they watched us. They were whispering, but I still heard every word. Seeing this, Corydalis said, “Oi, you all aren’t going to let these guys get away with this, are you?”

“Absolutely not!” my unit replied in unison. *Glad to see my men practically revere Viola.*

“I thought you might say that. They’re on board, too, then,” Corydalis smirked as he looked back at me.

It was settled then. Seems we’d be using the First Company in this significant operation.

“Hm. That’s that, I suppose. Let’s have the First Company cover our front for our most important and difficult operation.”

“Yes, sir!” the division replied in a moment of unity.

“They’ll regret crossing me from the moment they arrive,” I murmured out loud, not entirely on purpose. *I won’t accept anything less than 150% from them. Viola’s made a new man out of me, it seems.*

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 6, Cercis' Perspective — The First Cavalry Company's Moment to Shine? ◆ ◆ ◆

Several days after the deployment ceremony: The First Cavalry Company was summoned to the tent currently being used as a command center. They would have had no idea what I had called them there for, but they obediently showed up nonetheless.

"I'll leave the specifics to you, Commander Fisalis."

"Yes, sir," I replied.

To start with, the head general who outranked me in the Chivalric Order went before the First Company. I watched from the shadows as I awaited my turn. I was next.

"You may have only just arrived, but you are receiving your orders now. We have decided that the First Cavalry Company will spearhead this attack. Do you have any objections?" the head general asked them solemnly.

"No, sir. It would be our honor!" the company commander immediately replied on behalf of the entire company before saluting.

Being the vanguard is a dangerous role, but an honorable one. You could say it's 'high risk, high reward.' Should they succeed, promotions surely await them as well as a good number of medals. They'd be hailed as heroes when they returned home and would be even more popular with the ladies than they were now!

The head general appeared satisfied as he gazed sternly at the company commander.

"Special Ops Commander Fisalis will now provide you with the details of the operation."

"Yes, sir!" the company commander briskly replied.

"Gah?! ...Was that a joke..." whispered the other soldiers behind him,

however, at the mention of my name. *Oh ho, I'll give you something to talk about!*

“What’s with the chatter? Is there something you’d like to say?”

“No, sir! Nothing, sir!” the soldiers replied with a bow when their commander turned to them in suspicion.

Looks like no one’s clued in the company commander on what happened at the rally. Sorry your subordinates’ behavior put you in a dangerous position.

Once the commotion had settled, I stepped out in front of the company. I found it hard to remain completely expressionless, and eventually I couldn’t hold back a grin. The soldiers’ expressions turned strained at the sight of my smile. *That’s right—you understand precisely what this smile means.*

When I looked over the company commander’s shoulder at my own subordinates, though, they weren’t making a peep. I could practically hear them thinking: ‘What is he smiling for?’ ‘That’s not a friendly smile, is it?’ ‘His smile scares me!’ ‘Does anyone else feel chilly all of a sudden?’ ‘So this poor guy is gonna be on the front lines out here *and* has no idea what went down at the rally?’ et cetera, et cetera.

Pretending not to see all this, I said, “Yes, my apologies for the short notice, but you men have been chosen to execute the operation I’m about to describe. It will be difficult, but I believe you will prevail. It would be no exaggeration to say that our kingdom’s hope of victory lies in your hands. Prepare yourselves to get to work immediately.”

I imparted the details of their ‘somewhat difficult’ [*That’s an understatement! -Corydalis*] mission to them thusly.

When I turned back to the company at the end of my explanation, every one of them looked petrified. *Heh, well... my own unit did say my strategy was ‘evil’!* I left the tent feeling as if a weight had been lifted from my chest.

“Seriously, what’s he thinking with that plan?”

“It’s fiendish, is what it is.”

“He’s gotta be some sort of closet sadist!”

“He sure looked like he was getting a kick out of it, didn’t he?”

“I thought my ears were deceiving me, but they weren’t!”

“Same.”

I could hear them muttering as I walked out.

What fools you lot are. You don’t actually think I gave a serious role like vanguard to a worthless company like you, even after what you did to Viola? My selecting you and whatever skills you can possibly offer was more or less for my own benefit. If you hadn’t harassed Viola, you’d probably never have been selected. You’re going to work like dogs to redeem yourselves—in more than one way.

◆ ◆ ◆ Extra Scene ◆ ◆ ◆

The First Cavalry Company immediately after the Special Ops Division Commander has left the tent:

“...it’s not like we can just pack up and go home if we refuse.”

“Exactly. We’ve practically got targets on our foreheads until we successfully complete the mission!”

“Yeah.”

“But we’ll be total heroes if we do succeed, right?”

“Right! You bet we will!”

“Yeah, and chicks dig heroes!”

“Let’s hear it for rich girls!”

“Alright, I say we show ’em what we got! No one’ll look down on us once we make it through his hellish training!”

“Huzzah!”

Behold, a group of dumb jocks on the brink of wetting themselves in fear have somehow found a silver lining. Among them, however, a single knight whispers, with a look of desperate, brief optimism, “...If I make it through this mission, I’m going to propose to my girl.”

“Dude, no ominous foreshadowing!”

And thus thanks to the First Company and their resolve, the day was won by believing in themselves. But the decisive battle and any victories were still a long ways away.

Several months later:

“What ever happened to that guy?”

“He made it home safe. And is absolutely whipped now.”

“...I guess that’s better than being dead.”

21 — About to Come Home

A month had passed since the troops had arrived at the frontlines and tension had escalated to all-out war. In the meantime, the lady knights continued to relay information and messages to me about the war's progress and the situation on the battlefield. Flür seemed to be the stronger side, and the messages they provided suggested we were approaching the final stretch.

Incidentally, ever since Mr. Fisalis had cracked down on a certain company, they had set forth with their operation with no complaints to be heard at headquarters. Apparently, the commanding officer had misbehaved and now the whole company was paying for it. Corydalis was very concerned that they would go bald or get ulcers from all the stress.

At last, news that the final curtain had fallen on the war, with the Flür Kingdom victorious, came to the capital. Of course, since my in-laws and I had been informed at that time that Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates were uninjured, we were all very relieved. Since we were so far from the battlefield in Rozhe, and the Flür army had the upper hand since day one, it was easy to forget that there even was a war happening. That's what it was like the whole time.

"A month to organize everything, then a month at war, for a grand total of two months. It was another surprisingly short battle," Lord Fisalis said admiringly. *I thought for sure that the previous skirmish took a little more time. We think back on that war often, it's true, but if that's the only recent war you can compare it to, no wonder he'd be resentful if it dragged on! ...But I digress.*

"It was indeed. They must have been very scrupulous in their planning." Lady Fisalis seemed to feel the same.

"Had the war gone on longer, many more people would have been injured and the national treasury would have taken a hit, too. It's better that it was over quickly. Not to mention that Mr. Fisalis and all his subordinates are uninjured, and that is certainly a good thing."

"You're right about that," agreed Lord Fisalis. "There will be cleaning up to do

for a while now, so it will probably be another month before they can return. The other frontline soldiers ought to be coming back in the order they left, though.”

It sounds like the frontline troops get to leave later and come home earlier, then. On the one hand, that seems like something that should be reserved for important individuals, but on the other hand, those who put their lives on the line probably would need to come home to recover from their injuries and replenish their strength. That makes sense.

“Cleaning up? Isn’t that the job of the Minister of War and the consuls?” my mother-in-law asked. I had no idea what ‘cleaning up’ entailed or who was supposed to do it, so I stayed quiet and listened, too. *I’ve been learning so many new things lately. Ceremonies and uniform colors, for instance. I wouldn’t need to know any of this if I’d continued to stay in the manor, but since I’ve been dragged out in public more frequently as of late, I can’t get away with saying, ‘Oh, I had no idea. Ah ha ha☆’ any more.*

Uh oh. Suddenly I’ve got a sinking feeling that I’m going to need to start reading up on a bunch of things I don’t really care about or understand. I mean, I’d be the laughingstock of the manor if I, the wife of a duke from a prestigious family, acted like an absolute blockhead.

I know I need to study more, but I’m terrible at it.

Oh. Am I imagining things, or did I just see a flash in Rohtas’ eyes?

I pretended not to notice him and went back to focusing on what my father-in-law was saying.

“The Minister of War, as well as the commander and lieutenant commander of the Special Ops unit, all need to be present for a signing. Normally, the king won’t go himself, so the prime minister and several consuls and civil servants will go as his proxies,” Lord Fisalis politely explained to me.

“I believe I understand now.”

“So *that’s* how it works.” My mother-in-law and I nodded.

Following the announcement that the war had ended, soldiers began to return to the capital one after another. Lord Fisalis was right; as I watched them

parade into town, it was nothing but a sea of green uniforms. They were all regular frontline soldiers.

Half a month later:

“The division members under the command of Commander Fisalis are scheduled to return to the capital today.” I swear the lady knight with the silver hair actually sparkled as she stated the day’s news.

I had been enjoying my after-breakfast tea when I received word that an envoy from the Royal Palace had arrived. When I made it to the entryway with Dahlia, I was greeted by Angelica, the gorgeous lady knight with hair like spun silver. She was the one who’d delivered the news of the special ops unit’s return.

But didn’t Lord Fisalis say it would take at least a month to clean up after the war? It’s only been half that long.

“Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for the kingdom, but isn’t Mr. Fisalis still busy with the aftermath? I didn’t think he could return home yet,” I expressed my confusion to Angelica.

“The commander and lieutenant commander did what they could ahead of time to make sure we could wrap up early. The both of them very much wanted to come home as soon as possible,” she explained.

I knew Mr. Fisalis wanted to get home fast, but Corydalis, too?! No, wait, I think I just didn’t want to imagine Corydalis wanting to come home, but I can totally see it now.

“You’re not going to be in trouble, are you?” I asked Angelica, surprised at how much freedom Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis apparently had.

“Oh, no, it’s fine! All that’s left is for the consuls to do. If we’ve got time to stand around and chat down there, then I’d like to go home! I mean, I’ve been down there this whole time, longer than the civil servants *or* troops! ...Oops, eh heh. I shouldn’t have said that. My humble apologies, Madam!” *Angelica’s brain-to-mouth filter seems to malfunction sometimes, doesn’t it? She’s not drunk, is she? The way she smiled when she giggled was so lovely, though, that I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear everything else she said.*

“Oh, not at all! Thank you so much for all your hard work! I hear that it’s thanks to the diligent efforts of the special ops division that the war was so short, and that we won in the first place. You all deserve to come home and take a vacation.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Angelica saluted in reply to my expression of appreciation.

I suppose she’ll join back up with the rest of the unit tomorrow, and then they’ll all march back home to give a report at the palace. She can take a little break here now, though!

“It’s been so long since Mr. Fisalis has been home. What’s it been, two and a half months? I can still feel his presence strongly, too, despite his long absence. The way he talked about his territory down there like he was guiding a tour group, the two massive sacks crammed full of fruit...”

“I know exactly what you mean, Madam,” Rohtas chimed in with a sarcastic smile.

After Angelica left, we returned to the salon and held an emergency conference composed of Rohtas, Dahlia, the servants, and I, in preparation to receive Mr. Fisalis. Mimosa stayed in her room since she wasn’t feeling well that day. Bellis was basically glued to her side to make sure she didn’t overexert herself.

“What does Mr. Fisalis have on his schedule after he returns to the capital?” I asked Rohtas, the obvious source for accurate information, since we’d have to plan accordingly.

“He will have to appear at the Royal Palace after arriving in the capital, first of all. There he will present a report, after which there would normally be a banquet in appreciation of the unit, but...” he trailed off, as if the remainder pained him to say. *Normal people would follow the usual custom, but Mr. Fisalis hadn’t been behaving normally. That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it, Rohtas?*

“...If I recall correctly, the entire division boycotted the last banquet and came here instead,” I said. *They were awfully... vigorous... when they got here, for people who skipped out claiming ‘total exhaustion.’ And then they just postponed the banquet until a later day. And then all the servants freaked out*

when Mr. Fisalis came home much sooner than they'd anticipated, if memory serves. That's riiight... That was when he picked a fight with Cartham, too.

"Correct. Which is why we need to have a plan this time in case all of that happens again," Rohtas said, eyes closed, but with a look of resignation.

"Sounds good to me." *Thought so.*

We weren't the same people we had been before, though. We'd been learning and evolving every day! What we'd experienced last time was an immediate learning experience. And from that we'd evolved even further!

They'll probably claim to be exhausted and skip the banquet this time too since they're the kind of people who, when they say that they want to go home, will do whatever it takes to do just that. *They'll totally do that; it's not hard to imagine.*

"O-Okay then. I'll come up with several possible outcomes, and then appropriate Cercis Shifts for each of them," I decided.

"Understood," Rohtas replied with a nod.

"It's been almost too long since our last Cercis Shift. I'm worried my mind will just go blank. Give me a moment to think things through." I closed my eyes and ran a simulation in my head.

The best case scenario would be: Mr. Fisalis attends the banquet → comes home completely exhausted → I say my hellos → and then off to bed.

This next one seems more likely, though: He boycotts the banquet → eats here → and then we go to bed. I'd say there's about an eighty percent chance of this happening.

The worst possible outcome would be: Mr. Fisalis and his subordinates all boycott the banquet and then explode through my front door → they sweep through the house like a tornado → the servants and I are completely exhausted. The war is over; you can stop charging at closed doors now, I angrily told them in my head. Let's pray this isn't what happens.

So, yeah. That's where I was mentally.

I opened my eyes and decided to start planning from what we would do in the

best case scenario.

“Dahlia, first I want you to clean Mr. Fisalis’ room just for good measure. He’ll probably be exhausted, and I want him to be comfortable.”

“Understood. I clean his room every day, but I will do it once more, and thoroughly,” Dahlia said cheerfully.

“Please do. Make sure his duvet has been properly aired out so we can give him an outstanding night’s sleep.”

“Ah, excellent idea, Madam! I shall prepare his room as if he were my own son.”

“Thank you.”

Why does Dahlia look so happy? Oh, well. Not important. On to the next scenario. Unlike last time, we’ll plan ahead so mealtime isn’t utter chaos.

“Have Cartham be ready to bring out the buffet. And make sure he’s prepared to serve some hors d’oeuvres and snacks that pair well with alcohol, and anything else that Mr. Fisalis could want. I want us to go the extra mile.”

“Of course, Madam.” Once Dahlia had nodded her assent, I moved on to the final scenario.

It’s unlikely to happen, but you can never be too prepared—not to mention those guys have a habit of defying expectations.

“Thinking about when he brought his subordinates back with him—and this is just in case—we’re better off having alcohol and snacks on hand, huh?”
Everyone in the special ops division sure likes to have a good time on Mr. Fisalis’ tab.

“I will have some ready and waiting. What I can acquire, anyway,” Rohtas affirmed with a long-suffering sigh. He’d need to prepare for the possibility of many people coming over. Look what happened last time—we weren’t overreacting in going to these lengths to prepare.

“So is there anything we might have missed? He’s bound to be looking forward to coming home, so everything needs to be perfect. He’s probably stressed after being in a strange land for so long, so I want him to be able to

relax. Oh, what about some flowers? I wonder if the ones he bought me are blooming,” I said restlessly as a million different things ran through my mind.

“Don’t fret, Madam. I’ll take care of that,” Rohtas offered with a smile.

“In that case, let’s get started right away. If we dawdle around, he’ll catch us off guard again!”

“But Madam, he isn’t coming home until tomorrow,” Rohtas interjected.

Oh yeah.

Guess I’m being a little hasty.

“Ah, yes, silly me,” I tried to brush it off, but squirmed in embarrassment. *I can’t let myself get carried away like that. What could it be that’s got me all worked up? How embarrassing that he had to correct me.*

“You seem very excited for Master’s return home, Madam.”

“Huh?” Rohtas’ comment had me frozen mid-step. *I seem excited?*

“You appear to be enjoying yourself preparing the house for his return.”

Really? I look happy? I’m just doing what I can to ensure Mr. Fisalis is comfortable and can relax when he comes home, though.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 7, Cercis' Perspective

— Mr. Fisalis' Division Returns Home ◆ ◆ ◆

A military conference room, Aurantia: Following our victory, the Flür military, along with various civil servants, had occupied the Aurantian royal palace—processing war criminals, establishing an interim government, and that sort of thing. Corydalis and I had decided some venting about the civil servants plowing their way through stacks of paperwork to our side was in order.

“No more work for us.”

“You got that right, Commander. It sure is a good thing we got our jobs done quickly.”

“All that’s left is up to the civil servants to finish, so it’s completely out of our hands.”

“Ex-actly.”

“Shall we pack up and go, then?”

“Well, that *is* the reason we got everything done as fast as we could.”

Corydalis and I were about to exit the room, having come to the conclusion that we were clear to leave (and that we ought to pack up and make a break for it) when: “Did you say you’re going home?” Several civil servants raised their heads.

What now? Aren’t we allowed to leave yet? Our work is done! Why should we stay to just watch you all work? We have all the knights on guard duty for that. At this point, that’s all they’re good for.

We are not mere overseers!

“Yes. Our work should all be done now.”

“We’re beat, too. We were slaving away down here long before you guys got here. It’s been two and a half months. Sheesh,” Corydalis tried to reason with them, cracking his neck in a display of just how exhausted he was.

“You’re right. There’s no comparing what we’ve been through to marching in

after the war was over. Aside from the guards, the regular troops have already returned. I'd like to send my men home soon, too, in appreciation of their hard work."

"Aww, Commander, you do care!"

Wouldn't you know it, though, the civil servants didn't so much as reply.

I see how it is.

"...Fine, you can leave," a consul reluctantly agreed.

"Thanks. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Woohoo! We're outta here!" Corydalis cried, pumping his fist in the air.

Our little charade had worked.

"I'm going to go pack up. Inform the others."

"Roger!"

I got on my horse, who was waiting outside, and rode off as fast as he would go.

"YAAAAAY!" was the reply I received when I told the other division members. *I'm with you on that one, guys. I can't wait to get home, either!*

"I'm aiming for a new record for the fastest time home! Wait for me, Viola!"

"Wait for me, ooo!" most cried, as well—inserting their own lover or spouse's name, of course.

"Oh, shut up, would you?! Some of us are single, you know!" yelled one man, tears streaming down his face. Apparently he didn't have anyone to go home to. *He should be more optimistic... When he does get home, he can get started on the dating game.*

"All of you! Quit your yelling! Shut up and ride!" Mr. Fisalis shouted at them, with a look on his face that said heads were going to roll if they didn't obey. *Why are you angry? I thought you wanted to go home, too. Oh well, none of my business.*

And so, we took off down the road at a full gallop, our sights set on the capital.

◆ ◆ ◆ Extra Scene ◆ ◆ ◆

🐼 Some Random Village Along the Highway 🐼

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE

Villager A: What's that, an earthquake?

Villager B: Oh, I hear it too. I think it's coming from the south.

A: Me too. You don't think it could be a gang of rogues from down there about to attack us?!

B: Doubt it. The war's been over for half a month! And on top of that, we won!

A: I guess you're right.

RRRRRRRUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE

A: The earthquake's closing in on us!

B: What's that?! I can just make out a cloud of dust!

The special ops division gallops by at full throttle.

A: ...The heck was that just now?

B: Who knows...?

22 — His Return Home

Yesterday we finished all of our work in preparation for Mr. Fisalis's homecoming. So all that was left for the day was to double-check everything.

"Mr. Fisalis' room, check."

"Buffet ready to go in the kitchen, check."

"Alcohol and snacks restocked, check."

We can't afford to overlook anything, so I'm saying everything out loud as I go along! Then again, I'm pretty sure the word 'overlook' simply doesn't exist in our servants' vocabularies. This is mostly to make myself feel better.

I went along, checking things off my list, making sure that we'd be ready for Mr. Fisalis to come back in *any manner or mood imaginable*.

We'll be ready for anything he can throw at us!

"He can come home at any time now!"

The preparations to welcome Mr. Fisalis home were complete. Since we were currently in In-Law Shift, meaning I was unable to wander around in my maid uniform, I had been cleaning in some of my regular clothes, so I changed into something a little nicer. I had Dahlia fix my makeup, and I braided my hair. My transformation was complete—I was all ready, too.

"There. All primped and prepped."

"The only question is when Mr. Fisalis will come back."

"That's difficult to say, indeed."

"Yeahhh. Now that everything's done, I guess I'll just wait for him in the salon. There's no point in running around."

"Yes, Madam."

It was already well into the afternoon. I really couldn't say when he'd be back, but it seemed too early yet, so I followed Dahlia to the salon.

When I got to the salon, I found I wasn't alone.

“Oh, hello, Vi. We thought we’d wait here, too,” said my mother-in-law from where she was elegantly sipping some tea on a sofa with my father-in-law.

You’re a little early! ...ahem. Um, phew, okay. I’m fine now.

Look at this wonderful display of parental love! They were waiting in anticipation of their darling (?) son’s return from war!

According to what I heard from Dahlia earlier, back when Mr. Fisalis just let himself go completely off the rails... ahem, I mean, when he let his mistress wrap him around her finger... er, I mean, Mr. Fisalis’ parents were overly strict with him when he was a child, so he grew up never knowing affection or what it was like to be doted on. But I never got that impression from his parents myself. They’re always smiling, and they don’t mind at all that I like to garden. I can’t imagine them ever being cruel. Now’s not the time to be thinking about that, though.

They certainly appear as if they care about him, excitedly waiting here for him to come home from the battleground. It sure seems that way to me, at least.

Then again, Mr. Fisalis was sort of going through a rebellious phase back then, albeit a late one. He was acting out just to upset his parents, so that probably only made things worse. And boy, he didn’t hold back when he misbehaved, either—getting the whole manor and even my own family involved. If he were my brother, Mother would’ve sent the little brat to bed without dinner, but not before she got an apology! She’s terrifying when she’s angry.

Ehh, I’ll leave my own family out of this.

“Don’t just stand there, Viola—come and have some tea,” I heard Lord Fisalis say, forcing me to return to reality from my thoughts of parental love and post-teenage rebellious phases.

Well, that was... illuminating.

Approaching my in-laws canoodling on the sofa, I took a seat in an armchair, being careful not to wrinkle my dress. According to my maids’ instructions—which I really didn’t understand—I should ‘dress especially cute because Master is finally coming home!’ so obviously that meant the only option was to wear a light, airy dress with extra tailoring around the waist that made for a

voluminous, flattering silhouette. And yet, although the goal was to make me more adorable than usual, they strangely also dressed me in petticoats to hide my movements.

So now I need to be extra cautious, even though I'm basically wearing regular clothes. It's probably my fault for not being used to petticoats yet.

In the time it took me to straighten my skirt, the maid had brewed my tea.

"Goodness, I wonder when he'll be back. It seems like he was back from his last business trip much sooner," Lord Fisalis suddenly said with a smile, staring through the doorway to the entrance.

Little did he know, Mr. Fisalis returned home so quickly last time because he skipped the banquet. Naturally, I did not voice that little factoid out loud and merely blew on my tea to cool it down. I did my best to be careful as I lifted my cup and saucer to my mouth; it would have been a terrible time to make a mess. *Steady... Steady...*

...But wait. How did Lord Fisalis know that Mr. Fisalis came home earlier last time? He and Lady Fisalis were away in the countryside then! That must mean...

I stared at Rohtas, who in turn, refused to meet my gaze. Culprit apprehended.

Well, now that I know who the culprit was, mystery solved.

I felt my face begin to turn red as my father-in-law grinned at me knowingly.

"Er, you see, Mr. Fisalis and all of his subordinates were positively exhausted, so the banquet was actually postponed. They were very, verrrry tired!" I tried to explain, making sure to emphasize how worn out they had been. *Yes, so exhausted that they didn't even get out of bed the next morning. It was very sad. And when they did finally get up, I could tell they were only putting on tough faces. Why are you looking at me like that? That's really how it happened!*

My mother-in-law, however, did not seem to buy it.

"Tee hee. I'm sure they were. They must have felt much better then when they saw you. If they were so exhausted that they could barely move after a

two-week business trip, I can't imagine how they're going to feel after a two-month one! All their letters did say they wanted to come home as soon as they could, though..." she said with a pleasant expression as she watched me sweat bullets.

She's teasing me, isn't she? Regardless, the servants and I have anticipated three possible outcomes, and boycotting the banquet is still the number one contender.

It eventually approached the time when we expected Mr. Fisalis to come home, assuming he was following the pattern we thought he would.

As we were drinking our tea, waiting for him, a maid came into the room and announced, "There is a royal envoy at the entrance."

"An envoy, you say?" Rohtas questioned as his eyebrows rose up his forehead.

"Yes," the maid replied, her own eyebrows tilting down in a confused frown.

"I see. Please pardon me for a moment," Rohtas said before excusing himself from the salon with a bow.

"A royal envoy?" Lady Fisalis cocked her head.

"If Mr. Fisalis is soon to arrive, shouldn't we be getting an announcement of that, not a royal envoy?" I asked, cocking my head, too, as I looked at the door where Rohtas had exited. Royal envoys usually brought messages from the Royal Palace and His Majesty the king (such as royal rescripts and orders). What should have arrived before Mr. Fisalis was due home was simply an advance messenger.

So sure was I that Mr. Fisalis would skip the banquet and come straight home, I hadn't considered the possibility of a royal envoy.

"Perhaps something has happened," suggested Lord Fisalis.

As we all whispered amongst ourselves about what the arrival of a royal envoy could mean, the door to the salon opened a second time and Rohtas came back in from listening to the envoy. He gave us a slightly grim smile as we stared at him keenly, waiting for him to tell us what the envoy said.

“Master and the special division have returned to the capital safely and are presently at the Royal Palace. He will be attending the banquet this evening, and so will be returning home rather late,” Rohtas informed us matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

“*WHAT?*”

It wasn't like we planned to or anything, but the three of us all reacted in basically the same way. That was its own surprise. I was the one who was extra shocked there at the end.

Please pretend you didn't read that.

“He's staying for the banquet...!”

“I can't believe it!”

“Mr. Fisalis is actually going to participate in a work event like a mature adult...”

“Well, that's the obvious thing to do, of course, but then again, this is *him* we're talking about...” my father-in-law correctly pointed out.

“Goodness me, Madam! You've spilled tea on your dress!”

“Oh no! Vi!”

“What? You're kidd— Noooo!”

“Oh nooo, Viiii!”

“A towel, quick! And something to cool her down!”

In my shock, I'd completely emptied the contents of my cup all over my skirt.

Wh-What's going on? I'm all confused and there's something warm on me.

My in-laws descended into panic off to my side over the piping hot tea I had spilled on myself; meanwhile I just stared blankly in confusion. Luckily for me, the voluminous dress I was wearing that day absorbed most of the tea, so only a small amount actually made it onto my legs. The hot liquid didn't make direct contact with my skin thanks to the dress and the petticoats I was wearing, so I

avoided being burned. I guess I wore the right thing at the right time after all! ...Granted, petticoats were probably never intended for burn prevention.

“I can feel something a little warm, but I’m wearing a petticoat under my dress today, so really, I’m fine! Ohhh, but I’ve gone and stained my clothes now...” I tried to reason amid the chaos, but my statement was lost among the ‘towel!’, ‘ice!’, ‘a change of clothes!’, and ‘now!’

“Never mind the stain, dear! Ah, here, dab at it! Rohtas, honey, please step out of the room for a second— I need to lift up her skirt!” Lady Fisalis said, thus banishing the men from the salon. It was the right choice, considering I spilled the tea on my lap, and it would have been embarrassing to have my skirt pulled up that high in their presence. *Good thinking, Mother Fisalis!*

We were quick in our response, so the area affected was only a bit red, rather than scalded. I started to blot at the stain on my soiled dress.

Wehhh, my dressssss.

My in-laws were visibly relieved when I told them I was okay after I came back from changing my clothes yet again. I thought they had overreacted a little bit, but I was grateful that they cared. How lucky I was to have such nice in-laws!

Now that the problem was solved and everyone had calmed down, Lord Fisalis commented, “Well, now that we know he’s staying for the banquet, presumably to the surprise of all, it sounds as if he won’t be coming home until quite late.”

“So it does,” Rohtas replied in agreement.

“Hmm. In that case, why don’t we all have dinner without him? It’s been some time, but you don’t mind us eating here, do you, Viola?” Lord Fisalis asked me.

“Why, of course!”

“And what shall we do afterward? Rather... what are you going to do, Vi?” Lady Fisalis then asked.

By ‘afterward,’ you mean, until Mr. Fisalis comes home, right? I’m no good at staying up late, but considering that this is the best possible outcome, I’m gonna

give it a shot! I mean, my most important duty as a wife is to greet him when he comes home after finishing some very important work!

I'm sure some of the servants will still be awake (they always are!), so I can probably sit and chat with them in the servants' dining room while I wait. Er, maybe it's more like take a nap in the servants' dining room while I wait.

"I'll stay up and wait for him," I told my mother-in-law. "Will you be going back to the cottage? I can call for you when Mr. Fisalis comes home."

"No, we'll wait here with you, too. We're already here, after all. If we get tired, we'll just take a nap. Or perhaps you have a guest room available?"

"Oh, of course! Feel free to use any of the available rooms!" *Ohhh. Okay. You'll wait here. They really do care about their son! It's so wonderful to see the bond between child and parent in play!*

There go my plans of waiting in the servants' dining room if my in-laws are going to wait here, too, though. It was a nice plan while it lasted. Looks like I'll be staying up with my in-laws in the salon instead. I'll have to do my best to not lose consciousness!

We did not need to stay up too late, however, because Mr. Fisalis came home rather quickly. It was somewhat later than my usual bedtime, but there was still a significant amount of time before morning.

"I'm home! Finally! Ah, it's so good to see you, Viola!"

We received a prior announcement, so Lord and Lady Fisalis, along with the servants, had been waiting by the door, but the first words out of Mr. Fisalis' mouth when he came in were directed toward me, and came with a big hug.

"Oh, Viola. It's really you. I'm home!"

"You're... squishing me." He hasn't changed a bit—that is, he still doesn't understand how strong he is! I can hear my spine cracking and warping under the force of his hug! Not to mention everyone is watching! Great, now he's rubbing his cheek in my hair. Relax, please.



Did he even notice his parents and everyone else? Hey, look around you!

I had all the strength of a kitten batting at a piece of string compared to him, but that didn't stop me from pounding against his arm in an attempt to persuade him to free me.

"We-Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis! I am very happy to see you are doing well, but you are suffocating me. Mr. Fisalis. Please let go. Please, it hurts."

He gasped.

"Did someone hurt you?!"

"You. You are hurting me now."

"Oh, me?"

After some gentle prodding, he loosened his grip at last.

Ahhh. Just in the nick of time for my poor back.

I pushed again where he had loosened his grip and finally made some space between us. I tried to get away, but to no avail, because he simply grabbed me around my middle from behind, trapping me in his arms.

If my options are this or getting my back broken, I guess I'll take this.

That didn't stop me from trying to push his arms away with my own, though. When I finally made some leeway and looked up at him, he was peering at me with his dark brown eyes crinkled in joy. He didn't have bags under his eyes or appear haggard—in fact, he was still as handsome as ever. His facial features perhaps looked ever so slightly sharper than before he had left for the campaign.

Despite having put on a rare serious expression when he had told me was going to leave, he'd seemed very eager and willing to go (and everyone else discouraged, for some reason), and then proceeded to send me all sorts of letters from the field that made me want to tear my hair out. Everything he had done up until and while he was away flashed through my mind.

His journey to the frontlines hasn't changed him at all, and yet... he seems tougher, somehow. There's a lot about him that I wish was different, but I'm

definitely glad that he made it home safely.

I reached for his face, and gently stroked his cheek.

“Did you lose weight? You must have worked yourself to the bone.”

Mr. Fisalis’ eyes widened in surprise at my words of praise.

Oh no, did he not like that?

I went to draw my hand back when I saw his reaction, but he grabbed my hand with his own and pulled it back to his cheek. As I stood there, letting him rub my hand against his face, a wide grin soon appeared across his face.

“I really must have! But just having you stroke my face like this makes it feel like the exhaustion is melting away,” he boldly said.

Hold up. Check yourself, Viola. What the heck were you just doing?! I was totally touching his face! Of my own accord! And then I was cradling it! And stroking it! Gyaaah! I’m gonna die on the spot!

Suddenly getting a bad feeling, I nervously looked up at everyone else in the room. Sure enough, my in-laws and all of the servants were staring at us with looks of faint disgust and secondhand embarrassment.

Just as my own embarrassment felt like it was about to take a physical form and overflow from my body, out of nowhere Lord Fisalis said, in a mix of exasperation and ridicule, “Er, I’m sorry to interrupt your passionate reunion, but we’re all still here. Be more aware of your surroundings, Cercis. Save the romance for later.”

They must have been watching and hoping he’d remember they were there for a rather long time. Wish he would have interrupted sooner instead of just waiting.

“Oh, you’re here, Father. I’m finally home,” Mr. Fisalis said. The affectionate smile he had given me disappeared and was replaced with a look of indifference as he did so. I couldn’t help but notice the change.

“...Why, you! Is that any way to greet your parents?!” Lord Fisalis thoroughly scolded him.

“But I’m exhausted.”

“...It’s plain to see that the way you treat us is entirely different from how you treat Viola.”

“Well, naturally, yes,” Mr. Fisalis replied nonchalantly.

It was just like a scene from a comedy play, but then Lord Fisalis’ demeanor turned more pleasant. I could see it in his eyes that he was glad to see Mr. Fisalis walk through the door in one piece!

“I suppose being able to hold Viola like that does make you feel better...”

“Oh, no, we didn’t do all that much down there, we mostly just stood around. I’m not tired at all,” Mr. Fisalis said, hugging me again and nuzzling his face into the top of my head.

Although I was impressed by how much he seemed to have matured despite the arrogance, since he had decided to stay for the banquet at the Royal Palace, he was still his usual self after all. Yup, that’s just how he is.

So, although he was behaving contrary to everyone’s expectations, Mr. Fisalis made it home safe and sound.

Looks like my life with him is starting all over again. Back to living with the sappy man who wrote those tooth-rotting letters to me while he was away, I was thinking to myself, when:

“Ohh, Viola!” the man in question blurted out in front of everyone, using the same bedroom tone of voice he had used in the letters! He was back to his old ways, but now with ten times the sap.

Even though his features and overall silhouette looked a little sharper and leaner, this only made him appear all the more dignified. *Grrrr. Something will have to be done about that,* I thought enviously, as he continued to hug me.

It was at that very moment, too, with his face at point-blank range to mine, that I realized the two of us were still in the entryway. He hadn’t even taken off his overcoat yet, since he had come straight from the Royal Palace. *Stop hugging me and go to his room for some rest, is what he should be doing! Maybe I ought to try to have him do that! Instead of just standing around talking and hanging all over me.*

“I imagine you must be tired, Mr. Fisalis. We’ve run you a hot bath and there’s a warm bed waiting for you. The *servants* really went all out to prepare everything. It seems you’re going to have a busy schedule tomorrow, too, so please take this opportunity to rest up!” I said as I gently removed Mr. Fisalis’ hands from my body, around which he was still wrapped, and half dragged, half guided him to his room.

Look, the sooner you go to bed, the sooner we can all relax! We’re already working overtime. You can try to resist or argue, but you’re going to bed now! We all want to go to bed too, so I’m not giving in to any tantrums! I told myself as I resolutely dragged him along.

He’d normally protest around that point, but he actually said, “Oh, great! That makes me so happy! I can’t exactly say the sleeping arrangements down there were comfortable so, yeah, I think I *will* take it easy for the rest of the night. I’ll have plenty of time to tell you about everything later,” he said, obediently taking my hand and walking with me toward his room.

What. That was... anticlimactic.

Even Rohtas and Dahlia were surprised to see him act that way. Rohtas’ face didn’t give much away, but his eyebrows rose ever so slightly, and I noticed Dahlia’s cheek twitch for maybe half a second.

Okay, but I’m more concerned than surprised by what he said. Why did he put so much emphasis on ‘plenty’? It’s not like he’s going to be sent on another business trip or campaign any time soon, right?

“You-You certainly will! I can’t wait to hear all about it tomorrow!”

“Great. Well then, Father, Mother, I’m going to see myself to bed now. Thank you for waiting here for me,” he turned and said to his parents from halfway up the stairs, as if he’d only remembered them just then.

“Of course, of course. Have a good night.”

“Sleep well, dear!” They replied, their words tinged with shock at Mr. Fisalis’ obedient response to my suggestion.

And so, Mr. Fisalis let himself be led into the closet in his room... I mean, to the door to his room.

His sudden obedience has left a bad taste in my... No, I mean it was super weird... No, I guess it was kind of disappointing.

“Sleep well, Mr. Fisalis.”

“Good night, Viola,” he replied, giving me a gentle hug before releasing me with a smile and retreating into his room.

I returned to my own room once I heard his door shut.

“...He actually listened to me...” I mumbled as I trembled in shock.

“He did indeed...” Dahlia said with an expression somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

Don't act like you weren't shocked just a minute ago, too! But, yeah, lately he's been acting rude, and has been overly-sentimental and clingy. What could it be? Normally he simply wouldn't show up at events he didn't want to go to, but today he actually stayed for one of them, and he was even in a good mood afterwards, too. Did he hit his head while he was away? Or is he just acting funny because he really is exhausted?

Dahlia stood to the side as I muttered to myself, deep in thought.

“What in heaven's name is she...” she murmured, rubbing her temples and sighing.

So he gets back in town—positively gushing melodrama, I assume—and then actually participates in a work function, and then listens to instructions here without causing the servants (especially Rohtas!) or me any trouble at all... He's really grown u— Er, he sure has changed. I wonder what could have caused it. There's no way to ask him now that he's off to dreamland, though.

Even Rohtas and Dahlia, my usual fallbacks, have no clue what's going on, which leaves vague guessing as my only option.

At any rate, looks like tomorrow will be my first day living with a somewhat more mature (in more ways than one) Mr. Fisalis! ...I'm not even sure how to respond to him now. Will I be able to keep my cool? Ha, if tonight was any indication, that might be kinda hard!

...For now, anyway...

Can someone please explain what's going on?!

To be continued

Side Story Scenes from Following Duchess

Fisalis on Her Date ♦ ♦ ♦ Rohtas' office, the

Fisalis manor ♦ ♦ ♦

The night before the outing: The manor was completely silent after another day had drawn to a close and everyone had retired to their rooms. Light shone out from the crack below the door of Rohtas' office, illuminating a small patch of the otherwise dark house. Inside, Rohtas, Bellis, and the head of the manor's private guards stood face-to-face.

There was one reason why the three of them had gathered there, and that was to work out a plan to guard the duchess on the outing she had been compelled to take the next day.

"I'm sure you are already aware, but Master and Madam are going on an excursion tomorrow," Rohtas told the other two.

"We are," the head guard and Bellis replied in unison.

Rohtas nodded in acknowledgment before continuing.

"This is no different than usual, so I expect you already know what to do, but I want you two to escort Master and Madam tomorrow. I do, however, have a concern. Master does not wish to use the carriage this time, but to go on foot," Rohtas related, recalling what Cercis had, in turn, told him.

Until then, Cercis would have never even considered walking into town. Cercis had reined in his elitism in order to meet Viola and her commoner sensibilities halfway, saying that he wanted to make her happy, and had found his suggestion readily accepted by her.

'Compromise' had not been in Cercis' vocabulary until then. Rohtas wanted to consider Cercis' feelings, as unusual as they were, but he knew that granting his master's request would be difficult.

"That is going to be... challenging," the head guard replied after a momentary grimace. He did not know Viola very well, having had no regular contact with her. He was normally too busy checking for weak points in the manor security.

It was not as if he did not like Viola, though. In fact, he was glad that Cercis had left his mistress for her, his legal wife.

“Madam seems pleased at the thought of walking, though,” Bellis argued, his eyes softening in emotion.

The head guard gave Bellis a look, as if to say, “what the hell are you talking about?” Rohtas, on the other hand, nodded in agreement, apparently thinking the same as Bellis.

“That is just what I was thinking. But from a security perspective, going on foot has its dangers, just as the captain here was saying. No threat would be able to reach them inside a carriage, and security would have an easier time also, as they are well acquainted with escorting in that manner. Foot travel, on the other hand, leaves one’s entire body exposed. Regardless, we cannot allow Master and Madam to be knowingly exposed to danger.”

“Of course not,” Bellis and the head guard nodded with dual looks of obedience.

“Be prepared for a higher level of security than usual.”

“Are you certain it actually *is* acceptable for them to walk, then?” the captain of the guard continued to question Rohtas.

“Yes. Madam will enjoy herself walking into town. She does not care for pageantry. Should worse come to worst, Master is quite capable of protecting her, so I am certain everything will be just fine.” Rohtas ended his explanation with a grin that clearly dared anyone to question him further.

Seeing that his window to press the issue had been closed, the captain of the guard had no choice but to trust in Cercis’ abilities as a knight, and gave in, simply replying, “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll have my spies come out, too,” Bellis added agreeably, breaking his silence.

“I’m counting on you. Anyone Viola recognizes, have them watch from just out of sight. The guards she doesn’t know can dress as commoners and escort her and Master from nearby.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” the head guard replied to Rohtas’ proposal. Bellis nodded along.

“In that case, I will see you both tomorrow.”

And with that, the group broke up, plan in mind.

The day of the outing: The guards in their commoner disguises and Bellis’ spies had all gathered in the servants’ dining room. The other servants stood and watched, smirking at everyone in their strange attire.

Rohtas, Bellis, and the captain of the guard stood in the front and told the group the plan to be followed that day.

“Men, make use of Madam’s blind spots and guard her from where she can’t see you. The route for the day will be the bakery, followed by the confectioner’s just as Rohtas told you. They may, however, drop by other locations according to Madam’s fancy. Visualize other places she might wish to go, then send a single man ahead to scope out the area for suspicious persons or potential dangers. If you see anyone suspicious, eliminate them on the spot. *Do not* let Madam see you.”

“Yes, sir!” the spies replied to Bellis before moving out.

“Guardsmen, Madam is unlikely to recognize any of you, so you are to play the parts of commoners and escort her from more close by. Take care not to be discovered when you are near her. Make sure one of you doesn’t follow her for too long—switch every so often. Got it? Report to your posts.”

“Yes, sir!” the manor’s private guards replied to their captain’s orders. They would all fall into position on the street and casually pass the duke and duchess by as they went around town.

“Those of you staying behind in the manor, do not let on that Madam is going to be escorted.”

“Yes, sir!” the servants responded to Rohtas. There was something of a difference in their enthusiasm compared to the others. There was a faint warmth to their reply.

It would be a few more hours until Cercis and Viola’s date.

◆ ◆ ◆ Several days before the outing, the special ops division department ◆ ◆ ◆

“So, like, I heard the commander’s been seen around town stopping in the popular shops and stuff. Is it true? Do you guys know anything about this?” lieutenant commander Corydalis asked the other division members standing around the department.

“Oh, that. Yeah, it’s true. I heard he’s been seeking out the lady knights and the other women who work in the offices and asking them questions,” one of them offhandedly replied.

“The lady knights and the office girls... What’s he up to now?” Corydalis muttered, his head already swimming.

“It must be for something to do with his wife, right?”

“Duh, everyone knew that already.”

“That was the first time I’d ever seen the commander act so... devoted. I guess people really *can* change,” everyone started offering up, one by one, leaving Corydalis to press on the inner corners of his eyes to alleviate an oncoming headache.

“Sure, that’s got to be it.” *His wife does like commoner stuff*, Corydalis thought, as he remembered the times he’d met Viola before.

The old Cercis didn’t consider what his friends or partners might like, instead usually shopping and dining at high-end establishments catering to the elite, so he had never actually bothered to ask the people he knew for advice on what was popular. The young ladies he used to court and lovers he had fancied for longer periods were both fans of that kind of extravagant lifestyle from the start.

Cercis now, however, was completely different. Now it appeared as though he was scoping out stores his luxury-adverse wife might actually enjoy.

“...Where would a one-percenter like him even shop? I mean, all the popular places in town are geared towards commoners, right?” Corydalis muttered.

“I’m positive he’ll go to Dandelion’s Bakery and Lemon Myrtle’s

Confectionary!” Chamomile declared, brimming with confidence.

“What makes you so sure?” Corydalis looked dubious, despite Chamomile’s energetic thumbs-up and wink.

“Because we’re talking about the most popular stores right now, and those two are it! Everyone’s recommending them to each other,” Angelica replied with a smile that shone almost as brightly as her silver hair.

“What do you mean ‘everyone’?”

“As in, all of the people the commander asked,” Alkanna said, choosing to speak up just then.

“Haaah? And how do ya know all that?” Corydalis still did not understand them and furrowed his brows in skepticism.

“Because everyone starts chit-chatting whenever something strange happens.”

“At some point, all the women in the military just put their heads together.”

“And since something was clearly up, we held an emergency gossip session.”

“Exactly!” The Bombshell Trio all agreed.

There weren’t very many women employed by the military, even including the knights and the office workers. As a result, not only did their sense of sisterhood span across units and departments, it functioned rather like a free-flowing pipe that connected all of them. This intelligence network was reputed to be the fastest, most accurate, and most secure of any in existence. Women in the military are in a league all their own.

“So after we all exchanged info, we had overwhelming evidence that those two stores were it.”

“No one reported that the commander was conducting this research with other women, though,” Corydalis commented.

“Of course not. It would be social suicide if he were to just walk up to and start chatting with all sorts of random women and there was some kind of misunderstanding!”

“Mmmhmm. Not to mention, he rarely ignores the intel that we military ladies have to give.”

“Which is why there can only be two places he’s going to go!” the three of them said triumphantly.

“You ladies freak me out a little.” Corydalis’ entire face spasmed. “ ...Bakery aside, though, I think I heard that the line for that confectioner’s gets awfully long,” he said once he regained control of his facial muscles.

“Right. I heard that the confectioner’s shop and the associated cafe next door both feature eat-in only sweets, so you almost have to wait half the day just to get in. My girlfriend pestered me to go on my day off—and, boy, did we have to wait,” one of the knights testified.

The lieutenant commander folded his arms.

“I see. So then chances are high that the commander won’t even get in if he goes,” Corydalis concluded before letting his imagination run wild for a moment. *What a laugh, just imaging a queue packed full of snobby dukes. That’ll never happen. This is Cercis we’re talkin’ about. Wonder if he’ll use his status to get in. Nah, his wife wouldn’t take that lying down.*

“It would serve the commander right if he had to stand in line, but I’d feel so bad if Madam had to wait in that line all day!” one of the lady knights said piteously.

“You’ve got that right. He’d just want to ditch her and go in.”

“Or what if Madam didn’t feel well while waiting in line and passed out?! I know that’s unlikely to happen, but I can’t think of anything worse!” The Bombshell Trio began to spiral into sorrow, then angst, and then finally panic. They scorned Cercis but positively treasured Viola.

“You guys are acting like standing in line is literal torture. Standin’ around might make for a nice time for a couple,” Corydalis retaliated. *How’d they start with waitin’ in line and end with losing consciousness?*

“Wow, Lieutenant Commander, what are you, a little girl?”

“Ooooh, you want some ice for that burn?”

“LMAO.”

“Wait a minute, Lieutenant Commander doesn’t even have a girlfriend! Despite being friends with *us*!” one of the knights wheezed while the others laughed. “Ouch, oh god, my stomach hurts!”

“Can it! All of you!” Corydalis yelled as his face turned as red as a tomato before recovering and smirking. “Grrrrr... Hmph. ...I have to admit, though, I would like to see the look on his face while he’s on a date. I’d kill to see that.”

“Yes, yes, we would too!” came the loud reply.

“Now, not that I’d doubt that a *duke* of all people couldn’t handle himself on a simple date, but no matter how nice of a town this is, it can’t hurt to be a little extra careful, right? So I think we all ought to escort him!” Corydalis proposed after another speedy recovery.

“Good thinking!”

Now that Corydalis had successfully roped the others in, they’d gone straight into full-on conspiracy mode. Still, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves all the while.

“Here’s one possibility. The confectioner’s is packed, but there’s some hoodlums lying in wait. Commander and his wife are sitting ducks.”

“They sure would be!”

“There, see? I’m thinkin’... if we reserve the whole cafe, disguise ourselves as customers, and secure the perimeter, then there’d be no space for bad guys! That would make it easier to guard him,” Corydalis suggested as a slick grin spread across his face.

“Ohhh! That’s a great idea! So we’d just take over the cafe!”

“Plus, we’d get to eat some of the most popular cakes right now!”

“Two birds with one stone, guys!”

The whole division was in agreement, although their motives differed between them.

“Now that we’ve settled that, we just need to come up with a plan to make

the reservation. First, we'll need to find out when he's going."

"Me, me! Lieutenant Commander!"

"What is it, Chamomile?" Corydalis asked, whipping his hand through the air to point at the blonde.

"Taking the military's schedule into consideration, I suspect that the day of the date will be on the commander's next day off, which also happens to be a public holiday."

"You're almost certainly correct. He's unlikely to let that chance pass him by, since he's leaving for a campaign soon after," agreed Corydalis.

"Indeed."

"Now for the time..."

"I would think sometime in the afternoon."

"Why is that, Angelica?" Corydalis cocked his head at Angelica's conclusion.

"Because I told the commander that I thought it would be nice to go to Lemon Myrtle's for afternoon tea when he was asking me about shops!"

That would be a first—our blue-blooded Cercis going on a normal-person date. It makes sense, then, that he'd take a commoner, or at least someone who goes to those places, at their word, Corydalis figured.

"Good job, guys! Operation Cafe Occupation is a go! I'm sure you'll all be there. Or at least as many as the place can seat. First come, first served, as they say," he then announced to the others.

"What? But I have worrrrk."

"Lucky you! That's my day off! I'll have to convince my husband to go!"

"I'm off that day, too! ...Wonder if I'll have the time to find a date..."

Corydalis' announcement was met with an eruption of voices, some happy, some not so much.

"One more thing: come dressed in a good disguise! And bring someone else with you, for sure. Real men don't go to cute confectioner's shops alone! I don't wanna see that, either! So all you poor schmucks without girlfriends or wives,

bring someone. I don't care if it's your sister or even your mom. *Do not* bring another guy. That'll just make it weird. If we don't have enough people for a reservation, we can even bring people from the other departments."

"Roger!"

...And thus the chivalric order seized control of Lemon Myrtle's Confectioner's.

And then came the day of the duke and duchess' outing. All was well until midway through, with the division heartily enjoying spying on... er, *guarding* the couple, but their occupation of the cafe was discovered soon enough when Viola spotted Chamomile.

Incidentally, the Fisalis manor's own private guards were waiting outside the premises the entire time. They had disguised themselves as patrons standing in line. Corydalis happened to notice the captain of Cercis' guards when he glanced outside and gave them a little nod.

"Everyone wanted to try the dine-in only cakes they have here, but didn't want to have to wait in line... so we thought, why not just reserve the place for the whole squad? Look at it this way—we can protect the two of you at the same time!" Corydalis explained, left with little other choice after being found out.

"We don't need your protection."

"You don't need to say it that harshly."

"But why today of all days? You could have made the reservation for any other day."

"Well, no. We all decided that if a certain VIP customer was coming today, we had to come, too."

"And who is that customer, might I ask?"

"You, of course!"

At that very moment, the whole division turned around in their chairs, with big smiles on their faces, to face Cercis and Viola. Cercis held his head in his hands.



◆ ◆ ◆ Thus Spake the Shopkeepers ◆ ◆ ◆

☞ The Patisserie's Statement ☞

"What's that? You want to reserve the whole shop for a dessert party? Yes, we can certainly do that."

An order of knights made a reservation earlier as a treat for their boss and his wife. Which department were they from? I believe they said they were a special operations division.

Oh, you've heard of them! Yes, Duke Fisalis and his wife paid us a visit. You'd like me to tell you about it? Well, sure.

You had better believe I was surprised when those knights suddenly appeared and asked to rent out the place. We hadn't even been in the capital for six months, so no one had ever made reservations for a party before. They instructed me to reserve the whole cafe from just after noon until early evening, to make sure that the best seats would be saved for the duke and duchess, and to have plenty of cakes and sweets ready to serve. At first I wasn't sure what the "best seats" actually were, but I understood what they meant when the day of the party finally came: it was a surprise party.

The plan was to do something the boss and his wife would enjoy. Golly, just seeing folks doing something nice like that for their boss made me feel all warm inside. I was in awe over how much they must have idolized their boss to do that for him.

Needless to say, I put all my skill into those pastries to make sure that gentleman was treated right! Then again, I was in the back the whole time, so I don't actually know exactly what happened on the shop floor. If you'd like a more detailed account, why don't you ask one of the staff?

☞ The Hostess' Statement ☞

What was it like that day? Let's see, er... the knights all filed in, and then the man at the front of the line turned to me and asked me, "Where would the best seats in the house be?" if I recall correctly.

I answered, "Those over there, where you can see the flower beds in the

park,” and pointed to the spot by the window.

“I see. You guys hear that? Leave that table empty!” the man called back to the knights trailing behind him.

It was a mystery to me why they wanted to leave the best seats open, but then he said, “There should be two more people coming in a while—an outrageously attractive man and really cute girl.” Then he asked, “When they get here, could you make sure they sit there?”

That was when I understood that the handsome man was the guest of honor, and that the knights were saving the best seats for him.

I told him I would make sure, and then asked, “Will I know when I see them who the people you’re waiting for are?”

“Yeah, I think you will. There’s not many people who look as good as him.”

“All right, then. I’ll do as you asked.”

I was honestly kind of excited to see someone that gorgeous☆

I had been instructed earlier not to put up any signs saying that the shop has been reserved for a private party, so it got a little tedious having to turn away every customer who wanted to come in. Right after I almost got into a fight with an angry customer arguing that we ‘shoulda put a sign up if we can’t come in!’, the knights stepped in to help me. Thank goodness.

Ah, why don’t you let us put a ‘reserved for private party’ sign? It’s no fun having to turn customers away.

I was starting to think I might put up a sign anyway when I heard someone say, “Oh, there’s already a lot of people in there,” and quickly put on my customer service face. When I turned around, however, I swear I gasped in shock.

Like, I couldn’t help it—the man who was standing there was just so... stunning. It was like Prince Charming had just climbed out of a fairy tale.

“Do you have a table for two?” he asked, as I dumbly stared in admiration that such a person could not only exist but was actually right in front of me. His smile had me absolutely smitten. Even his voice is dreamy, I realized, when his

question yanked me back to reality. I noticed then that there was a cute girl behind him.

It had to be them. I looked around the man just to be sure, and yep, she was definitely cute.

I was so excited to have such a lovely, well-dressed lady in the shop, too! The two of them looked like a pair of dolls, the girl on the man's arm. It felt like I was witnessing a genetic miracle!

Pretending to check to see if we had any open tables, I spotted the man who had given me my instructions earlier. He gave me a subtle nod. These were our guests, no doubt about it.

"Yes, we have seats for two. Right this way, please," I said, leading them to the table we had saved for them.

Even though it wasn't far to the table, the handsome man escorted the lady like it was the most natural thing in the world. I couldn't hold back a smile when I saw. He really cared about her. I was too choked up to be jealous.

What was weird, though, was when everyone there pretended not to recognize the couple and just continued to enjoy their cake and tea. It was like each table had their own non-intervention policy or something. Despite this, they all watched the attractive couple like hawks without saying a thing to them.

It seemed like the only ones who didn't notice were the attractive couple themselves. I wondered what the heck was going on as I joined in on watching them, albeit inconspicuously. They didn't seem like anything other than a pair of people deeply in love.

After a while, though, the couple finally caught on; the man in particular held his head in his hands in exasperation. The young lady was more or less carried off by the pretty older women.

Once everyone revealed themselves, they no longer ignored the couple, and the shop transitioned into a party atmosphere. Orders came flying in one after another, so we ended up just bringing out all the cakes we had!

I continued to observe the couple as we hurriedly brought out cake, tea, and

drinks (we had a small amount of liquor ready, all drinks that went well with sweets). I really couldn't take my eyes off of them for some reason.

Some time later, when it seemed like Mr. Handsome was pestering the cute young lady for some cake, she reluctantly cut off a piece and offered it to him on her fork.

And then! I don't know if she told him to do it, but he ate it directly off her fork!

Almost everyone there gasped when they saw that. I froze, as one does in such a situation.

The happy couple, however, continued on unperturbed. The young lady gazed at Mr. Handsome in awe. He was clearly having fun.

Aaaaahhhh! Thank you, god, for bestowing this gift upon mine eyes!

Everyone unfroze and went back to watching them with grins plastered across their faces, but the couple themselves—completely unaware of what had just occurred around them—just continued to partake of the goodies.

My eyes quickly recovered because they were good looking (it would have been another story if they were ugly), but then, I started to feel like the sappiness I was witnessing was... giving me heartburn? Er, no, that's rude of me to say about customers. Regardless, the way I was able to stare without them realizing it was a true show of skill, I feel.

I found out from the owner later that Mr. Handsome was the so-called 'Fine Duke Fisalis.' I hadn't ever seen him before, only heard the rumors, but I believed the owner. The duke was positively immaculate! His wife, as well—she was so lovely that all I could think was how they were such a perfect couple!

Having seen how diligently the duke watched out for his wife, I fear all I'll ever dream about anymore is finding a man like that for myself!

...Eh? I should throw a private party here myself? To land a man? Well, if I did, I'd want to invite Duke Fisalis☆

Side Story

Blow Your Worries Away!

We were just barely unable to avoid starting a war with Aurantia, the kingdom on our southern border. We still had some time before hostilities broke out in earnest, but there was a heap left for us, the special ops division, to do. We had to complete as much groundwork and investigation into the rapidly changing nation as we could. After the war started for real, on the other hand, we wouldn't actually be all that busy.

At any rate, since I would be away from home for a long time, I needed a way to precisely convey that to Viola. It figured I would have to leave for a campaign just when the distance between us was finally starting to close.

Would I just be pestering her? Is that all this would be?

I had even heard whispers that I'd taken a new lover! And that it was Angelica?! Impossible.

What was that gossipy tradesman going to do to fix that?! When Rohtas had informed me, I clutched at my sword, overcome by the urge to flee in spite of myself. ...I deserve a reward for simply crumpling up a single report.

I couldn't be away from home for so long with this misunderstanding in the air, so I leapt into action to clear my name. I'd find a way to resolve Viola's misunderstanding and then leave for the campaign with a clear mind; having to leave now with this anxiety between us would make for an extremely lonely journey.

"I have to leave again for the south."

"The south?"

"Yes. The situation has deteriorated a bit down there. We've been keeping an eye on it for a long time."

"Really? I had no idea."

"That's understandable—the situation hasn't been made public yet. The only

ones who currently know are the military and the government's top brass."

"And this is an actual campaign, not a business trip?"

"Er, well. It looks like there's been increased activity in that area lately, and considering what we've already gathered from intel..."

"Does this mean there's going to be a war?"

The sparkle in Viola's sapphire blue eyes disappeared when I told her about the campaign, and she trembled in what seemed to be anxiety.

Is she worried about me? I know it's not nice to think like this, but I'd be thrilled if she was.

In that moment, though, I resolved to dispel her worries. I schooled my features so I wouldn't give away how happy I was.

"It's far enough in the future that we can't be sure at this point, but it's rather likely. That's why we're heading down there." *Although, honestly, it's just Aurantia picking a fight, and I wouldn't worry too much about it. It's a real pain in the neck.*

This time around, however, we know based on our current investigation that they're going to come out in pretty large numbers, so we'd be in for a rough time if we confronted them recklessly. We've got to gather all the intel we can and be diligent in our preliminary preparations.

Ugh, I get the feeling this is going to drag on. We have reason to believe that Aurantia has been preparing for a while, so we don't have the luxury of taking our time, but who knows how long it'll take once the fighting actually begins. If Aurantia manages to start an all-out war, it's going to be a hard battle for us, too. If that happens, it might even turn into a drawn-out conflict like the one that forced us to delay our wedding. Great... now I'm worried that I'll have to leave Viola while she's worried.

I unintentionally sighed as I ruminated gloomily over what was to come. When Viola discerned how my expression had darkened, her own features hardened. Her eyes had some fight in them when she gazed back at me. Her sweet face seemed to grant me strength as she stared at me, fists clenched.

Damn it! What a cruel fate it is that drives me so far from her now!

I wrapped my hand around her delicate fist and asked of her, in hopes that it would ease her worry, “Viola, I’m trusting you to look after the place while I’m away. Keep everything nice for me, for when I come back.”

Viola’s eyes widened and she put her hand over her mouth. But I was not expecting what she said next.

“Of course! I’m not alone, after all. I’ve got Rohtas, and Dahlia and Mimosa, Bellis, Cartham, and everyone else, so I’m sure I’ll be fine. We’ll *aaaaaall* look after the manor!” she bluntly replied, smiling.

I’m not exaggerating when I say that, for a split second, it felt like a kick to the chest. I barely kept myself from hanging my head in surrender.

...So, she’ll be fine without me, then. She has the servants, then.

I was speechless. I know she didn’t mean to, but her words really hurt. It must have shown on my face, because Viola’s look intensified, she clenched her fist harder, and followed up with: “I won’t be lonely, I mean. So don’t worry about me, focus on your work instead!”

But it’s so hard for me to leave you! How can you possibly feel that way?!

I’m tearing up a little. I’m... Just a moment.

Does her sense of happiness simply not include me? My presence in her life is only going to grow weaker once I’m away from her and the house. That’s the first step to disappearing completely from someone’s life, right? I can’t imagine a happy life without Viola, but she doesn’t want me in hers? How can that be?!

I felt something inside me snap.

Worry over a drawn-out battle? That won’t be an issue after our brutal training regime. We’ll end it in no time. We’ll show them! We’ll beat them to a pulp!

“Damn it! I can’t let this turn into some drawn-out battle! I’m gonna do whatever it takes to wrap all this up as quickly as possible, so please! Wait for me!” *We won’t be the ones to draw this thing out, at least!*

My long-gone motivation welled up inside me once more, and I let my fighting

spirit shine through as I assured her that the battle would be brief.

I'm coming for you, Aurantia!

—

“Corydalis, where’s the map of Aurantia?”

“Right here,” he replied, handing it to me so I could spread it out on the floor.

We were in a conference room in the special ops department at the Royal Palace. I was earnestly hammering through my work, having decided to do everything in my power as perfectly as possible, in order to keep the battle short and fulfill my promise to Viola. It was a few days before I was to leave for the campaign and time was not on my side.

We would add notes to the map of Aurantia whenever we made contact with them, but even with the decent number of notes we had, it still wasn’t enough. *We need more data. Trails used by animals that would allow us to disappear in the dead of night, secret routes for undercover investigations, escape routes for whenever we might need one...*

“We still don’t have enough detailed information. The info for this area here is old, right? And this area is still blank. Those roads were captured by Aurantia—they’ve laid a trap here. There’s no escape if you’re caught. There should still be a few narrow roads and trails they’re not using,” I said as I pointed to spots on the map.

“Are you for real? This is already pretty in-depth, and you want us to modify it *more*?” Corydalis looked at the map with an expression of disbelief.

You’re not wrong. It is a pretty detailed map, but we need to develop new routes. I swore I’d make this a short war and an easy win. I’ll use any means necessary to lead us to victory!

“Yes. Dispatch three or four people to investigate onsite. After that, make sure everyone has memorized this map,” I told him, pointing to various areas.

“...Even this wasn’t enough for him...” the division members whimpered, tears streaming down their faces as they looked at the map on the floor. They had recorded even the narrowest of village roads, so much so that the lines on

the map looked like a fishing net. But no, the commander still wanted more.

“After adding in the animal trails, the map’s already nearly solid black!”

“Just finding the animal paths was a challenge.”

I could hear their muttered complaints, but didn’t really care.

“Understood,” Corydalis replied defeatedly. *Don’t give me that look.*

“Now that that’s out of the way...”

“What’s next?” he asked as he put the map away.

“Have you noticed a slight uptick in deserters from the Aurantians?”

“Huh?!” Corydalis dropped the map he had just neatly rolled up. I didn’t think it was *that* surprising.

“According to our investigations, it seems as though their attack will fail, and their king and queen won’t take any sort of action. So wouldn’t you think that would lead to an increase in dissatisfaction among the people?” I explained my reasoning behind my instructions.

“Definitely.”

“If the numbers of people newly willing to cooperate are on the rise, that’s in our favor.”

“True.”

“So I want you to come up with a plan to convince more Aurantian citizens to come over to our side.”

“...Understood.”

“Targeting people with military connections would be best, I think.”

“For Pete’s sake! Why does he keep raising the bar...?!”

“Did you say something, Corydalis?”

“No, not a word,” the lieutenant commander fibbed, looking off to the side.

I sent him off before turning to the other order members.

“I assume you all want this meaningless war to be over with soon, too. You’ll

need to give me one-hundred-ten percent in order to achieve that. Show me what you've got, today," I told them, looking over their faces.

"...It seems like the one who wants this over the most is the commander."

"For sure," Corydalis mumbled.

Cue more audible whispering.

"Did someone say something?"

"No, not a word."

"That's what I thought. I take it you have no objections, then. Go and get started."

"...Yes, sir. Seriously, though, this is brutal. Honest to god *brutal*. I mean, I get wanting to finish the war quickly, but we've already been providing pretty darn accurate intel. The man says he wants more, though. ...Ugh, there's no point in going on about it, though. Uh, let's just do our best, I guess. So, everyone stop your whining and select members for your missions."

"Yes, sir!" the order members responded.

I watched as Corydalis and the others, with Corydalis still grumbling under his breath, left the conference room before picking up one of the many papers piled on my desk. *Now to summarize all the information we've gathered. I'll look it over carefully so I can come up with the most effective strategy.*

I, for one, found engrossing myself in my work delightful.

"...And then later, there should be some new intel coming in to work with."

A few hours after the meeting:

I had worked my way through the thick stacks of paper and finally had a clear desk. From them, I had worked out the best possible plan.

Er, I may need to rework it depending on the new intel, but for the time being, it's the best. Having this plan eases my worries about the war considerably. All that's left now is finding a way to make sure Viola never forgets about me! I need to give her something to remember me by for the period I'll be away! Not that there's anything wrong with her quiet, relaxed life around the manor, but it

lacks impact.

What if I took her on another outing?

I feel like I made a lot of mistakes on our last date, but this time around, I've reflected on them and I can come up with all sorts of plans.

As far as what the servants told me goes, Viola likes humble, simple things. I wonder if she'd like just a carefree walk around the capital, then? I've never done such a thing, though, so I'm clueless about what sort of shops we should stop at.

Should I ask Corydalis? No, he'd just make it into a new joke. I need to stop asking him things altogether.

What about Celosia? No, his tastes are basically the same as mine, so there'd be no point.

I could ask one of the other knights, maybe, I thought, deciding right then to go and take a break. On the way to the break room where we often gathered, I spotted several women who worked in the chivalric order offices headed toward me down the hall. They look to be about Viola's age, maybe a couple of years older. That's it! I bet their tastes are closer to Viola's than any of the knights. Maybe I should ask them. I know that some of the female staff are from the noble class, but by and large, most of them live common lives.

Realizing this, I made my way over to them and began to bombard them with questions.

"May I ask you ladies something?" I motioned to them.

"Commander Fisalis!" one of them gasped, managing to give a proper salute despite her surprise at my sudden question.

"If you're in the middle of something important, I can ask another time, but do any of you happen to know what stores around the capital are popular with young women right now?"

"Huh?"

"Popular stores. Around the capital?"

"Um..."

Their surprise was visible in their eyes; they'd probably never expected me to ask them a question like that.

"...Let's see. Lemon Myrtle's Confectionary is probably the most popular," one of the women replied after a moment of thought, placing her finger on her lip.

"Everything they make is absolutely delicious. There's always a huge line."

"It's no fun waiting in line, but the flavor of their food is definitely worth it," two others added.

"I see. Thank you," I replied in gratitude.

"Sorry we couldn't give you a better answer!" they all said.

I gave them a little bow before leaving them.

Hmm. Lemon Myrtle's, huh? I made a mental note of that.

"That went well. I'll see if I can find anyone else to ask." *It's no wonder intel gathering is my forte. They'll all see my true power now!*

Little did I know, but the office workers behind me had timidly crept away, whispering, 'Show us what now?', 'That's the second time he's made me jump now', and 'What's he planning on doing with the information we gave him?'

Also, I didn't realize it at the time, but the fact that I'd suddenly started approaching women I'd never spoken to before provoked some wild speculation amongst the staff. This led to an emergency gossip session, as their desire for answers reached fever pitch.

The day I was to leave for the campaign came at last.

I had gone on another date with Viola (which she really seemed to like!) through which I was sure I had successfully burned myself into her memory. It felt like a full-body refresh for both of us.

Still, I worried that I would eventually run out of juice on the war front in Viola's absence, so I told her, "I'd really like some handmade handkerchiefs from you. I think they'll help maintain my morale, and I'd keep them on me the entire time." I was referring to the ones she had made shortly after we were married. I recalled that they were incredibly well made.

But why did she do that? Or a better question would be, why was I such a jerk when I first moved back into the main house? I'm sorry, Viola!

"Handkerchiefs? Sure," Viola readily agreed. She then made me two dozen.

I want to have some spares—not because I plan on letting them get dirty, but because I want to display them!

I'd finished all the prep work to be done in the capital. My subordinates did excellently, too, in my opinion. In fact, they made so many additions to the map of Aurantia that it was all black, and we had to rush out an enlarged version. They really did give me one-hundred-ten percent!

"Time to roll out! Let's make this as short as possible!" I leapt onto my horse with renewed determination, his black coat shining in the sun.

"About that. I'm already exhausted, so I'd like to go home as soon as possible."

"Same here," agreed the rest of my knights.

"What was that?"

"Nothing! Let's all work our hardest so we can come home early! Huzzah!" they quickly backpedaled before giving a war cry and spurring their horses into a gallop.

I was deep in thought as various foliage and fauna rapidly passed us by. We were able to sufficiently prepare for the war. I'd strengthened my bonds to Viola. Or at least, I thought so. I was pretty sure that I had been able to calm her worries. All that remained was to execute my plans.

I'll end this war in no time at all!



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Can Someone Please Explain What’s Going On?! Volume 3

by Tsuredurebana

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A vibrant anime-style illustration of a wedding scene. In the center, a young man with brown hair in a dark blue suit with gold embroidery and a young woman with long pink hair in a pink dress stand together. To the left, a blonde woman in a purple dress and a brown-haired woman in a green dress look on. To the right, a silver-haired woman in a teal dress claps. The background features a large building with arched windows and large orange flowers in the top left. The bottom is decorated with yellow and pink flowers.

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

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

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