

Drudgery

Lynn Renard

This short story from Ellisar's perspective is the result of my wanting to know what an average day was like for him when he and Fye were still courting. Though the concept changed as I wrote it, I hope you enjoy this insight into his backstory! Its place in the timeline is the same summer in which Saria discovers magic.

Serenna waltzed into my room, twirling in her new dress. "Ellisar, how do I look?"

The gold of the gown and of the circlet she wore for special occasions accented her brown hair and the brown undertones of her skin, turning what some might consider a fault into an advantage.

"You outshine the sun," I said.

She giggled and stuck her tongue out at me. "I'm Father's star, remember?"

"How silly of me to forget." I posed. "And how do I look?"

She considered me, then adjusted my sword belt and the lay of my tunic. "Do you have a dark blue handkerchief to wear in your breast pocket? It would look better than all this silver on top of silver, even if they are different shades. I think you should get your black sword belt, too. And a sword with sapphires on the hilt to match the handkerchief. No gold."

I tempered my amused grin as I set about implementing her advice. Ten years old, and she already knew more about fashion than I did at eighteen. I swore the kid was a genius when it came to anything linguistic or artistic.

The door to our shared sitting room swung open with a *whoosh*.

"Is my star ready to be the belle of her first late-night ball?" Father called.

Serenna squealed and scurried out of my room. Buckling my new sword into place, I joined her in time to see the tears that sprang to Father's eyes. He ignored the white kitten twining between his ankles and just stared at Serenna.

"Father?" She stepped closer, frowning.

I nodded at my sister and smiled. "Mom was wearing something similar for one of her portraits, wasn't she?"

Aside from her coloring, which she and I had inherited from Father, she was the spitting image of the late Queen Celaena. For me, the similarities increased when Serenna painted. Not that I remembered our mother ever painting, but they both got that faraway look in their eyes. For Father, Serenna's resemblance was strongest when she dressed up.

"One of the few she'd had done before I met her." Father's voice was thick with emotion. "She was your age, star."

Serenna wrapped her arms around his waist.

He rubbed her back and cleared his throat. "There now, star, it's all right. Are you ready to go have some fun?"

She beamed. "Yes!"

He looked at me and nodded in approval. "You'd best not be late collecting Lady Fye."

"Yes, sire."

* * *

I held in a groan as I approached the suite Fye and her middle sister shared. 'Four hours,' I told myself. 'Midnight, and it will be over.' Until the next festivity. My knuckles barely connected with the door before it flew open, and Taenya beamed at me.

"Your Highness!" She sank into a deep curtsy.

I bowed. "Lady Taenya, you look lovely."

The words were automatic, but a quick, if belated, glance told me they were believable enough. She seemed more childish than Serenna, though, with the mash of swirling colors in her gown.

"Is Lady Fye ready?"

"She's in one of her moods," Taenya whispered, darting a glance over her shoulder. "You look like a moon faery prince. Since I look like a sun faery princess, we could go together instead of Fye."

"No."

'Diplomacy, Ellisar,' I could practically hear Father chide.

"Thank you, though," I added. "Please let her know I will wait here for her."

Taenya nodded, pouting, and closed the door in my face.

I sighed and leaned against the wall by the door. 'Four hours.'

Ten minutes later, I had taken to pacing. Taenya's escort had come, collected her, and gone on. When the door opened next, I tried to look as though I hadn't moved a muscle.

Fye curtsied. "I apologize for keeping you waiting, Your Highness."

I bowed. "You look beautiful, Lady Fye."

Both of our words were wooden, automatic. We'd done this same dance too many times to keep up the pretense that either of us actually wanted to be here.

I offered her my arm, and we walked to the ballroom in silence.

Fye wasn't terrible. If she were, I would have broken with her long ago, as I had with Jandar. Father wanted us to associate. I complained but obeyed.

'Not quite four hours,' I reminded myself.

Fye arranged her features into a smile before we officially entered the ballroom. I didn't bother. Father gruffly allowed that a placid mask was good enough.

Before people could swarm us, I turned to Fye. "May I have this dance?"

She nodded and let me lead her to the relative safety of the dance floor.

"Princess Serenna is present for the first time this evening, yes?" Fye's tone held a steely determination.

"Yes. She's very excited. Are your siblings all present this evening?"

And so it began. We went through the motions of conversation, pretending to be interested in each other's lives for the sake of anyone watching. I'm not sure how many people we fooled, but the general consensus was that we made a handsome couple.

Father would toss Serenna our way later, I was sure. We were always more convincing around her.

A few dances later, a clock struck the half hour. Fye asked for a rest, and I fetched her something to eat and drink.

"Your Highness! Prince Ellisar!"

I turned to greet Lady Faehana as the older woman maneuvered her bulk through the crowd, waving her fan at me. She curtsied, and I bowed, taking care not to upset the snack in my hands.

“Is not my Fye radiant tonight, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, my lady. I’m taking this to her now.” I raised the food I held. “So if you would excuse me?”

In my haste to leave, I nearly crashed into someone else.

He helped steady the food I nearly dropped. “Strawberry tarts. Did you know they are her favorite?” Jandar grinned, one hand on my plate, the other arm wrapped around Lady Someone-or-other. “You charmer, Highness.”

A muscle in my jaw twitched, and I moved the plate out of his grasp without backing up. Jandar liked to get in people’s personal spaces. It made the couple inches’ difference in our heights noticeable: He was now taller than me. If it was an intimidation tactic, I wasn’t going to let it work. I made eye contact but reminded myself that part of a prince’s job was diplomacy.

“Your observation is duly noted, Lord Jandar,” I ground out. “Please don’t make me keep the lady waiting.”

His grin widened, and he bowed out of my way. The lady on his arm curtsied simultaneously.

I made it back to Fye without much further trouble. She was smiling warmly at Serenna, who was describing the antics of Rei, the white kitten Father had given her for her birthday last winter. Fye barely glanced at me as she took the plate and glass.

I sat on Serenna’s other side, not noticing I was smiling until a minute later.

‘Three hours,’ I was thinking when Lady Faehana pushed her thirteen-year-old son toward us.

He made a face. She glared and jabbed a finger at us. He scowled and stomped our way.

“Don’t you look dashing, Ralnor.” Fye tweaked her brother’s collar when he stopped before us.

He squirmed out of her reach and glared at Serenna, who shrank back. “Would you like to dance, Your Highness?”

Serenna looked at me, eyes wide.

“Ralnor,” Fye chided. “That’s no way to treat a lady.”

I opened my mouth to ask Serenna to dance with me instead, but then someone shoved Ralnor aside. I blinked.

The person who took Ralnor’s place was... Ralnor? Wearing different clothes and a hat that hid the ends of swept-up hair, the newcomer grinned and held a hand out to Serenna. “Will you dance with me, Your Highness?”

Serenna blinked at the second Ralnor, blinked at me, and, at my nod, accepted the proffered hand. They scurried off to the dance floor. Serenna burst into giggles a few steps away. The first Ralnor heaved a sigh of relief and scampered away.

Fye was smiling as she watched the kids dancing.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Your mother lets Lady Riniya dress up like Lord Ralnor?”

She looked back at me, and her smile dropped for a moment before she renewed it. It looked stiff now. “Of course not.” Then, barely audible, “The rest of us do.”

I blinked. “Did you just make a joke?”

She turned back to her food. “That’s no way to speak to a lady, Your Highness.”

And the frigid Lady Fye was back.

‘Three hours,’ I reminded myself with a glance at the clock.

As Fye finished eating, I caught a glimpse of Father a few feet away. He raised his eyebrows at me and made a small gesture at the room around us, indicating that we needed to mingle better.

I motioned to a servant to take Fye's plate and glass, stood, and offered her my arm again. "Shall we make the rounds, Lady Fye?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

We walked. We made nice with each other and with the people around us. We danced once more with each other and several times with other people.

'Two hours.'

Serenna brought eleven-year-old Fumia Venra to me between dances. Fumia obviously hoped for a dance, so I complied, then spent the next few dances unable to escape. Taenya finally offered me a way out by dancing with her, which was almost as painful. I managed to politely dump her in favor of my sister. Hopefully, no one saw my relief.

"Getting tired, Serenna?" I asked.

She barely kept her eyes open. "No, I'm still wide awake." She broke off to cover a huge yawn. "I could dance all night."

I grinned. "How about one with me?"

"Okay."

I picked her up and went through the steps for both of us. By the end, she was limp in my arms, head on my shoulder, breathing deeply.

As I carried her off the dance floor, her princess circlet started to slip. Fye caught and replaced it. My hope for an early departure dissipated when Father met us.

"Here, I'll take her." He held out his arms. "Wrap up come midnight."

"Yes, sire," I said. 'One hour. Just make it through this last hour.' The clock taunted me, taking its time to toll the full eleventh hour.

I turned back to the ball with Fye and considered my next steps.

She leaned into me. I stiffened.

"Humor me a moment," she whispered.

A glance around the room told me Lady Faehana was watching us, swelled with pride, as she spoke to Lady Venra.

While I waited for Fye to move back, Lady Venra raised an eyebrow at us and said something to Fye's mother. Lady Faehana glowered, snapped a reply, and marched to us.

"A dance, Lady Fye?" I whispered.

"Yes."

We barely escaped her mother.

"What do you suppose that was about?" I asked as we glided in time with the orchestra and moving couples.

"'Tis hardly unusual, Your Highness, for a girl Princess Serenna's age to depart a ball early."

I let my gaze slide over her head, trying not to scowl. 'Less than an hour now.'

We danced twice more, and Fye resorted to talking about the weather. Then we made one last round amongst the guests before I would get to signal the end of the ball.

Lady Faehana finally caught up. "Your Highness, where is your father? I must speak with King Belanor immediately about a marvelous idea I just had!"

"Father has already escorted Serenna out, my lady," I said.

His voice echoed in my head: 'Diplomacy, Ellisar.'

I braced myself. “May I offer my assistance?”

“Why, yes, I believe you will find it most agreeable! All the hustle and bustle of court must be as draining for you as for my poor Fye.”

Where was the clock? Ah, nearly time!

“Fortunately, my beloved parents wrote to me the other day how they missed having young people about to liven their home. I’m certain your father could spare you for a brief vacation at their estate this winter, and Fye would be delighted to reintroduce you to her grandparents.”

She prattled on about the details, and my stomach sank.

A winter vacation would mean a mid-autumn departure from the palace and no turning back until spring thaw reopened roads properly. At a country estate with only Fye and her family.

Father had been pushing Fye and me together for years. I had little hope he would veto the idea.

The clock struck midnight.