

"What do you mean?"

"Quick," said the Fairy Godmother, "run and fetch me a pumpkin!"

"A pumpkin," Cinderella laughed. "Now, I really must be dreaming!"

She hurried to the garden and returned with the best she could find. The Fairy Godmother clapped her hands.

Cinderella gasped!

Before her eyes, the pumpkin turned into a masterfully gilded coach!

A group of nearby grasshoppers were now the most splendid horses. A tiny grey mouse became a portly coachman. And where moments earlier two fireflies had sat, two elegant butlers now stood!

"But how did you ... This is ..." Cinderella spluttered.



As she stumbled through her sentence, the Fairy Godmother clapped her hands once more.

Two doves appeared, carrying the glistening dress her brothers had made.

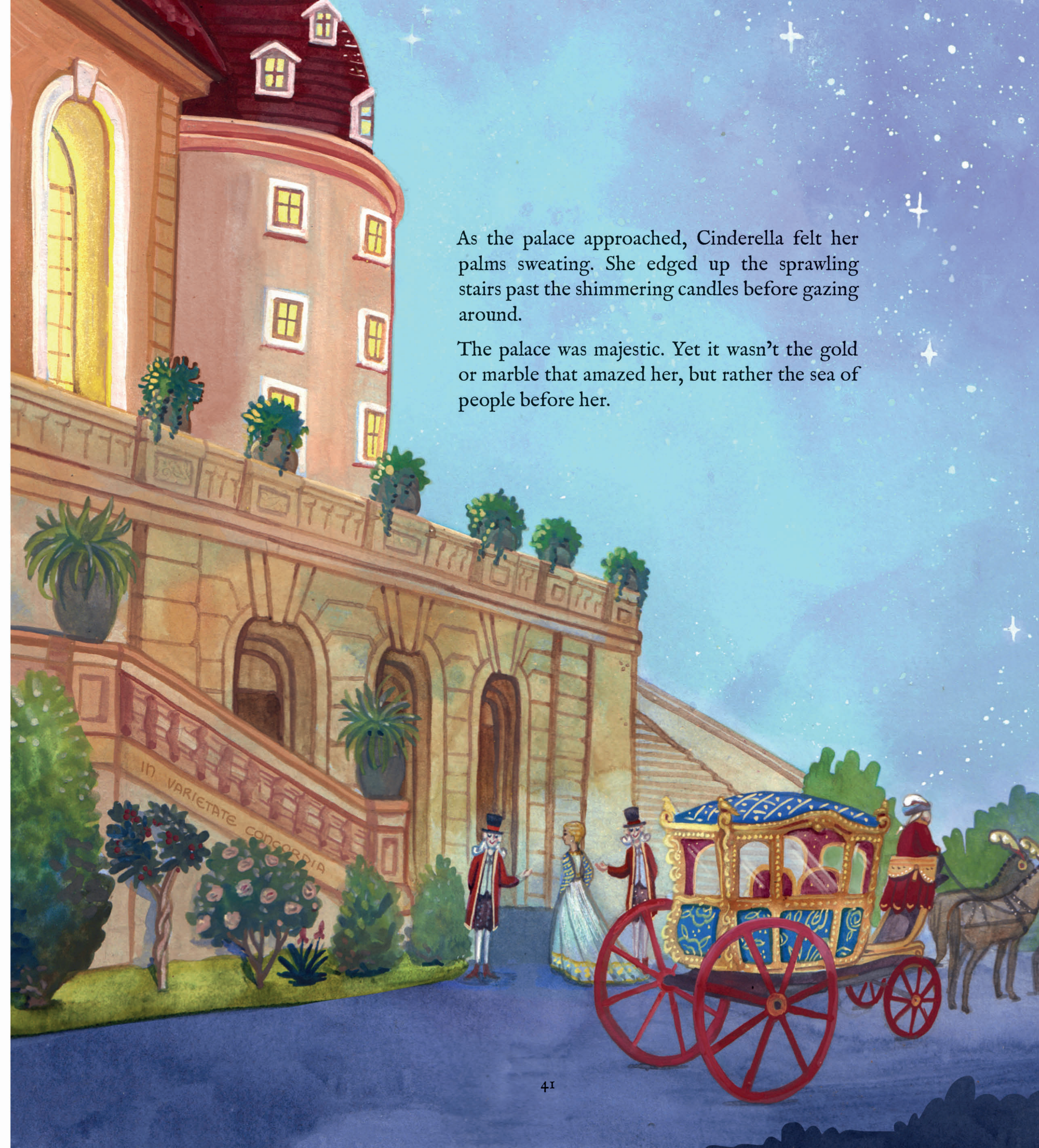
After dropping it into her arms, they transformed into a most marvellous pair of glass slippers.



“There - I knew we’d find a way!” chuckled the Fairy Godmother. “Just be back before the clock strikes twelve. The transformations only last until then.”

“Oh, and give my regards to the grumpy old Duke,” she giggled as she faded from sight.

Her heart pounding and her mind spinning, Cinderella took a deep breath and stepped into the carriage.



As the palace approached, Cinderella felt her palms sweating. She edged up the sprawling stairs past the shimmering candles before gazing around.

The palace was majestic. Yet it wasn't the gold or marble that amazed her, but rather the sea of people before her.

Dressed in the finest garments, guests represented not only every corner of the land but seemingly all parts of the world. Cinderella had never seen anything like it - it was simply **beautiful!**

Sounds of laughter and joy filled the hall and wonderful smells filled the air. Cinderella glided across the marble floor, unaware of the admiring looks cast her way.



Only when the music stopped was she shaken from her trance. Looking around, Cinderella froze! She saw a tall, wiry figure in the distance, staring right at her.

Instead of walking across the ballroom and confronting the Duke, Cinderella panicked. Needing air and space, she ran out of the Great Hall.

Eventually, she slumped down at the foot of a secluded staircase. The gentle sea breeze and the sound of waves crashing against the cliffs below gradually calmed her nerves.



"I see someone has discovered my favourite hideaway," came a warm voice from behind. *"Do you mind if I join?"* Cinderella shuffled across, still lost in thought.

"Thank you, I needed to escape for a moment. How are you finding the Ball?"

"It's incredible," replied Cinderella, looking down at the sea. *"I could never have imagined such splendour! Why, Princess Iliana must be the happiest person in the land."*

"Oh, I wish," came a sigh. *"If anything, I sometimes feel trapped in this great castle and its prison of expectations."*

Cinderella turned and looked at the figure beside her for the first time.



"Princess Iliana!? I'm so sorry. I -" Cinderella began, but she trailed off as their eyes met.

Time stood still.

Cinderella couldn't move. This time she wasn't frozen in fear, but transfixed as a wondrous warmth wrapped her in bliss and sent flutters through her heart.

Neither could break the other's gaze. Eventually, the blushing Princess broke the silence.



"I must head back inside to be seen," Iliana smiled. *"Would you do me the honour and join me for a dance?"*

"Dance with you?" Cinderella gulped. *"The Princess? In front of all?! Oh, I am not worthy."*

"Not worthy?" the Princess laughed, taking Cinderella's hand. *"What does that even mean? Come!"*



When they entered, a great hush echoed around the hall. All eyes turned towards the pair, yet Cinderella could only see Iliana. Instead of her nagging self-doubt, she felt a quiet confidence build with every step she took.

The pair mesmerized all around and spent the evening laughing, dancing, and joking as if they'd known each other all their lives. As she twisted and twirled through the crowd, Cinderella's glass slippers sparkled.

Adrian and Sasha looked on in delight while the King and Queen beamed, their hearts warming at the sight of their enthralled and smitten daughter.

The Duke was nowhere to be seen.

As the orchestra struck up their final tune, Iliana pulled Cinderella away from the Ball. Cheeks glowing, the Princess turned to Cinderella.

"My head is spinning! Who are you? How have we never met before?"



Pulled from her magical trance, Cinderella hesitated. The Duke's mean comments rushed back. She took a deep breath, ready to reply, when the faint strokes of midnight rang out. Remembering the Fairy Godmother's parting words, she panicked!

"I'm so sorry, I must go! Just know tonight has brought me more joy than I thought possible," replied Cinderella, hugging the Princess and kissing her on the cheek.

Before Iliana could reply, Cinderella turned and rushed towards her carriage, stumbling down the steps.

The Princess desperately tried to follow, but it was too late. Cinderella had gone.

Gazing longingly down the stairs, Iliana noticed something shimmering in the moonlight.

Walking closer, she realised it was one of Cinderella's mysterious glass slippers.

It must have fallen off!

