

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

10. Priority Departure

We exit the train station and pass into the airship hangar that's attached to it. A cavernous, immense building that can hold a single airship at a time for servicing and storage, but today is empty. A scant few airwomen and airmen mill about the sides of the hangar, toiling away on the boilers and steam generators that service the facility, preparing themselves for the next ship to occupy the space. I suppose the current international situation means most of the fleet is on patrol or stationed somewhere closer to our borders.

We pass through the center of the hangar undisturbed until we reach the massive entry doors of the building. A few airwomen were giggling amongst themselves on their break until they saw our group approach, rising promptly to stand at attention and salute me as I pass. "At ease," I tell them. They exhale, relaxing their shoulders and tails in unison.

"Oh, it's just you, Princess," one says. I smile back and acknowledge them. Mom likes to see the dedication to service, but I'm far less strict about it.

A great wind whips around us as we walk outside and are greeted to the sprawling Municipal Aerodrome — Varecia’s hub for commercial, civil, and military airship operations. Ships of all types and sizes dot the expansive grass fields around us, but the one we were interested in — our family’s private airship, the Blue Daemon — is waiting for us right outside the hangar.

This is why Duncan is so trusted by mom — he knows how to get stuff done. If I had been allowed to carry out my original plan and do all the trip planning myself, it would have taken a week and the ship would’ve been parked on the opposite end of the airfield. In a ditch.

We approach the side of the tall, aptly colored blue airship and head up the metal stairs to board, following Duncan’s lead. The ship was designed by a famous industrial designer for our family and has all the newest bells and whistles, packaged into a sleek modern design. I don’t know a lot about airships and flight, but I do like how the craft looks. Lots of flowing lines and curves, resemblant of the petals and sepals of a flower.

Duncan stops in front of the entrance to the pilot’s deck and turns back towards me, “Princess, our trip today was only possible because of my good friend Maximilian. He so generously volunteered his piloting skills on short notice to make it happen.”

See what I mean? The dude has *connections*. I peer past the door of the flight deck and see a lanky Ringtail in a faded, tan pilot's outfit, hands and feet at the byzantine array of knobs, switches and levers.

"Aw, shucks!" he drawls in a thick Greenwater accent, pulling up his aviator cap to see us better.

"It's nothin', really. Duncan called me up and says The Princess Herself needed an experienced pilot, and I ain't had nothin' better going on this afternoon so I says to myself, 'Heck, why not?' Never met a Princess before!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Duncan grinning from ear to ear, causing me to do a quick double-take. "Ah! Well, I appreciate it very much Mr. Maximilian. I'm sure Duncan mentioned just how important this trip is to me, personally."

He chuckles under his breath, "Oh, of course. Y'know, I ain't never piloted a ship this fancy before. I got to the Aerodrome and the guy led me here and says, '*This 'uns it.*' And I just about fell over! You've got one nice ship, Princess! A real *Lucketts Special!*'"

Well! He sure is a... character. How did he and Duncan become friends, I wonder? I smile and nod my thanks again.

"Princess," says Dunc, motioning with his arms to lead me into the rest of the ship.

We continue boarding with Calypso behind me, passing through a set of doors into the passenger compartment. Unlike the metro car we took earlier, this space is designed for our family, and the attention to detail shows. Individual green quilted leather seats line the edges of the compartment, flanked by ornate, hand-carved wood-trimmed windows and thick, plush curtains. A thick, woolskin rug runs down the center of the aisle, inlaid with gold inserts in a complex floral pattern. This is the section of the ship our family sits at during flights, but I won't be staying here this time. I have a *Mental Note* to act on.

Just then Duncan turns around, looking ready to tell me something. Hold that thought bunny boy, you can tell me about it later.

"Duncan, could you join me in my private compartment, please."

His ears fold back, surprised by my sudden shift in tone. Correcting himself, he bows his head in respect. "Yes, of course, Princess,"

Calypso noticed it too. He rushes to my side and stands at attention, anticipating my orders. "Princess?"

"Privacy, please. No interruptions."

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He gives Duncan a sidelong glance. "Yes, Ma'am."

I'm so casual all the time that in the unusual instance I need to get down to business and give someone an order, it tends to make animals sit up and notice.

We pass down the hallway of the ship and turn left at one of the doors. Inside a large window dwarfs 2 bench seats opposite of each other on both sides of the compartment. I store my bag on the luggage rack above the bench and gaze out the window to observe takeoff conditions: Clear skies, with clouds on the horizon. Should be a smooth flight today.

In the distance two warships are idling their propellers, waiting for our priority departure so they can have their chance to take off. It's patrol duty for them, most likely. An island near the border with Melicola Province has been drifting into Ellyntide territory, and last week mom announced she was claiming it for us. Melicola still considers it a part of their territory, so tensions have been unusually heightened the past few days. It's almost like Mom *wants* another war to break out.

Duncan slides the door to the compartment closed with a heavy thunk. "I was just about to ask you the same thing, Princess."

"Oh?"

"To talk in private," he says, taking his seat across from me. "You want to know how I was able to convince your mother so easily this morning, don't you?"

"That's right," I nod. "I've never chartered an airship, but you plan these sorts of trips regularly. Success is expected of you... but that isn't the only reason, is it?"

A metallic clatter reverberates through the skeleton of the ship as it's freed from its mooring anchor, shifting us about our seats. I brace myself against the edge of the windowsill out of habit, as if we were passing through turbulence. It's no cause for alarm though, noises like this are routine when taking off in an airship.

Max's voice comes over the ship's loudspeaker. "This is your pilot Max up in the catbird seat, just sit tight and keep your tails warm, we've been cleared for take-off by the Aerodrome and will be out to the Eastern Weald in a jiffy." The drone of the engines grows louder through the compartment as the steam propellers begin spinning up to flight speed.

"As you're aware, my job is to handle the finer details of the state's affairs for the Queen," says Duncan, raising his voice to match the rising noise.

"Arranging meetings, condensing intelligence reports, planning trips such as this one, so on and so forth. Participating in your family's personal affairs is not one of my duties, but because of the proximity to your mother, I sometimes find myself invested in them."

Yes, this much I know about Duncan's position. Foreign or domestic, when it comes to matters of state Duncan's the one who's always on top of it with her. It makes sense he'd get the occasional whiff of what's going on in private between us and the extended family.

He pauses to gather his thoughts, clasping his hands in front of his face, then continues, “It was a few weeks ago. Your mother and I were up past 10 working on the situation with Melicola. Sleep-deprived and frustrated, she confided in me something personal; She does not consider you an adult yet.”

“What?!” I hiss. “She thinks I’m still a child?”

“I-I don’t think she would characterize you quite like that,” he stammers, quickly trying to save face. “But she’s disappointed that instead of taking a bigger role in helping her govern, you resign yourself to your muses. Volunteering in the garden, reading books about plants, helping your brother with his hobbies. In her words, she finds these tendencies, ‘escapist’ and ‘regressive.’”

So that’s what this is about. When mom was my age, she began helping my grandmother, Beatrix, with the day-to-day affairs of the Kingdom — now she wants me to do the same for her. Heck, I bet she’d like it if I practically ran the entire Kingdom the way Sarlain’s Princess does. But it’s not like I haven’t tried to help her!

“Mother may say those things, but the truth is she doesn’t want my help,” I chide. “You remember it — the coal miners that went on strike in Rhl last year? I told her every morning at breakfast I wanted to help her with the official response.”

Duncan's whiskers twitch. "You were for the union, as I recall."

"And Mother wasn't. She brushed me off every single time until one morning, she exploded and told me to go outside and play in the mud. Mother is only interested in my help when she thinks I'll agree with her politics."

"I'd have to agree with that."

...Huh?

I stare at Duncan in bewilderment. "...You would?"

A gentle force pushes against me, easing me into the compartment seat. I flick my eyes to the window and spot the horizon line dipping below us.

We've departed.

Duncan straightens himself up. “As you’ve observed, the Queen has contradictory desires for you. When I pointed this out to her she was not... particularly amicable. But she did admit she often plays to your muses when it’s convenient to do so.”

Wait, what?

“You *talked back* to my mother about me?!” I gasp.

“I may have been mildly tired and frustrated myself that night, but...” he trails off, shrugging his shoulders with a sly grin. “More or less, yes.”

I can’t believe it! “Why!? Why would you stand up to her about me?!”

Oh, my goodness. It’s one thing if I raise my own voice against mom — I’m her daughter. I can get away with it because we’re family. But someone outside our family doing it? And the animal in question is a noble trying to defend my behavior? I feel like I’m going to tumble out of my seat.

“Asha,” he says, relaxing his ears. “Do you remember the first time we met each other?”

Eh? Why did he change the subject? And why is he addressing me by my first name? I mean, it's not like there's some rule where he must always address me formally as 'Princess' or 'Your Majesty'. I just don't think he's ever done it before.

But I do remember where we first met. "It was when you took over as head of staff from your mother. We were in the state dining room, and my mother came out to introduce you to everyone... I couldn't have been older than Sofi is now. Why, how come?"

"Think back farther," he grins.

"Really?! Oh gosh," I say, staring off at the ceiling trying to probe my memories for something farther back. Did we meet at some state event that I just forgot about? I search the recesses of my memories for a few moments, thinking back through years past, but nothing comes to mind. "I'm sorry, but I can't remember anything else. Did we really meet each other before then?"

Duncan takes his bag and says, "I have something to show you." He unhooks the brass latch that holds it together and retrieves a small sheet of paper from inside. He gives a quick glance, smiles, and hands it across the compartment to me.

