

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 11. Turnabout Ally

I examine the printed side of the paper, and... er, wait. This isn't just a piece of paper. It's a photograph:

It's me! A very young, femininely dressed me for that matter. And that older boy next to me...

"Duncan, that's us! But... but how?!!"

"It is!" he says, laughing at my no doubt astonished expression. "You were just 5 years old at the time, I'm not surprised you don't remember."

Whaaaat? I've actually known Duncan for that long and I just didn't know it? I'm floored.

It's clear this picture was taken in the palace. I easily recognize the location where we're standing in the photo: the hallway on the first floor of the

residence wing. It's not far from the room that's now Sofl's lab, actually. But how it was taken?

"What's the story behind this?" I ask, staring into the faded picture. "You know mother won't allow cameras into the palace."

He leans back in his seat and stares out the window. "It was a day the Queen was out on a trip, I've long since forgotten where she went. My mother, the woman she was, pulled all the necessary strings to get a photographer discretely inside the palace. She knew she would be retiring in a few years and wanted those visual mementos of her time serving your family."

It makes me smile, remembering his mother. She was a strong woman with a head full of convictions and a commanding presence that made her taller than she actually was. From a distance, you'd be forgiven for thinking she was the Queen herself, the way she animated words when explaining something objectionable to mom.

Despite this, I remember she was always kind to me. We had a ritual on Friday afternoons: down in the dining room before supper when nobody was watching (or more accurately, mom wasn't watching), she'd secretly offer sweets from her pocket in exchange for good mannerisms. I never liked following them as a kid but was happy to oblige when offered a few pieces of

licorice. It was her way of discretely parenting me and it worked quite well in getting me to be more polite.

“She brought you along that day and wanted a photo of you with the young Princess,” I grin, handing that very photo back to Dunc.

“Oh, yes,” he explains, staring off into the photograph. “I was a directionless 14-year-old that had no idea what I wanted to do with myself. Mother showed me the palace and the animals in it — yourself included — encouraging me to compete with my sister for the head of staff position. I and everyone else had assumed she’d be a shoo-in for the role, so I never dreamed of working towards it. But It had been some time since an Almandoz man held the title so my mom thought some sibling competition would be healthy.”

Dunc’s family, the Almandozes, have served ours closely for generations. Being close to the Lordanous is the ultimate aspiration for any noble family, and no family is closer than Dunc’s. It’s a matter of intense pride for them that they’ve become so intimate with ours.

“Asha,” he says, leaning in closer to me. “The point I’m trying to make is I’ve known you for quite some time now. And we share more in common than you think.”

I nod in understanding. I've kind of... okay, maybe not 'kind of'. I haven't treated Duncan very well at all. I've always thought of him as another one of mom's stuffy courtiers, so I've always treated him as such: with a healthy dose of spite. But he's seriously stuck his neck out for me in front of mom twice now. Have I been wrong about him this whole time?

"I saw a flash in your eyes this morning, something I'd never seen in you before. A glint that signaled you weren't going to take 'no' for an answer from anyone, including the Queen," He pauses to look at the ground and sighs. After a moment he turns back to me with a gloomy expression. "You were willing to go to war for the Prince, weren't you?"

Just like that, the friendly conversation we cultivated turns serious again. "I was... very close to erupting on her," I muttered, overcome by embarrassment. What happened to all the confidence I had in myself this morning when I was screaming at mom?

"Nobody benefits when a schism exists between the Queen and her daughter. I've observed the growing animosity between you two for some time now. Your mother's desire to groom your ascension to the throne, and your own convictions to protect your brother from what you perceive as the hostile takeover of his free will."

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I...

...He described me so succinctly. I'm not *really* that predictable, am I? Or is Duncan just that perceptive of other people's emotions? All I can do is nod dumbfounded in response.

"When me and the Queen spoke about you that night, I... " he trails off again, pondering his choice of words.

"...I suggested she should be more open to giving you the freedom to determine your future. Yes, someday you will become Monarch. That is inevitable. But it's clear that forcing you to be a recluse is having a detrimental effect on your relationship."

Ohhh, it's making sense now! "And when you spoke up at the breakfast table, it was because— "

"—I interrupted the Queen, even though it was wholly inappropriate of me to do so, in order to prevent that schism," he declares, cutting me off. Speaking

up was clearly a move that benefited me, so why is he adamant about his neutrality? Honestly, he's acting like mom is grilling him right now instead of speaking to me in a private conversation.

I'm beginning to see how this all fits together, though: Duncan talked to mom a few weeks ago about allowing me to have more freedoms, so our relationship didn't deteriorate. She agreed to consider it. Then, this morning, Duncan stepped in to prevent things from really turning sour by volunteering to manage my trip to the Weald. Mom remembered the conversation with Duncan and decided to allow it.

You know, if I hadn't gotten all riled up at Mom this morning, if I had just taken her dismissal of my plans sitting down... then I wouldn't have forced Dunc to act in my favor. We wouldn't be on our way to the Weald right now, and Sofl would have never gotten his lichen.

"Princess," Dunc's voice is flat. Oh, um! You don't see me grinning like an idiot over here because my plan totally worked out, okay? Nope, didn't happen. "Your mother agreed to consider giving you more freedom on one condition."

"A condition?" I croaked. "Just what kind of condition?"

“If possible,” he says, pulling down his waistcoat. “She asked me to help you understand her point of view.”

“Her *point of view*? Oh, man... “ my tail goes limp and I collapse into my seat. Yup, I knew it was going to be something like this. *He’s going to lecture me.*

I mean, this isn’t actually bad at all. A lecture in exchange for more personal freedom is a solid deal. It’s just... I’m an adult now! The Princess and heir apparent! It’s degrading to have to still sit through these things when you’re 23. And Dunc’s only a few years older than I am!

“I will admit she didn’t specify how long our discussion had to be, so... “

“Thank you,” I say plainly.

“There’s only one point I feel I need to make, anyways. And that’s because it’s pertinent to our trip, today.”

“Yes?” I press, trying to speed things along. The faster we get through this, the better!

“Princess,” he rasps. “I understand your frustrations about your brother. I have a younger sister that I sometimes feel protective of. But you and the Prince are different from us.”

“Because me and Sofl are heirs,” I say, anticipating his argument. Not the first time I’ve heard this one.

“No matter how uniquely brilliant you or your brother may be, the course of your lives has already been chartered. Your parents are not assholes for trying to steer your brother down a path away from his hobbies—”

“That’s exactly why...” I mutter under my breath.

Duncan ignores my quip. “They’re doing it because they have no other choice. And neither do you or Sofl. You must sacrifice these parts of yourself for the good of the Kingdom. Your futures will be dedicated to public service, and nothing can steer you off that path.”

It’s not that he’s wrong or anything, because he’s totally right. I’ll never become a botanist and work with plants for a living. Sofl will never create medicines. We’ve spent our entire lives growing up in the palace, and we’ll

continue to spend them there. We'll fulfill our public service, start families, grow old, and die in that palace.

But Duncan had the freedom to choose his path in life, and the encouragement of a mother who believed he should have that freedom. He may be able to relate to me because he has a younger sibling he feels protective of, but that's where our similarities end. He'll *never* understand what it's like to have your entire future predetermined from birth, with no chance of ever deviating from it.

I'm scared as hell for the day *it* happens. That inevitability that comes with being the heir apparent. It's a duty I must live up to, and I accept it. That's why, when it does happen, it's going to be on *my* terms.

Duncan's ears relax. "That's all I wanted to say. I hope you'll consider my words."

*Ehhhhh.* I'm well aware of everything he lectured me about, way more than he'll ever know. But I should at least be nice to him. He really stuck his neck out for me this time.

"I will," I lie. "I appreciate all you've done for me today, Duncan," That wasn't a lie. It's clear there's an ally in the palace I wasn't aware I had.

“I was, and always shall be, in the service of your family. You’re our future, Princess,” he dips his head, and I smile. The conversation wrapped up, we gather our bags and exit the compartment.

Outside, Calypso is leaned up next to the door with his arms folded. As ordered, he’s prevented any interruptions. He watches us exit with a coy grin. “She didn’t tear you to pieces, did she Dunc?”

I’m certain we rolled our eyes in unison.