

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

14. Encounter at Log Bottom

“Nortanian spies!” Calypso snarls, tearing out his rapier.

“I said *don't move!*” screeches the Owl.

Calypso twitches in my direction but keeps his feet firmly planted.

I try to maintain my own position crouching next to the log, but it feels as if the pounding of my heart will knock me to the ground. If not my heart, then the suddenness of this ambush may shock me to death. Sheltered in the palace with loads of security surrounding me, I've never been exposed to a real life and death situation before. This was only supposed to be a fun jaunt out to the country to look for some plants... But now? Laurent is surely *dead*, and my own life is in peril.

Goddess above, how can this be happening?!

The owl motions his tawny wing to one of the shadowy figures that attacked Laurent. I don't dare turn my head to see which one it is. "Starla, circle around to the other side and cover the male Ruffy."

"Right," responds a woman's voice. A moment later a Sable wearing a dark green cloak enters my field of vision with a one-handed sword, free of blood, pointed toward Calypso. It's too far away for me to be certain, but there doesn't appear to be any identification on her outfit that would give away who she's working for.

Starla keeps focusing on Calypso as she rotates behind the Owl, pacing back to cover the route we took to enter to hollow. Again, Calypso ignores the Owl's orders, keeping his eyes and his weapon locked to Starla's. Being unarmed, the Owl doesn't seem to mind him choosing a new target.

With Starla moving to cover the way we came, brambles block the other routes out of the hollow. We are seriously surrounded and trapped.

"Orie, you stay there and cover the Ringtail and that other girl," the Owl orders.

“Hey, that Ringtail said she’s a *Princess!*” says Orie, outside my field of vision. My whiskers twitch at hearing the word, ‘Princess’ spoken out loud by the animal who killed Laurent. “We weren’t supposed to get this involved!”

“So, she did,” says the Owl, looking towards me. “But I find it hard to believe a Princess would be this far away from the capital city on a Sunday afternoon.”

“She’s not *dressed* like a Princess,” grumbles Starla.

Oh, *come on!!*

Why does every girl think I’m dressed like garbage today?!

Seriously? You’re holding me at swordpoint and you *still* can’t help but insult my riding outfit? Would you like it better if I donned a parasol in one of my mother’s travel ensembles? Would I look *princessly* enough for you, then?

Feh! I guess I should be thankful. Who knows what terrible ideas they might concoct if they knew for certain I was Princess Asha, heir apparent to the throne of Ellyntide. Try to take me hostage? Focus all their efforts on killing me?

Are these animals *actually* spies from Nortane? Shouldn't someone from a foreign intelligence operation have some familiarity with what the Princess of Ellyntide wears? Or what she even looks like? You should be able to tell who I am by looking at my face, right? Just who are these animals, and what are they doing in the middle of the Eastern Weald?

The Owl's attention moves from me to Calypso. "Like I would tell you anything," he hisses, baring his teeth.

Good, don't give them any hints about who we are. If they aren't certain I'm the Princess, then we have an advantage.

"No, I doubt you would, *monkey*. And neither shall we," says the Owl, flicking his gold eyes between Starla and Orië. Wherever they're from, or whoever they're working for, he intends to keep it a secret.

Calypso scoffs. "Two Martens taking orders from an Owl, sneaking around the middle of Ellyntide during a border dispute with Melicola. Who else could you be but Crow Wing?"

Crow Wing is the name of Nortane's state intelligence organization. Because Avians can fly just about anywhere, Nortanian intelligence has a reputation as being particularly all-knowing — that's why I found it unusual when they didn't recognize me as Princess Asha. If they really are Crow Wing, then my likeness should be well known to them.

But on the other paw, Calypso has a point. Melicola, the home country of Martens, is a province of Nortane. Naturally, their populations are primarily Martens and Avians. There are hardly any Lemurs and almost no Rabbits living anywhere in Nortane. So, this is exactly the type of species makeup you'd expect from Crow Wing agents.

Add to that the dark clothes they're wearing — a signature aspect of Crow Wing agents — and the argument swings back in favor of them being Nortanian. It doesn't explain why they don't recognize me, though. Perhaps my likeness is some sort of secret, and these are lower-level agents?

The Owl's ear tufts curl. "We can't allow our presence here to become known. So, think whatever you want about us — you'll go to your graves believing it."

There's no response from Calypso, only the tightening of the grip on his rapier.

So, they intend to kill us after all. *Damn it.* I was hoping we could somehow negotiate with these animals, but he just shut the door on that possibility. Whatever they're doing here is of such importance that they'll kill us to protect the secret.

I'm not sure I follow the Owl's logic, though — he must believe we're not very important animals if he's threatening to kill us. Maybe he thinks we're a wealthy family that decided to have a picnic out in the Weald? And that nobody would immediately come looking for us if we went missing?

Me and Calypso *are* dressed pretty casually. As for Bodie and Laurent, it's not unthinkable a very wealthy family would hire private security for a trip to the countryside. Heh, the Owl must think 'Princess' is some sort of nickname for me. And that I'm Calypso's... partner...

Ew.

Calypso's silence is calculated, though. If we don't check in back at the airship, then Duncan and the rest of the guard will be out searching for us. And when it becomes known I'm missing, the entire Weald will be overflowing with Knights and airships. They'll never make it out of here without being discovered. We'll have the last laugh, no matter what.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

For a moment, there's silence in the hollow. The only noise is the exhalation of heavy breaths from everyone present understanding a fight is now inevitable. Two Martens and an Owl versus three Lemurs. It seems we're evenly matched.

I'll need to be careful about the owl. Though he lacks a weapon, his talons are dangerous. An Owl with a well-timed talon strike can easily inflict a fatal wound on an unsuspecting animal.

As for me... The idea of running away from here as soon as the fighting starts *is* an option.

To put it bluntly, my life is more valuable than Calypso and Bodie's. It's barbaric to even contemplate, but that's just the bitter truth. For the future of the Kingdom, I *must* find a way to live through this, even at the cost of their lives.

The problem with running away is we don't know if these animals are alone, or if there are more of them lurking out there in the Weald. I could leave, only to run into their friends on the way back to the airship. And then there's the

matter of that dead bear we found... it looked like it died of natural causes, but what if it didn't? What if whatever killed it is still out there, and it finds me?

Argh, there are just too many unknowns with running away! If we were closer to the airship I could see it as a possibility, but I think my only option is to stay here and help in whatever way I can.

I know I'm going to have to let Bodie do most of the fighting against the Marten facing us. My concealed weapon, a small dagger, won't be much help. And although I have some self-defense training, it's nothing compared to what she had to go through to become a member of the guard. If I try to help her directly, I'll only get in the way.

I feel her hand rest gently on the back of my shoulder.

...Oh! I get what she's telling me. On second thought, maybe there *is* something I can do to help. Holding my gaze on the owl I nod gently. I hope she saw it.

"Then take your best shot," says Calypso, breaking the silence. His voice is steady with determination. "We'll sacrifice our lives if necessary. Are you prepared to die today, *flyboy?*"

Hey!! Don't give them any hints, Calypso! Swallow your pride, please!

"Why don't you find out!" the Owl screeches, taking off at Calypso. At once, the hollow explodes with motion. The fight has started!

I feel Bodie push her weight down against my shoulder. Using all my strength I push myself up from the crouched position, sending Bodie flying toward Orië with her rapier drawn. I spin around, catching a glimpse of Calypso kicking the Owl to the ground in the process. When I finish twisting, I reach inside my coat and tear the concealed dagger from its cloth holster.

Bodie has used the momentum from my boost to her advantage and appears to have the upper hand in a back-and-forth duel with Orië. I try to follow their fight, but the whirling back and forth of the blades oscillates like a steam piston, making it too difficult to track their movements. As I figured, if I tried to help her out, I'd only get myself hurt.

On the other side of the hollow, the Owl is slow to clamber to his talons as Calypso trades stabs with Starla. She appears to be the better of the two Martens, holding her own against Calypso. I can tell he's having to restrain himself and take a more conservative battle approach, though. Now that she's moving, I can see Starla has the advantage with some light armor under her

cloak — Calypso's fighting two animals, and his only protection is a fabric waistcoat. He has no choice but to be careful.

Unless... what if I even the odds? If I could get in there and stab the Owl with my dagger, that would make Calypso's fight way easier for him. I've never been trained to attack someone so brazenly, but... how can I just be a spectator when there's such a huge opening?

There — The Owl is stirring again. If I don't act now, I'll never forgive myself! I take off towards him with my dagger held out, prepared to strike. Almost at once, Calypso notices me charging into battle.

"Princess, STOP!" he commands over the fight. This intonation of his voice alone is enough to freeze me in my tracks. "It's too dangerous! Stay where you— "

Before he can finish his sentence, Starla seizes on his lapse in concentration and stabs at the hilt of his rapier, hooking it on her blade and sending it flying across the hollow toward a bramble.

Agh, this is bad! I should have just stayed put!

Calypso refocuses, deftly avoiding Stala's attacks while moving to get back his fallen weapon. At the same time, the Owl forces himself to his talons and moves to get to the rapier before Calypso can. Flicking his eyes to see the Owl, Calypso takes off in a sprint for the rapier and at the last second falls to the ground to slide and grab it with his right foot.

Raking fingers against the damp ground to slow down quicker, he flips around to give the incoming Owl another kick in the sternum with his free foot, sending him tumbling backward into a tussock. Sensing Starla is mere feet away he flips the rapier into the air, springs to his feet, and snatches it with a waiting right hand.

Swinging it out in front of him to complete the act, Starla is stopped in her tracks before she can carry out an attack.

What an incredible feat of athleticism! Calypso is Knight-Captain for a reason, and this is the reason why!

Out of breath and still panting from her sprint, Starla holds her rapier out at arm level, signaling a pause. "You're pretty good for a black tail," she spits.

Calypso acquiesces to the pause but says nothing in response.

“What’s the matter? Too scared to speak?”

He shakes his head. “Petty name-calling, stabbing animals in the back... I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

“Nothing wrong with a few dirty tricks,” she smirks, flicking away a strand of hair with her free paw. “You’ll need a few of your own if you plan on surviving this duel.”

Out of the corner of my eye I spot the Owl, who seemed to be struggling to get back up, leap into the air. He flaps his wings hard and lunges with talons outstretched towards Calypso!

“CALYPSO!”

He flinches at my voice, snapping himself out of the concentration of the fight. Understanding correctly what I meant, he drops to the ground and the outstretched talons of the Owl sail cleanly over the tips of his ruff. The Owl squawks, flailing his wings to try and correct course. But it’s too late, and he’s

unable to prevent himself from careening into Starla, knocking both of them back into a bramble.

“Hah!” I laugh, unable to contain my satisfaction. But my excitement is short-lived, interrupted by the sound of cracking wood behind me. I turn back to the duel between Orië and Bodie to see her tripping over a root sticking out of the ground. Once more, I can do nothing but watch as Orië takes advantage of the situation, plunging his rapier into Bodie’s back.

“Arrgh...!” she yowls, her voice trailing off. More blood is added to the floor of the hollow and her body goes listless.

Damn it, no!! “Bodie!!”

Orië wastes no time withdrawing the bloody rapier and pointing it squarely at me. My insides turn to ice as his eyes narrow, locking with mine. He says nothing as he takes off with his weapon held high, prepared to kill once more.

His eyes are tempestuous, dark, and cold. I’ve never seen eyes like his before; the gaze of an animal with the intent to kill. I make a pitiful attempt to raise my dagger, trying to rekindle what I’ve been taught about self-defense, but my arms are weak and listless. How can I fight back against this? An animal that could so effortlessly take the life of another?

For a breathless moment, I stare into his eyes, mesmerized. Paralyzed.

“Princess!”

Calypso appears beneath me using his outstretched body as a shield. Time slows as the rapier slides through his sternum and blood erupts forth, turning the dark armor of the Marten bright red.

“Urk...!”

He lands on his side with an abominable thud. I can say nothing, do nothing, but recoil in horror as I watch the life force drain from his body.

Orie props his boot on Calypso’s flank, using it as leverage to exhume the rapier from his chest. He seems annoyed as the weapon puts up a petty resistance to being dislodged.

Shnnnk!

Calypso screams, heaving in pain from the separation. I watch as blood, no longer restrained, pours freely from the fatal wound. Until this moment, I've never wanted anything more in life than I want to see Calypso healed. To keep calling him by his nickname. To have him by my side in public. To see his dumb face smile again.

Through his suffering he focuses on me, his face turning pale. There's relief in his eyes as he understands I'm still standing above him, alive. He succeeded in his duty. His sacrifice.

"Dunc..." he breathes, his last.