

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

15. Bloodlust

No...

“Wow! 3 for 4, Orie. Save some for us, will ya?”

“Yes, yes, well done. Now, why don’t you finish the job so we can get the hell out of here?”

Damn it, no!!

“Hey, that guy sacrificed his life to save this girl. He was like, ‘Princesssss!!’ ...Pfft, ha-ha!”

“Ha ha ha!”

My whole world is spinning, making it difficult to stand upright. My brain can’t process the reality of what’s occurred: Calypso has died in front of my very eyes, sacrificing his life to save my own. The bodyguard I’d trusted for so many years is lying in a pool of blood at my feet.

The scenes playback in my head like a needle stuck on a phonograph. Calypso leaped in front of me. The rapier slid through his chest. The blood. His final moments. I shut my eyes, pleading to no longer see the images, but the nightmare only becomes more clear.

I stumble back a few paces, even though I desperately want to fall to the ground and console him. The animal that took his life is still standing before me in a hysteric fit over his passing, filling me with a fierce bevy of emotions: Misery at the loss of Calypso. Seething anger at the animal who took his life. Guilt over insisting this damnable trip ever occurred in the first place.

This was only supposed to be a happy little jaunt to the country to explore nature. A simple errand to satisfy my brother's curiosity. Instead, three souls have been extinguished from this world, never to return.

"Seriously though, what if she really is royalty, huh? That's two of them that called her 'Princess.'"

"It doesn't matter! Just *kill* her," pleads the owl, the rising annoyance in his voice knocking me from my trance.

Yes, that's right. To protect the secret of them being here, they intend to take my soul as well. Nobody is here to protect me. I am a Princess alone, outnumbered, and with no way to defend myself. I'm going to die here unless I figure out a way to escape!

Orie is standing over Calypso's body, blocking my exit up his side of the hollow. I twist around, only to see Starla striding towards me with her sword drawn, blocking the other exit. I'm completely surrounded.

"Sorry love," she says, flicking her ears. "But we can't let you leave. The only place you're headed is on the ground to join your friends."

Such a detestable woman, Starla. I stifle the urge to lash out at her with my dagger, aware of just how foolish that would be.

If escape truly isn't possible, then there's one option left at my disposal. The one I was trained to use only as a very last resort, in the unthinkable event something like this occurred. Calypso knew about it too, what I should do if I was alone and exhausted of all other options. No doubt, the relief in his eyes as his life ended was because he knew I would live to have this chance.

Calypso... I pray your sacrifice won't be in vain. I recall the lines he trained me to say and take a deep breath.

"Then take me hostage!" I bellow, throwing my dagger to the ground.

Yes, that's right: I'm begging.

“I am Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, heir apparent to the Lilac Throne of Ellyntide. And I am pleading with you to spare my life!”

Starla stares at me dubiously, tilting her head like an avian. Skepticism is to be expected. But being the heir affords me something unique nobody else has. I hold out my right hand, using my left to gesture to the diamond on my ring finger.

“If you doubt my legitimacy, then see here! This is the Serpentine Diamond! It has been worn by heirs of the Lilac Throne since antiquity!” I spin around to present the distinctly shaped diamond to the Owl, then Orie. They watch me with guarded expressions.

I was given this ring on my 14th birthday. It’s a ceremonial piece for when I ascend the throne and become Monarch, but it can be used to verify the authenticity of the wearer as a Lordanou. As far as I know though, it’s never been used for that purpose... until right now.

“I do not know for whom you work for. But know that the crown of Ellyntide will make fantastic amends for my safe return — I am a prize unequalled. I make this request to you of my own accord and will follow your orders willingly.”

Starla sighs and turns to the Owl. “We weren’t supposed to get this deep,” she growls, her usual smug demeanor absent.

“I’ve heard of that diamond before!” says Orie, gesturing to my hand. “Read about it in school, I think. Been around since the founding of the Kingdom, and all the heirs wear it.”

“He’s right,” I say, turning back to address the Owl directly. “I’m the genuine article. If you kill me, my absence will be immediately noticed. The Weald will be crawling with knights in no time, and you and your reason for being here will be uncovered. But if you take me hostage, you’ll have a chance to make demands. You still have a way out of this, if you make the right choice!”

These animals aren’t from Ellyntide. The Serpentine Diamond is a national treasure, everyone in Ellyntide knows about it. If they kill me, they’ll need a way to flee the Weald and escape the Kingdom.

The Owl could simply fly away. They’d be a fugitive, but brave avians can cross islands discretely and escape to the other continents.

But the Martens are moon-bound, and the only way they can escape is on an airship. Even if they hid one somewhere in the Weald, airships are slow. There’s no chance they could escape before every ship in our fleet was on the highest alert, searching the skies for my attackers. They’re virtually guaranteed to be caught fleeing the scene.

The owl squints, surveying me from afar and inspecting my features like a judge in a beauty pageant. I catch myself absentmindedly twisting the ring on my finger. Was it not convincing enough? Do my clothes truly belie my royalty? Life and death hinge on his assessment. No matter how much of a losing situation this is for them, it won’t matter if they don’t believe I’m the real Princess Asha.

After a tortuously long wait, the owl squares his shoulders, clears his throat, and declares:

“...Nah.”

“What?!” I gasp. He won’t take me hostage?!

“As I said before, it doesn’t matter you’re the Princess. We simply can’t let it be known we were ever here.”

I stare agape in disbelief, struggling for breath like I was punched in the stomach. What could be so important that it made more sense to turn down taking a member of the royal family hostage? What is it about the Eastern Weald that makes it more important than *me*?

“As for your Kingdom coming to look for you, we will doctor your corpses and make our escape long before they realize you’re missing. They’ll believe you were slain by ferals and be none the wiser.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Crow Wing might be a powerful organization, but even they can’t conceal being stabbed in the chest by a rapier. I clench my fists in anger.

“That’s impossible. You’ll be caught before you can escape. And by killing me, you’ll be committing an act of war.”

The Owl raises his beak in defiance. “Orie. Kill her.”

“With pleasure,” he replies, shaking the blood of Calypso from his rapier to prepare it for my own.

So, it's come to this.

This is insane. They have to understand they'll never escape the Kingdom in time, and yet they're still going to kill me. What could they possibly hope to achieve by doing this?

Those bastards! If I'm truly meant to die here today, then I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing me cower in death. I'm going to make this as difficult for them as I possibly can. Admittedly, there's not a whole lot I can do. Picking up my dagger to try and defend myself is pointless — I can't defeat Orie, Starla, or even the weaponless Owl in direct combat.

But I won't give up. Not after the sacrifice Calypso made to save my life. If for nobody else but him, I won't accept fate lying down.

There is always a choice.

My only chance is to dodge Orie's initial stab, sprinting past him to scamper up the side of the hollow and escape. If I can find my way through the grove, I might stand a chance of escaping all the way back to the airship. It's a long shot, but I'm willing... no, I *must* try it!

Orie locks eyes with mine and begins a slow walk towards me, rapier at the ready — he wants to savor this. Once more I see murderous intent festering inside him.

This time, I'm not afraid.

I tense the muscles in my legs and draw a deep breath.

Th-THUMP!

Suddenly my chest heaves with such violent force that it pushes me backward, knocking me off-balance. The sound of my heart reverberates through me like a bell struck by a hammer, drowning out all other noise completely.

What was *THAT?!*

Th-THUMP!

Again, my body is knackered by the next thrust, as strong as the first. Reflexively I clutch my stampeding chest to keep my heart from escaping through it. Strangely, I feel no pain from the palpitations.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Owl pointing his wing at me with a distressed look. He shouts something to Orie, but I can't hear it over the droning noise that lingers in my head.

I don't have time to figure out what's happening to me! Anticipating the next movement, I force my eyes shut and brace myself.

Th-Thump!

It comes, weaker than the first jolts, pushing me only slightly. My tail lashes, counterbalancing the tremor and keeping me upright. But something perceptible changed this time — the feeling as if I'd been led into an unfamiliar room, only to have the door locked shut behind me.

I reopen my eyes and discover my vision has changed; wavering and red-tinted, as if I'm viewing the world from underwater. But there's no time to assess what's happening. Orie is bearing down, his rapier moments away from piercing my chest. And when it does, it will inflict a fatal wound. This is it! The moment I need to dodge his weapon and escape!

Except... I don't go anywhere. My boots stay firmly planted on the ground. In fact, something compels me to stay where I am.

Why...? Damn it, *why?!*

I search myself for answers, but my thoughts are turning visceral, unable to follow reasoning. A primal vitriol that is utterly unfamiliar consumes my insides, erasing the creature known as *Asha* and reforming her into something new. My fur stands on end and my teeth clench with a ferocity that could shatter them to pieces.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Oh, I get it now.

I embrace the adrenaline erupting through me, staring down Orie with new eyes. To this point, I've understood him to be some things: A murderer, primarily. A Pine Marten with a scruffy accent: *Martes Melicala*. But now a new, much simpler classification appears in my head:

Prey.

The bastard murderer is dead – your death is avenged Calypso, but the others must die as well. *They enabled him!! They are just as guilty!!*

I won't cease until I can taste the blood of the Owl!! He'll pay dearly for being their leader. For rejecting my plea, *I won't allow you to escape!*

The body of the Owl lies at my feet. A fitting end for someone as miserable as he was. I should have let him suffer a while longer.

I gaze around the hollow, surveying the aftermath of the hunt. I've made quite a mess, haven't I? It's a shame there weren't more of them for me to *kill*.

...

...

Yeah, a real.... shame...

....

Um.

What just happened here?! What did I *do* to them?!!