

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

7. I'll See You Off

“Yes, well there you are, Princess. We were worried you wouldn’t make it in time.”

Duncan greets me as I finish crashing through the doors leading to the palace’s outdoor train shed. Flung open, they slammed into the sides of their frames with a thunderous racket.

A few senior members of the guard on their lunch breaks turn their muzzles up to the commotion, tails high on alert. If I were anyone else barreling through those doors, I’d be on the receiving end of a stern verbal reprimand right about now. Instead, they shift wearily back into their seats — the task of disciplining a Princess falls only to the Monarch.

Such a raucous entrance was necessary. If my pocket watch is to be believed I've got all of 5 minutes before our train departs!

"Sorry for being late," I panted, short of breath from my run through the palace. "Griselda insisted that she pretty me up before I leave. I'm going out to the middle of nowhere to sift through some dirt. I don't need to look like I'm attending a state dinner!"

"You know well enough what kind of attention you attract in public, Princess. Even for those brief moments we spend passing through the station everyone's gaze will be on you."

Yeah, I guess.

To get to the place where our family's airships are stowed, we have to travel through a section of the train station in Varecia that's in view of the public. Mom designed it this way intentionally so she could bask in the spotlight and show off all the latest fashionable outfits and precious jewelry that being Monarch affords you.

What an unnecessary indulgence! I'd go out there in my pajamas if I were allowed to. To Hell with what the public thinks about my appearance!

Like most things though, I don't have any say in the matter. And Mom's stylist is aware of this fact. When word got out that I'd be in view of the public this afternoon she sprang into action and held me hostage until she could spritz my hair and ruff. Then when I tried to leave, she pulled me back to choose a new outfit!

That unplanned detour nearly cost me the entire trip!

"C'mon, Dunc. I think she looks fine no matter what she wears," says my bodyguard, Calypso, who's been standing with us opposite Duncan.

"Thank you!" I chirp. Besides the nice compliment, it's so refreshing when someone stands up for me!

Calypso's dressed light today, forgoing his usual uniform for a waistcoat and slacks. Armed with only a light rapier, the Ruffy came to the same conclusion I did about the danger today's trip posed.

"*You* may think that Calypso, but the Queen does not. Your opinion holds little regard, I'm afraid."

Oh! I almost forgot I came up with a nickname for Calypso! I gotta use it around Duncan today, he could stand to lighten up a little.

“I happen to think quite highly of *Bristlebody*’s opinion, thank you very much.”

Duncan blinks. “Bristlebody...?”

“Oh, ha-ha. That’s Asha’s new nickname for me. I guess *Calypso* wasn’t good enough anymore,” he says, cheeks blushing.

“It suits you better, Bristlebody,” I assure.

“...Right. Moving on,” began Duncan, buttoning his waistcoat. “Princess, I tried to arrange your family’s carriage for this trip, but because of the impromptu nature of our journey, they weren’t able to attach it to the consist in time. Regrettably, we will need to take one of the standard metro coaches into Varecia. Now, I’ve asked them to clean it thoroughly, so there won’t be any grime leftover from the morning commuters. We’ll have the car to ourselves but they won’t be running a refreshments cart. However, I— “

He cuts his apology short and stares at Bristlebody. He was rolling his eyes, miming Duncan's speech, and making gestures with his hands. My stupid grin must have given it away.

"What? You know Asha doesn't care about this stuff," he says, shrugging his broad shoulders.

I shake my head and exaggerate a frown. I don't.

Duncan sighs, "I wish you'd care about *me* more often, Calypso."

"Hey, you know I care about you more than anyone."

Calypso lifts Duncan's billycock out of the way and gives him a quick kiss on the forehead. Duncan can't help himself from letting out a squeak and thumping his feet against the ground.

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These two have weird ways of showing their affection for each other. Undeniably cute ways.

I shouldn't give Duncan too much grief. The only reason we're out here getting ready to leave for the Eastern Weald is because he stood up for me in the biggest way possible.

I was all set to plan this trip myself, using my privilege as a Princess to pull all the necessary strings. I'd get everyone I needed lined up like toy soldiers, ready and willing to obey my orders to take me out to the country.

But Duncan stepped in and offered to manage everything. As our family's head of staff, he routinely plans these sorts of trips. He brought a credibility, an experience to the operation that I don't have. And evidently, that's all it took to convince my mom to go along with it.

Why didn't I ask him in the first place? Well, I simply don't have that kind of relationship with him. To be honest, I've only thought of Duncan as another one of mom's nobles. Another Yes-Man, eager to obediently follow her orders and not give any second thought to me. To stand by and be silent when I start screaming at my own mother.

Gosh, I'm embarrassed now even thinking about that argument. I was genuine, honest to Goddess furious with her. It's been a long time since I've been that upset about something, and it's unsettling to think I'm still capable of emotions that intense. If Duncan hadn't stepped in when he did...

Mental Note: When we get on the airship, don't forget I need to bring him aside to my private carriage and ask him about a few things.

Duncan clears his throat, slipping his ears back through his hat. "Yes, well we better get going," he says, motioning to the bag from Sofl's lab. "Is that all you're bringing, Princess?"

"Yup, that's it. Only the stuff I need to collect samples and a pocket field guide. Don't need anything else."

I have a concealed weapon on me too, as I always do — but I won't need it. It's not even worth mentioning.

"Alright, let's go."

We take our bags and turn on our way to board the train.

Although the palace has a 'front door' so to speak, the way everyone comes and goes from the place is by train. This is done partially as a security precaution — all the screening is done at the last stop before the palace — but mostly because you can take the train almost anywhere in Varecia.

A train shed was built behind the palace, so as not to disrupt the architecture of the front facade which is visible from most of downtown Varecia. Despite only needing 2 tracks at any given time, the shed was built with the level of detail you'd expect for something attached to a royal palace. Ornate steel beams holding the roof, a glass panel roof, fanciful... carvings...

Um.

I don't know much about architecture. But it's nice, okay?

Throw me a bone, here.

Oh! You know what I *do* know? It's plants. And there are some nice potted plants that I helped grow and decorate back here!

With trains coming and going all the time, the surfaces back here get pretty soot-stained. Sure, they clean it off every so often, but it can still get a little unsightly between washes. I wanted to make things a little greener, a little more enjoyable while people wait for their train! Now, there's not a lot of light that filters down through the rafters, so I had to pick low light perennials that would—

“Asha Eloise Lordanou!”

Mom's voice echoes through the shed, piercing my wandering thoughts on interior design. I turn to face her, joining every other animal within an earshot. She's standing in the door I careened through moments ago, bracing herself against its slightly warped frame. Uh, oops.

She motions a 'stay here' gesture to an entourage of concerned doctors, nobles, and her Ring-Tailed bodyguard Clarissa. Having held them off, she approaches me with a precarious gait.

“Mother! Please, don't push yourself,” I call out, jogging towards her so she doesn't have to walk as far. I won't forgive myself if she collapses a second time just so she can have a conversation with me.

She holds her hand up in a reassuring manner. “The doctors say I’ll be fine, Asha.”

“Well, you’re not fine yet,” I chide, well aware I’m the only animal alive who can be so direct with her. “We’re just about to leave for the airfield, what’s going on?”

“Asha, we need to talk.”

Uh-oh.

“About what, what is it?” I ask, trying to hide my apprehension.

She didn’t come out here to tell me she’s walking back her permission to go to the weald, did she? After the fall in the chapel, I was worried something like that might happen. It’s just a coincidence it happened today of all days, but Mom is superstitious enough to let an event like that color her judgment.

Fweeee!!!

Again, a locomotive whistle interjects my conversation. Last call for passengers.

Mom gets distracted by it, turning her head to the source of the sound. She stares off into the distance again, the same way she did back in the chapel.

“Mother?” I ask again, taking her clammy hands and gripping them.

“I...” she trailed off, gazing around the station to try and refocus. A breeze whipped around the side of the palace, causing a cloud of steam to drift through us. When it passed, her expression had become softer.

“...I just wanted to tell you to please be safe today, Asha. You’re very important to me.”

Oh? It seemed almost certain a moment ago she was coming out here to tell me to stay home. What happened? Did she change her mind?

Well, I’m not going to ask too many questions.

“...Yeah. I will. I love you, mother.”

“I love you too, Asha.”

She smiles with a gentleness I’ve rarely seen from her. Mom... are you sure you’re alright?

I turn on my feet and scamper away to board the train.