

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 8. Antics

Duncan is staring down a conductor in a metro car as I approach, holding his hands flat and making rapid slicing motions parallel to his neck. The conductor, separated by a pane of glass, seems unable to infer the hint, throwing his hands up in baleful frustration. This causes Duncan to get even more upset.

I place my hand on his shoulder as I catch up to this scene. “Hey, we’re done talking. We can leave.”

“Oh! Thank the Goddess, Princess,” he says. “I was worried these incompetents would leave us stranded. Let’s not waste any time.”

We board the coach at the back of the train, the one that was reserved specifically for us. Inside rows of simple, green bench seats line both sides of the aisle. The white walls above the windows are lined with colorful advertisements, stretching the entire length of the car. The last 3 rows are

missing, replaced by empty floor space and leather loops attached to the ceiling on wooden joists. I'm not certain what those are used for.

Calypso's already boarded and found a seat near the halfway point, so I make my way down the cramped aisle to join him.

"It's quite basic, isn't it?" I've never had to take a commuter coach before. Sparse and pedestrian, they're far different from the luxury ones constructed for our family.

Duncan follows up shortly behind me. "I apologize, Princess. In the future, I will work harder to ensure your family's carriage."

"Oh, it's fine, really. I just wasn't expecting it," I reply, deciding not to mention it smells like a wet leather glove.

"The window seat's yours," says Calypso, shifting to the space in the aisle behind our row so I can enter. I hand my bag off to Duncan and take my seat near the window as the brakes of the coach whine and hiss, signaling our sluggish departure from the palace.

The bench is very stiff — sitting against a flat piece of lumber could be preferable to this — but it'll do for the brief time it takes to travel into Varecia. The more pressing issue is the size of the seat. It's a bit small; My legs are pushed against the bench in front of me, and I'm already taking up most of the available space with my tail tucked to my side. Is there enough room for someone as big as Calypso to sit next to me?

My concern is immediately put to the test as he positions his tail and sits down next to me, moving his flank closer, closer, and closer still until I'm pushed up against the window and can count the individual strands of fur in his ruff. The cloying scent of his Rhylian cologne invades my nostrils, forcing a polite cough out of me.

Hours pass. Or so it seems until Bristlebody finally recognizes it. "Oh! Heh-heh, sorry Princess." He shifts his position to give me more space, angling himself so he's half on the bench and half in the aisle.

Well, that was uncomfortable.

Across the aisle, Duncan has already unbuttoned his folio to catch up on the work he missed from tending to mom's fall. He removes a cloth from his bag and unwraps it — inside is one of the leftover cherry scones from breakfast this morning. He takes a bite and resumes writing. As if on cue, Calypso's

head swivels and stares across the aisle. He's glaring at Duncan like a puppy begging for table scraps.

He kicks the seat ahead of us, causing it to pivot on its bottom and slide forward to... create another seat!? They can do that on commuter trains? Hey, Bristlebody!! Why didn't you move that when I sat down, huh?

"Yo Dunc, pass me my muffin?" he finally asks.

Using the hand that's not writing, Duncan gingerly stores the half-eaten scone on his lap and pulls a lumpen cloth from his bag. Continuing with his spare paw, he unwraps the muffin from the cloth and tosses the pastry across the aisle, all without averting his eyes from the page.

With his right leg crossed over the other, Calypso makes a sudden motion to reach up and grab the muffin with his foot.

And with a skillful little flip, he tosses it into his waiting left hand, completing the act.

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Um, ew?

Yeah, impressive bit of choreography. Well done. But touching food with your feet is kind of gross, dude. Not that I'm one to berate folks about being covered in dirt and mud, but Lemurs are sort of taught not to handle food with their feet, you know?

"What?!" chuckled Calypso, taking a bite of the muffin. "Roo wook so offended, Awsha!" Across the aisle, Duncan stifles a laugh.

And to top it off he's chewing with his mouth open! Has he lost all sense of manners today? My eyes roll about their sockets. "You just can't help yourself sometimes, can you?"

Crumbs of food stick haphazardly to his grinning, toothy maw.

Honestly. These two have been together for 5 years now, and yet Calypso still feels the need to impress women with little stunts like this.

We get it: You're pedidextrous.

Okay, so maybe he does the same things to impress men. My point still stands: he can be such a goof!

Ha-ha! At least he can actually hold down a stable relationship, huh, Asha? Dating Duncan for 3 years and married for 2, versus 23 years on this moon and I've yet to find a single partner. Antics or not, he's got me squarely beat in that department.

It's not like I'm uninterested in romance. Or that there's any lack of pressure from my parents to go out and find a man to bear the first grandchildren with. But where am I supposed to find folks I want to date? I'm stuck in the palace all day around animals I loathe, and it's a battle any time I want to go somewhere that isn't owned by our family.

Having no opportunities to meet animals hasn't exactly made me a social butterfly, either. Duncan and Calypso met each other at the academy over a game of pawball, as I recall. I dropped out of Professor Willow's botany program because I had an anxiety attack when I walked into the lecture hall.

*'You should fancy yourself a dashing young knight,'* my dad likes to say, oftentimes unprovoked when the conversation has nothing at all to do with relationships. Worked out well for him and mom, I guess. But why does he think some guy who swings a sword all day is going to fall for a girl whose idea of a good time is to cuddle up with a book on plant phylogeny after a long day pulling weeds?

Part of the problem is I just don't enjoy being close to men. They smell bad, act callously, and I don't particularly enjoy their appearance. I won't act like I've never seen one before and thought, *'Oh, he's cute.'* But I'm not sure I can harbor deep, romantic feelings for one, either.

Does that make sense?

Date a girl? Yeah, I could. Wouldn't be the first time a Queen took a woman as a partner. But then I'd be dumping all the pressure on Sofl to continue the family bloodline. And for the Goddess' sake, he's only 14. I don't know if he's thought a whole lot about who he's interested in... if he's interested in anyone at all. He's been even more apathetic about relationships than I have.

What happens if I take a lady as a partner and it turns out he only likes men? Or he's grossed out by sex? Then what? These are not the questions a child should be forced to ask themselves.

Mom, why did you decide to only have 2 kids? You must have understood something like this could happen, right?

The metro car rocks gently from side to side as we round a corner into a tunnel, the one that connects us to Dragon's Gate Station. On cue, a switch is triggered, igniting the gas lamps of the coach and bathing us in warm, flickering light. This is normal for the journey into the station. Once we emerge back into daylight we'll be at our platform — the one mom has designated just for our family — and a well-choreographed routine of platform closures, movements of the palace guard, and overhead station announcements will occur as we make our way to the airfield.

Duncan rises to his feet. "I'll be right back. I'm going to talk to the conductor and make sure we're on the same page for the transfer. I don't trust this crew," He slips past his seat and moves to the car in front of us.

Calypso turns to me. Being my bodyguard, he's acted his part in the station alongside me countless times before. "You ready?"

I nod. "How's my hair and ruff look?"

“Thought you didn’t care about that stuff?” he says with a wry smile.

“Oh, hush!” I clapped, running my claws through my ruff to straighten it out. “I may not have mother’s fashion sense but I’m no slob.”

Calypso seems satisfied with my response. What an oaf.

I try to distract myself by staring out the window and watching the sides of the tunnel pass by. A bank of signals passes us on the wall, and then another after that. The lights flicker and the carriage jolts forward slightly.

That doesn’t happen usually, does it?

Daylight encroaches down the sides of the tunnel. Another switch is triggered, extinguishing the lamps, and we emerge into the station. Immediately, it’s clear something is terribly wrong.

Calypso shifts in his seat to get a closer look. “What the…”

The train platform, which we'd normally expect to be filled with metal security gates and members of the palace guard is teeming full of ordinary, everyday passengers, the gates and the guard nowhere in sight!