

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

9: Celebrity Skin

“We’ve been sent to the wrong platform!” I announce.

Calypso pivots to bodyguard mode, placing his large hand steady on my shoulder and turning me stiff as a snake plant. “Princess, don’t panic and stay as close to me as possible.” The brakes squeal as the train begins slowing to a halt.

“R-right!” I stumble, trying to recount all the training I’ve had about what to do if I find myself unexpectedly in public. Except, I haven’t had any training for a contingency quite like this, have I? Stuck in the back of a commuter train car we shouldn’t have been on in the first place with only my bodyguard and none of the security that surrounds us when we move through the station. Who could have anticipated this happening to us? What are we going to do?

Calypso stands and stares forward, perhaps hoping Duncan will walk through the door, and then scans the rest of the car. The train comes to a stop and the doors to the coach are flung open by a conductor on the platform. Throngs of

animals in plain, everyday work attire are let loose and begin boarding from the front of the coach and taking their seats. I brace myself, expecting my outfit to give away my identity and send them into a tizzy. But to my surprise they ignore us, keeping their gaze low to the ground as they scan for open seats, seemingly off in their own little worlds and blissfully unaware of who's sitting mere feet behind them.

My hand is taken by Calypso, causing my heart to skip a beat. "Follow me," he gruffs. I give a curt nod of understanding, grab my bag, and get led down the aisle to the back of the coach. Calypso smacks the side of the rear door with his hands, causing something with the lock to disengage. The door slides open by itself, and we descend the stairs onto the platform.

A beam of sunlight from a clear blue sky filters through the curved steel and glass roof of the concourse, illuminating us in broad daylight. The train has deposited us square in the middle of the bustling station — platforms filled with noisy passengers flank us on all sides, providing no easy escape route to the northern half of the station where the entrance to the airfield is. For the moment at least, being at the very end of the consist has given us a bit of breathing room; me and Calypso are beside ourselves on the platform.

Instead, everyone is in front of us — milling about, patiently waiting in line to board our train to its next destination. I'm not sure how many cars ahead Duncan had to go to reach the crew. It couldn't have been that far, could it? We should wait here for them to catch up to us, right? I lean in closer to

Calypso so he can hear me over the syncopated chuffing of a departing locomotive. “Should we wait for Duncan and the guard?”

He shakes his head. “No. The contingency if we become separated from the group is to head directly to our destination. Duncan knows this as well.”

That seems counter-intuitive for our situation, but it’s not like I wrote the rules on this stuff. Either way, if that’s what Duncan’s been trained to do, then heading straight to the hangar is our best option.

My bodyguard continues, “We’re going to have to travel through the crowds to reach the airfield. Princess, stay as close to me as possible, keep moving, and don’t let go.”

“Calypso, what if someone recognizes me?”

“Ignore them. Just keep moving forward and act like we’re a couple that got off the train.”

Wait, what?! “A *couple*?! N-no!”

I hear frantic footsteps and turn to the source; a Ruffy and a Yellow-Throat Marten in work attire, sprinting down the stairs to our platform so they don't miss the departing train. We're about to lose our privacy.

"Princess, *do it!*"

I want to object, but before I can protest further my arm is pulled along by Calypso and towards the stairway, forcing me to follow after him. I lessen my grip on his hand to let go, but Calypso just readjusts his own to compensate and grab back on. I feel his tail brush down my back; a non-verbal slapping of the wrist as if to say, '*cut it out!*'. Whether I like it or not, I'm quite literally being dragged into pretending we're partners!

We pass the hustling commuters and begin trotting up the stairs to the noisy second level of the concourse. Up there is the main level of the train station where I believe we can transfer to the platform we were supposed to arrive on.

Knowing I'll soon be moving through crowds of people, I recall what's been drilled into my head about appearing in public spaces: Muzzle up. Back straight. Shoulders and tail relaxed. Chest out.

Then, I forget all of it.

I don't want to draw a lot of attention to myself right now. It would be bad enough if someone recognized me as Princess Asha and caused a scene, swooning over me like a celebrity. My likeness may not be well known, but some closely follow the day-to-day events of the Crown and *do* know it. News reporters, radio journalists, and creepy animals with far too much spare time on their paws. Exactly the type of people who would be skulking about a train station in the vain hope of a Lordanou showing up unannounced at mom's public viewing gallery.

What's bothering me the most is if one of those animals identified me and assumed Calypso was my boyfriend. *Oh, man.* Royal relationships, the future of the Kingdom — the type of gossip they can't shut up about on talk radio. I can just hear it now, *'Who was that handsome boy Princess Asha was courting around Dragon's Gate Station this afternoon? Is this our first glimpse of the future Prince Consort?! Stay tuned as we take your calls after the break!'*

I might vomit in my own mouth at the thought.

We reach the top of the stone stairs and arrive at the second level of the concourse. A great mass of people swarmed around us, moving about their

way in seemingly unpredictable patterns. Some traveling to the platforms, some leaving, and some sitting on benches, hoping only to eat their lunch in peace. In the center of this noisy mess of animalkind is a large board with various handwritten towns and cities, times, and dates. Near the top, a Ruffy dangling upside-down from a horizontal pole by his feet writes a new departure time next to *Hollyhead*, a city to the north of Varecia. Somewhere in the distance a radio is tuned, broadcasting a news report about mom's fall in the chapel.

Calypso leads me through the crowd, darting around the animals staring patiently at the large board. I watch the faces of those passing us, anxiously following to see if they pay us any undue attention. But their expressions are stoic, focusing only on what's ahead of them.

We reach a junction that seems to be middle of the concourse, and Calypso stops to look around. "What is it?" I ask.

His whiskers twitch. "I'm trying to locate the entrance to our platform. I know it's out of the way and they intentionally don't give it a number." Above the entrances to the platforms a signboard with a number hangs from the ceiling. Predicting a response I may give, he continues, "...And they're all numbered."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a Fronted Lemur in a navy uniform of some kind hustling towards us at a quickened pace. I notify Calypso with a tug of the arm, and he turns to face the man approaching us.

"I'm sorry sir, but somebody noticed your sword," he explains, motioning to Calypso's rapier. "I'm afraid we can't have you walking around the station with a weapon."

So, somebody *was* paying attention to us. But instead of noticing me, they noticed Calypso's sword and told station security. Calypso isn't wearing the usual set of light armor he wears in public, so at a glance, there's no good way to tell he's a Knight that's allowed to carry whatever he wants.

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"Oh, is that so," Calypso's voice grows sly. He motions with his finger, and the boy moves in close so Calypso can whisper into his ear with discretion. Please just tell him the truth, Calypso. *Don't mention we're a couple. Don't mention we're a couple. Don't mention we're a couple.*

As he speaks, I spot the gaze of passing animals fixating on us. It appears the intervention by security is causing people to take notice. A well-dressed

Ringtail on a bench near one of the platforms seems to have taken a particular interest in me, examining my outfit with a discerning eye from a distance. She seems high-class, donning a flowing, warm-toned traveling dress adorned with satin bows and a silk bonnet trimmed with orange lace. It's not unlike some of the coords I see nobles wearing when they visit the palace.

She must be admiring my outfit, right? I picked it out this morning with Griselda's help since mom usually disapproves of my tastes. It's a women's riding outfit that's worn when riding bicycles, but I thought it would be a good way to mix things up and get out of wearing a dress or something else obnoxiously feminine to the Eastern Weald. It's also way more discrete, which considering our current situation was a wise choice. I'm glad I chose it today!

Though I'll never confide this in anyone but myself, I do enjoy the compliments I receive from other women about the outfits I wear. It's just a real cheery and rosy feeling when another girl wants to go out of her way to tell you how nice you look, you know? I just want to wrap myself in their warm praises like a quilt on a bitterly cold winter day.

I decide to straighten up my back anyways, puffing my chest out like an Avian.

"Y-yes sir, the platform is right down that way. It's where the security checkpoint is," the Fronted boy quivers, pointing Calypso down a corridor in the apparent direction of the platform we should have arrived on. Calypso

must have given him a pretty stern lecture. He gives the boy our thanks, and we continue on our way.

Oh, we're going to walk past the Ringtail going in this direction! She's going to give me a nice compliment about my outfit, I just know it! We approach the bench, which is situated near the corridor we're heading toward, and I spot that her eyes are still fixated on me.

Her tail relaxes and she opens her muzzle to say, "Oh, honey, that outfit just doesn't suit you."

...What?!

She *doesn't* like it?!

I stop dead in my tracks, snapping my head towards the Ringtail to give her a death stare. Calypso pulls my arm, but my boots stay firmly planted on the ground.

Oh, no. *I'm not going anywhere, Bristlebody.*

Why would you go out of your way to tell a girl you don't like her outfit? How pompous do you have to be to tell that to a stranger and not just keep your maw shut? My fur bristles and my tail lashes. She deserves the condemnation I routinely receive. I summon my inner Queen Kelani, attempting to perform the most spot-on impersonation of my mother's scorn possible.

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"Riding outfits are seasonal to springtime darling," she says in a confident voice unmoved by my aggravation. "Beautiful days like this are the exception in autumn, nobody expects to go riding during such a dreadful season."

Seasonal to springtime? What does that even mean!? You can wear an outfit any time of the year, It doesn't matter what season it is!

Calypso drags on my arm again. "Pri— um, *dearest*, we need to keep moving!"

"You should order that boy of yours to fetch you something more appropriate," scoffs the Ringtail.

Oh, no. Not only did Calypso just *do the thing I told him not to do*, but the Ringtail's seemingly picked up on who I am. She told me to *order* Calypso to get a different outfit. She wouldn't have chosen that word unknowingly, would she?

"Don't call me that!" I bark at Calypso, then whip my attention back to the woman on the bench. "I'll wear whatever I please, whenever I please, and *it will be fashionable because I wore it!* Thank you very much!"

Before she can respond I turn on my boot heel and march off, this time performing the dragging of arms to Calypso. I'm hot with embarrassment at what just occurred, so I'd like to remove myself from the scene as quickly as possible.

We move an earshot away and Calypso turns to me, his eyes wide. "What the hell was that all about?!"

"She dissed my outfit. What was I supposed to do?"

"Keep walking and not cause a scene?"

I roll my shoulders. “She was being rude. I thought I’d try imitating my mother.”

“That was more than an imitation.”

Yeah... Justifications aside, I may have leaned a little too far into the role play on that one. Eager to move on, I stay silent in response.

...It was just an imitation, right?

We approach a platform entrance with an impressive array of metal gates blocking the stairway down to the lower level. Nearby is an overlook to the concourse below with a banner hanging from the ceiling proudly announcing it to be the ‘Royal Observation Platform’. The telltale fingerprints of mom’s infatuation with public vanity are all over this one.

With little reason for regular passengers to come to this part of the station, me and Calypso are beside ourselves as we approach the security checkpoint. Another station security officer sees our approach and holds her paw out to stop us.

“Ma’am, this is a restr—“

Calypso cuts her off. “—Calypso Durham, Knight-Captain of the Legion of Dragons. By the orders of Her Majesty the Princess we will be passing through to the airfield.” Having reached our destination, the time for discretion is over, it seems. Thank the Goddess.

The Marten’s fur stands on end. She swivels her pallid gaze towards me, the ring on my right hand, then back towards my face. I give her an expectant stare. “Y-yes, of course! Right away Sir Knight!” she stammers, quickly removing herself from our way. She tosses in a quick, “Ma’am.” as we stride by and descend the stairway.

Stopped again by petty security! What an unnecessary delay. “I would have just walked right through,” I mutter under my breath.

“That would have caused a scene, Princess.”

“Well, I’ve already caused a few scenes today. What’s so bad about causing another?” Calypso fails to laugh at my joke.

We reach the bottom of the stairs, finally on the platform we should have arrived at in the first place. The metal barriers from above are extended like walls down here to prevent anyone from rushing the platform. We tread on the same plush red carpet that's used in the residences wing of the palace, installed here along with the fanciful statues and frescoes that are native to my family's home.

'I wish for all the public to feel like they're alongside me as I go about the official business,' is what mom likes to say of this place. I know this because it's written on a giant fweghing tapestry strung to the wall next to us and plainly visible from the observation platform. You know, just in case you forgot what all this pomp and spectacle was doing here.

Calypso finally relinquishes his grip as we reach the middle of the platform. "Let's wait here," he says, as I stretch my hand out to gain some of the feeling back. "We'll be safe, and Duncan and the guard will know where to go."

"Alright," I reply. I'd prefer to go wait in the hangar itself so we're out of the public eye, but at least I'm used to standing on this platform in plain view of the station while mom goes about her thing.

Above us, on the observation deck, a few animals have gathered at the railing and are staring down at us. I guess all the commotion we caused on the upper lever finally caught up to us. Though far away, I can make out their body

language. A Fisher is talking to a Pine Marten and pointing directly at me. The Pine Marten peers down, examines me, and then turns back to the Fisher and shakes her head. Her tail droops and she mouths the words, “No, I don’t think so.”

H-hey! You weren’t dissing my outfit too, were you? I sincerely hope you’re just confused if I’m the Princess or not!

Eventually, the guard caught up and joined us on the platform. Duncan followed shortly after, claiming he needed the extra time to give a good shout to the train crew and the station staff. Me and Calypso were both accommodating. By the time he had arrived though, all the activity on the platform had attracted a large enough crowd to the viewing overlook that it spilled over and onto the rest of the second level. I was eager to escape the spotlight and head to the airship.

“Alright. Are we ready to move on?” I ask of everyone assembled.

“Yes, we are... but Princess,” Duncan says, angling his large ears to the crowd behind him. “Your mother would be upset if you didn’t at least acknowledge them.”

Ugh.

Well, at least I don't have to give a speech or anything super stressful like that. I can handle a *little* bit of the fame associated with being our Kingdom's Princess, but the station crowds are as much as I can tolerate right now. Yeah, I know I'm going to be the Monarch someday and speak to way larger crowds of animals. But that's another problem for Future Asha!

I nod to Duncan. He and Calypso part and the full breadth of the crowd is opened up to me. Feeling their weight, I saunter forward a few paces as a cheer rises from them, rolling over the station and mixing with the sound of hearty applause. It's not often the public gets to view their Princess. I smile and imitate mom's signature hand wave to the giddy onlookers: a large, swaying motion with my forearm flowing back and forth.

Mental Note: I still need to come up with my signature hand wave! Oh well, at least I still have plenty of time to figure it out.

I pivot to make sure the entire crowd is acknowledged and turn back towards my entourage. "Okay, that's enough excitement for one day," I exhale. "Let's please get out of here."