

The Secret Princess

Percy—Farewells

“They look happy, don’t you think?” I asked the guest beside me, my eyes on the engaged couple chatting easily with Princess Alyssa and Prince Max.

The horse whuffed a disapproving sort of snort. *How anyone could be happy when they’re about to embark on a prolonged journey with Celine is beyond me.*

I turned my head slightly to hide my grin before turning a grave face back toward Arvin.

“If you don’t like the idea of traveling with Celine, why don’t you come with me?”

The horse whipped his head around to narrow one eye at me. *Come with you?*

I nodded, eagerness gripping me as I considered the idea further.

“Now that Giselle and Philip have completed their visit to Northhelm with Oliver and Celine, they’re taking a break from diplomatic duties, aren’t they? They’ll be traveling down to Lanover to their families with the intention of making a longer stay until after Celine’s baby is born. I’m sure Giselle would understand if you want to do something more active and useful.”

Arvin shook his mane regally. *I do strive to always be useful, it’s true.*

I grinned openly this time. Despite their trip to Northhelm, the other royals had spent long enough in Arcadie that I had grown used to the strangeness of a talking horse. The suggestion that he accompany me had been the whim of the moment, but it had already taken root in my mind. Despite his haughty attitude, Arvin would be an asset in my search and an entertaining companion, besides.

“You would be more than welcome,” I said. “Better qualified than me, probably, since you’ve actually met Daria and Cassie.”

I can certainly understand why you would desire my assistance, he neighed. And it is distasteful to me that Damon should have escaped. The whole affair was entirely mismanaged and clearly needs my guiding hoof. He paused before giving a toss of his head. *I shall speak to Giselle on the matter.*

He trotted away on a direct route to the Eldonian princess. I grimaced. I hadn’t meant for him to broach the matter in the middle of her engagement picnic. But as I watched him accost her and Philip, I shrugged. Giselle had been the one to insist on Arvin’s presence when Alyssa had suggested throwing her an engagement party on their way back through Arcadie, heading south toward Lanover. Giselle had suggested a picnic in the palace grounds specifically so he could be included. And she knew the horse better than anyone. She wasn’t likely to be surprised by his lack of manners.

I turned to accept a small cake from a passing server and turned back to find someone at my side. I grinned at the bridegroom-to-be.

“That escape was smoothly done. Accept my congratulations.”

Philip chuckled. “You would think discovering he has yet to learn his lesson would have softened Arvin. But if it has, I haven’t noticed the effect. Sometimes I think I liked him better before I could understand him.” He shook his head at me. “But I hear you’re requesting his company.”

“No horse can equal him, for all his haughty attitude.” I grimaced. “And I suspect I’m going to need all the help I can get. You were in Northhelm, so you heard Aurora’s reports for yourself. No one has found any trace of the missing girls—or managed to locate Damon, either.”

“So you’re still determined to go after him?” Philip’s good humor dropped away, his face serious. “Because you know you’re still welcome to accompany us to Lanover. This isn’t your fight, and no one would think less of you for leaving it to the locals. None of the missing girls are even from Talinos.”

“No, we don’t have anyone missing, thank goodness. But my brother, Gabe, was fostered with the Trionian royal family for eight years. He would expect me to do what I can to find Daisy.” I frowned. “I expect it of myself. Who knows what trouble Daisy will have gotten herself into on the run in a strange kingdom?”

It was a terrifying thought, but it wasn’t my only motivation. Damon had pulled us all into his schemes, using us as pawns for his advancement—and our kingdoms with us. He couldn’t be allowed to roam free. If I had managed to disable him in our fight—instead of allowing myself to be distracted—he would be imprisoned already. I had been the one with the opportunity to stop him, and I had failed. I had relived those frenzied, confusing moments in the throne room so many times, and I intended to quiet the unpleasant memory by righting my error.

“At least we can expect the godmothers to be guiding the girls,” Philip said, unaware of my inner turmoil. “From what they said to Giselle, anyway.”

I laughed, throwing off the somber mood. “If you knew Daisy, you wouldn’t say that like it was a good thing. Daisy is bad enough on her own, let alone with the weight of the godmothers behind her. I almost pity whatever kingdom she’s ended up in.”

Philip clapped me on the back. “In truth, I rather envy you. I wouldn’t mind setting off adventuring myself.” His eyes drifted to where Giselle was still in conversation with Arvin. “But I have other responsibilities for the moment.”

I shook my head. “I’ve seen the two of you together, so don’t try to pretend they’re heavy responsibilities to bear.”

Philip grinned. “Naturally if I had my way, Giselle would be joining me on the adventuring. But it’s true enough that the responsibilities of the next few months are a small price to pay for a future in Eldon with Giselle. Even if those months will involve being ordered around by every person who shares my blood.” He shook his head, although he was still smiling. “You can be sure they’ll be quick to seize on their last opportunity before my escape.”

“Philip.” The crisp voice, full of steel despite its age, made my spine instinctively straighten. But my new friend turned to face his grandmother with a laugh in his eyes, apparently undaunted by the unfortunate timing of her arrival.

“Yes, Grandmother?”

The Duchess of Sessily gave him a disapproving look, but I could see affection lurking at the back of her eyes.

“There are some Arcadian nobles you need to meet. They may travel to the new kingdoms in the next few years, and they will no doubt be looking for a friendly face when they arrive. I would like for that face to be Lanoverian.” A long-suffering look came over her face. “And since I can hardly rely on Celine for such a role, I will have to make do with you.”

“Your confidence in me fills me with joy, Grandmother,” Philip said with a straight face. “Behold me full of enthusiasm for these introductions.”

The duchess gave him a dampening look. “It’s a great pity those storms didn’t subside a few years earlier. Clarisse was wasted in Rangmere. She is a princess who understands her duty and responsibility, and she would have been a useful ally in the new kingdoms.” She turned to me. “I apologize for his levity, Your Highness.”

Philip didn’t look in the least abashed. “I think Queen Ava appreciates Clarisse’s presence in her kingdom. So I will just have to do my best as a poor substitute.”

The duchess looked at him with narrowed eyes before smiling. “You’ll do well enough, child. You’ve got enough charm for the job, I suppose.”

“Ha! Philip? Charm?” Celine strolled over, one hand resting idly on the now noticeable bump at her middle. She nodded to the duchess. “Your Grace.”

“You could learn something from him on the subject,” the duchess said.

“Do you think so?” Celine asked lightly. “I thought my role was to inspire fear in potential wrongdoers.” She lifted her other hand, and a small flame danced between her fingertips before disappearing.

The duchess surprised me by barking out a laugh. “True. And you were terrifying enough before your godmother conceived the horrifying idea of giving you power over fire, so I suppose you’ll do.”

Philip grinned. “You’re forgetting that Celine was only terrifying to parent figures before. Now she terrifies even me.”

Celine rolled her eyes. “If you are, you’ve yet to show any sign of it. But then, you’ve always been shameless. I should warn Giselle before she shackles herself to you for life.”

A soft laugh heralded Giselle’s arrival. She slipped her arm through Philip’s and gave him a mischievous look, soft with love.

“No warnings are needed, thank you. I like Philip just the way he is.”

Celine opened her mouth to give a suitable retort to this lovestruck comment, but Oliver stopped her with a hand on her arm and a quick smile.

“Leave them be, love. It is their engagement party, after all.”

“Yes, indeed.” The duchess’s voice had softened, although from what I knew of her it had less to do with the gentling effect of true love and more to do with the reminder that Philip had managed to secure a foreign princess for his bride. The duchess was relentless in her pursuit of good for her kingdom.

She eyed the engaged couple. “Perhaps you had better come and meet these nobles as well, Giselle. Although one of the Arcadian royals may have already introduced you?”

She gestured for Giselle and Philip to join her as she moved away from our group. But Giselle held Philip back for a moment, her eyes finding me.

“We leave early tomorrow morning, so I wanted to say goodbye now, in case we don’t see you. But I hope you’ll visit us in Eldon before too long.”

I gave a shallow bow. “Of course, if I can manage it.” I had already become friends with Philip in the few weeks we had spent together, and visiting them would be no hardship.

Philip gripped my hand. “We wish you all success in your endeavors, naturally. You have both sets of kingdoms behind you in your efforts to stop Damon. You leave tomorrow as well, yes?”

I nodded. “Naturally we’ll keep you all informed of our talks with Queen Ava, as well as any information we might find on the girls or Damon.”

Oliver and Celine chimed in with their thanks, and Philip and Giselle finally responded to the compelling look the duchess was sending their way and departed. Oliver gave me a regretful look.

“Philip isn’t the only one who wishes he was going with you, but…” He looked at Celine, and she grimaced back.

“You know I would love nothing more than to send a few choice fireballs after that traitor. Perhaps—”

Oliver cut her off. “But we’re both agreed that it’s best to follow the doctor’s advice and avoid the fireballs for now.” He paused, slipping an arm around his wife’s waist and grinning at me. “Unfortunately.”

“Of course you must consider the baby’s safety first,” I agreed. “And so I shall have to carry the burden for you all.”

Oliver laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. “Lucky thing. You would think the rest of us would have had enough adventure for a lifetime. But normal life does seem to pall after a while, however appealing it looks in the middle of the excitement.”

Celine laughed, rubbing her belly. “If my many nieces and nephews are anything to go by, we won’t be lacking for excitement in the next few years.”

Oliver turned to her with a private smile.

Sickening isn’t it? Arvin had approached behind me on silent hoofs. Now you see what I mean. Instead of fiery retribution, we get this.

“So you’ll come with me, then?”

He pawed the ground. *I have informed Giselle that I have consented to oversee the efforts to find and capture Damon. And that I will keep an eye out for her friends while I’m about it.*

“Excellent!” I said, accepting my relegation to assistant with equanimity. “We’ll start by going to Rangmeros with Prince Max and Princess Alyssa for their meetings with Queen Ava. But no promises that we will remain there. I don’t mean to come back until we’ve found Damon.”

Naturally, Arvin neighed. I am not accustomed to failure.