

A Flight of Fancy

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Content warning: Adorableness.

Among all the RSVPs for the party on Princess Persephenae Gallandie's desk, an opened envelope with a wax seal sat. The strange image of a coin upon a propeller hadn't matched any symbols of the nobility; the guard who screened the letters had guessed that, given how untraditional both images were. It was immediately confiscated, but rumor reached the princess. Once it had been identified as a love letter, there was no stopping her from getting her hands on it. There were few things more entertaining in pampered and secluded royal life than unprompted love letters.

The human girl breathed in, a twice-folded parchment in her brown hands, steeling herself for an assault of pure over-romantic poetry or semi-graphic cheesiness. Percy—a nickname she desperately wished the other nobles would even consider using—lived for this sort of schmuck.

My Dearest Princess Gallandie,

I am an admirer given to daring deeds, not the least of which is sending this letter to you. Your deep, thoughtful eyes sing to my heart, and my mind is stimulated by your soft yet confident voice. I particularly appreciate your enjoyment of the ancient works of Gabbiani; it is a pity no one else's face lit up like yours at the topic. For shame, the banality of royal gossip rots the minds of so many so-called nobles.

It pains me to see you host party after party with such dour looks upon your ebony visage. It is too beautiful a face to be wasted on such charades. You long for excitement, yes? I have met so many that wish the same. You, surely, are a corsair at heart. Of course, there's only one way to know for sure.

Instead of mailing an RSVP to yet another event to gaze upon you from afar, I mail this to you in the hopes you might RSVP for a private event with me. Same date, same time. All you need do is close your eyes when the lights turn off, my dear Percy, and I promise to sweep you off your feet.

Sending this on the winds of fate,

Mercurus Sarbetz

PS: To the guard reading this letter first, I admire your vigilance. I would be honored should you catch me. Should you not, please do not blame yourself.

Percy laughed at the postscript. This was surely the most ballsy love letter she'd ever gotten! Rereading the message once more, her mirth-filled face turned to genuine intrigue. Clearly, it must have been a noble who wrote this, but she'd never heard of a Sarbetz Estate. And to appreciate her taste in literature was certainly a more unique angle than most. Granted, the usual tropes were there, of eyes and ebony, but the rest...was surprisingly understanding.

Folding the letter and sliding it back into the envelope, the princess placed it in a drawer among countless others she'd collected. "When the lights turn off, huh?" she hummed. "What an ego. As if I'd dream of someone I'd never seen before." Finishing a glass of water and placing it upon the silver platter atop her nightstand, she shuffled her way atop the large bed, hands lifting her black curls and setting them down over one of the ten or twelve pillows piled behind her. A clap coaxed the light beads hung on the room's ceiling to dim to the faintest of glows. She rested her arms on her chest, gazing up at the embroidered violet canopy that hung above her and trailing the lines with her eyes until sleep took her. She had a busy day tomorrow making sure the party went well.

No stranger walked into her dreams that night.

Percy sighed as she looked over the gathering. A large ballroom gown of dark red did little to entertain her, and the gathering was paltry compared to her previous few. Perhaps two in one month was too much to ask for? But what else did the nobility have to do in this time of peace? There was only so many ways they could award medals to the heroes of twenty years ago. Half of the heroes didn't even humor the pomp anymore.

It also didn't help that there were few other nobles of her age; she'd been conceived in a surprisingly busy stretch of years where most other families were scrambling to anticipate monster attacks and manage both armies and adventurers against said foes. With a crystal in their kingdom and having one of their knights swept into a world-saving journey, her parents must have been particularly confident. Perhaps recklessly so.

But she was born and survived, and now she was here, sipping from a cup of non-spiked punch; she knew Duke Geoffrey better than to drink from the bowl placed among the assorted blue-bloods. A lively party-going noble he might've been, but sometimes Percy wanted to not hear about flirtatious wenches and duels with rivals.

The thought of “royal gossip” made Percy think of the letter she’d read the previous night, leaning against the marble balcony she looked over. “If only more of my class were as humorous and fun as that,” she thought to herself.

Suddenly, something she’d been used to disappeared. The subtle hum of the room’s magic lighting subsided, the small glass beads slowly darkening. Rising to occupy its place was the murmur of a confused and concerned gathering below. Guards readied their weapons, adding the noise of metal and leather clanking and shifting. Percy jerked upright, her punch cup dropping to the floor.

The lights turned off? ...the lights turned off!

Percy shivered in a moment of fear. Should she? She had to, surely. Was it worth it? She clenched her eyes shut.

Barely a second passed before she heard a single chuckle just behind her head. “Thank you for RSVPing yes, my dear Percy.” Suddenly, something pulled taut against her belly, a band of fabric quickly snapped tight by two metal hooks and two bands of rope. Something metallic tinked against the beautiful stone floor below her.

Then, her feet left the floor. “Keep them closed,” the voice advised as Percy was drawn into a shocked gasp. “It’ll be easier on the stomach.” The voice held no malice; in fact, it was surprisingly high pitched, not unlike a teenage boy’s. Still, it spoke with enough expertise and comfort that the suddenly entertained girl trusted it to follow its instructions.

When the lights slowly pulsed back into life, the assembled nobles gave a small collective breath of relief, busying themselves about the snack table. The guards, however, quickly escorted them to their various horse- or chocobo-drawn carriages. One particular guard, commonly assigned to screening the castle’s mail, was beet red, holding a small token of gold emblazoned with a propeller and standing where the princess had been mere minutes before.

The sounds were deafening. First, the rush of air around her whooshing over her ears as she soared upwards and lost track of the ground. Then, the roar of engines grew ever closer, thrumming as she and her kidnapper approached, signifying a ready escape. Then, all of it was replaced by a hiss of rope against metal, and below her suddenly sounded the clunking and grinding of wood against wood.

“Welcome back, Captain!” The voice was low even if the phrasing was excitable. When Percy dared to open her eyes, the first face met her was a young nu mou’s. The main way Percy could tell was from the relatively subtle hunch in his back when compared to his other long-eared cousins. Rather than scholarly garb, he appeared to be dressed in some perversion of a royal butler’s garb; the sleeves had been torn off, and a blue-and-white bandana was firmly tied over the top of his head, but it was a formal tuxedo otherwise.

"Hello," she greeted with a nervous smile. Not long after, though, she gave an "eep!" as the hooks slipped out and she fell a couple feet onto the solid wooden panel below with a thud.

"I apologize for ruffling your dress with such a sudden trip, but I believe you understand the logistics of the matter," the voice behind her said, a significantly softer thud of feet sounding behind her. "This is my first mate, Drem."

"How do you do, your highness," he said with a bow.

"How do you do, Mister Drem...?"

"Oh!" the voice behind peeped. "No asking last names on my ship unless offered. Bad manners here, sorry."

"Oh! I'm very sorry," she said with a bow of her head to the nu mou, the first mate already waving the apology away as unnecessary. Brushing out her dress, she eventually hoisted it by the wire frame as she turned. "And I assume you must be..."

"Mercurus Sarbe-!"

"CUUUUUUUUUUTE!"

What had been a most confident and (so he thought) suave expression of pride on the captain's face paled and turned to an exasperated groan as the princess reached forward and pinched his cheeks. "Awww, captain, not another one..." his first mate moaned, coming over and leaning down to give the captain a pat.

Dressed in full royal airship captain apparel—a set of red and gold clothes that had apparently been resized multiple times from the numerous seams and slightly-too-large buttons and rank lapels on it—was now a most dour-looking moogles. Bright, fuzzy brown ears drooped behind him, as did a fluffy red pom. His face was not as long as some of his cousins, resulting in a large, dimpled face with big cheeks and big eyes. Rather than being perfectly stiff, his whiskers curved as they poked out to the sides from the side of his face. Small hands and small legs did not help him look any more imposing or elegant, either.

Had it not been for the slightly too large uniform scrunching about his form and the precedent he set with such romantic overtures, Percy might have been able to control herself. Unfortunately, she realized too late the extreme faux pas she made. Releasing the captain's cheeks, she stepped backwards, grimacing sheepishly. "I am...so sorry. ...uh, sir."

The moogles sighed. "Mercurus Sarbetz, dashing airship rogue, surveyor of the horizon, yada yada, so-on and so forth," he finished in monotone, clearly dispassionate about his introduction. Eventually, though, he took a breath, and looked back up at the princess with what seemed to be a genuine smile. His eyes, though, still showed a little hurt. "No titles, please! If you insist then I would prefer to go by captain, but I would very much like this to be an honest outing of fellow spirits on a first-name basis. Is that alright?"

"O-of course! Sorry. I mean, I actually would like that a lot," she enthusiastically replied.

“Good! Now, would you be interested in joining me for dinner in my private quarters? I have tea prepared, but I can uncork some wine if you so pref...”

“Yes! Wine. Wine would be very nice.”

Percy cringed inwardly at her reply, especially at the raised eyebrow it drew from the moogle corsair. “...wine it is, then.” As he walked up the steps from the quiet airship hold, she followed while mentally beating herself up for having crushed the spirits of the captain so quickly. Maybe, she had thought, just maybe the alcohol would relieve her of future embarrassment amid this consensual kidnapping.

Percy had her suspicions, but she was certain this “Mercurus” was a pseudonym at seeing the most high class feast for two prepared at the table. Strangely, though, amid the whole roast chicken with eldagusto, Gedegg soup, and small cups of Cyril ice were substantially less formal dishes. Kiddy bread, choco gratin, and gysahl salad were thought of as commoner’s food, yet they sat among the rest without any separation or special note. Mercurus’ plate had already been served, sitting ready with a leg of the chicken, a small bowl of gratin, a few pieces of kiddy bread, and his own cup of Cyril ice. Percy noted the table was high enough to comfortably seat her but not low enough for a moogle’s reach; had he served his plate before as to not look undignified?

Filling her own plate and sitting down at the place set nearby his, she watched him gnaw at the chicken leg for a moment and did her best not to grin at the adorable scene, even as he looked back with spicy eldagusto smeared around his lips. First Mate Drem thankfully walked in, interrupting to offer a bottle of Ambervale pinot gris. “I thought the malboro wine would be more potent than you were seeking, your highness,” he noted as he poured her glass. Privately, Percy made a mental note to figure out some way of thanking the nu mou for reading her better than she had herself.

“So,” she began, as Mercurus wiped away the sauce at his lips, “you are passionate about Gabbiani?”

“Oh yes!” he cheered, face brightening to a darling smile. “We know so little about him, but his journals on freedom, friends, and love have lasted ages. They’re obscure in the face of more complete authors, but how could I not favor a writer so enchanted by the sky and the call of the horizon?”

Percy smiled as Mercurus emphatically explained himself, the moogle’s eyes lit with a fiery passion. A suitor he might be, but it was hard to take him seriously. She couldn’t tell if he noticed, given how enraptured he was as he described races in the air, companionship toppling gods, pushing one’s own boundaries... The princess ate for a bit, then simply rested her elbows on the table (no one would judge her for the temporary violation of etiquette) and leaned her chin atop folded hands to listen.

The moogles' eyes glanced to the princess' pose. He thought for a second in silence, then settled himself back onto his seat. "Apologies, my dear Percy," he mumbled sheepishly into a spoonful of gratin, tiny mouth giving soft blows over the still hot cheese between thoughts. "I am a passionate sort and often get lost. It is rude of me to not invite your thoughts. What made you pick up such an ancient adventurer's writings?"

"Boredom, admittedly," the princess sighed. "But I thought his writing was so rich with energy and feeling. I wanted to know if anyone else had felt that same excitement. But nobility is its own game, and the excitement seems reserved for luxuries and sexual gossip. I've had the first all my life and have no interest in the second."

"I see," Mercurus hummed. "Do you ever think about...simply creating another life?"
"Like you?"

The pom on the captain's head almost swung forward into the bowl of soup as he choked on a spoonful of the island dish. "Gwh, fw-wha? Whatever do you mean?" he chuckled, eyes dashing from side to side as if to spot eavesdroppers inside his own quarters.

"Well, for one, you have an airship."
"I stole it."
"You were at a party of mine. At least one."
"Lax guards, pity that."
"You know a little too much about my perspective, no?"

Mercurus threw his hands up. "Fine! Fine. I MAY have been a low ranking captain-"
"Noble, you mean. Son of a duke, perhaps?"
"Gah, fine! A noble of some sort." His hands snatched down to his roast chicken, taking a rather large bite with plenty of sauce and stuffing it into his mouth. "Bugsh I ahm uh chorshare at hearsh!" he proclaimed through the mouthful as he chewed.

Percy giggled at the purposeful rejection of courtly manners. "Fine, Mercurus the Corsair," she said, her voice managing to create the same sarcastic air of honor as a far-too-deep curtsy. Her hands idly twisted her spoon back and forth into the cup of honey-flavored frozen treat, brown digits grinding the silverware into the slowly softening white dessert. "And...honestly? I think because I would cause my parents great concern. Even if my heart were fully behind it, it would be..."

"...logistically difficult?"

She hummed at the suggestion. "...well, that is true too. And I suppose what I was going to say wasn't actually true, either. I was going with...unprecedented."

Mercurus put down his fork, having managed a surprising amount of food for someone both small and talkative. "Okay, why are you being so insistent on my nobility?"

The princess's eyes turned to the glass of wine, watching the cabin's candlelight flicker across its surface. "Well, you expressed an interest in romance, did you not? If you were not a noble, it seems that you would be asking me to effectively break from my title to marry a—"

"I don't see how that's relevant," he groaned, sitting back into his chair, the slouch partially hiding his face below the edge of the table.

"It's relevant because nobility would allow you an excuse to at least bring such a relationship into the light through proper—"

"It's irrelevant because you're not romantically interested in me," the moogle interrupted, "just as you are sexually disinterested in general."

Percy was frozen. Even from his slouch, the moogle's eyes were clearly focused and honest. The only thing that let her reach out and take a large gulp of her white wine was the fact that kindness still shone within them. That, and....even mad, she found him painfully adorable.

"...then why the dinner?" she asked softly. "You could have easily returned me as soon as you knew. I presume you have a plan for returning me, after all."

"Of course I do. And of course I will, the very moment you ask," he said firmly, pushing himself up from his chair to stand upon it. "But you hurt me that I would not do this for a friend as much as a potential love. Was it not clear in Gabbiani's journals? *In this world of chaos, it is love that gave me wings. Not from lovers and trists, but from family, rivals, and friends. This I learned and this I knew when I faced god.*"

Percy loosened her grip upon the wine glass. "A...friend?"

"Of course a friend," he scowled. "It is hardly a consolation prize, you know. Both friends and loves are valuable in their own rights. The simple matter is that you were unentertained and seemed to seek a different type of friend than court could provide. You found love letters entertaining, and so—whether it touched your heart, Percy, or tickled your mirth—a love letter was the best way for me to extend my hand in friendship. Just as my airship is the best way for me to feel the thrill of life and provide it to others. And do not think I insist on dropped titles and formalities for purely seduction's sake; it is a rule on this ship so that we all might be seen as people with lives, thoughts, and dreams. And nicknames too."

The princess turned her deep, brown eyes—the same that countless letters had mentioned in sexual or courting desires—to the surface of the wine once more. The moogle massaged his temples, kicking back the last good fourth of a glass back and down his throat. Almost immediately the furry captain regretted it, wheezing out at the feel of so much alcohol on his breath. Percy stifled a snicker, drawing a look from the moogle.

"...if you're not going to let yourself laugh at that, I can always pour another glass." he remarked, a sly smirk growing upon his face.

"No, please!" she giggled. "I don't think either of us could take that."

Mercurus beamed at his guest, clearly relieved she'd found his words relaxing enough to at least remove the mirth-hiding hand from in front of her face. "Good. Then I believe, unless you are ready to return home, you have yet to think of one truly important question."

The girl blinked. "...what question is that?"

Hopping off from his chair, he straightened his collar and headed to a small, mooglesized chest of drawers. "Why bring you to an airship if I'm not going to bother showing you the view?"

Percy grinned before looking down in concern at her wind-ruffled dress. Even having properly hiked up the rear of her wireframe dress to seat herself, the sudden upwards trip from her own party had left the wireframe bent in places. "I uh...don't think my dress would survive a trip to the deck," she noted.

Mercurus carefully picked two objects out of one of the drawers. The first he slapped to his own face. Eyes and cheeks now shrouded in a red and gold masquerade mask perfectly fitted to rest upon his moogles muzzle, he handed a more plain red mask with a string to his guest. "I think this one suits your beautiful skin without hiding too much," he observed, "But, no, no need for the surface deck. I didn't, after all, invest in soundproofing every single room in this place purely to keep out the engine noise." He grinned mischievously; in Percy's eyes, the mask and mad grin almost distracted her from the corsair's adorableness with intrigue and mystery. Almost, but not quite.

As soon as the door opened, the noise was indeed overwhelming. More than a hundred people, squeezed into the large, full-length room, bustling around tables of various sorts. Most wore masks of some kind, and many were dressed in rich clothes; however, just as many mingled in the enclosed room in farmer's tunics, soldier's armor, priestess robes, or servant's garb, and there seemed no separations between any of them. Craps dice flew, roulettes spun with hopeful eyes on the rattling ball, and cards were dealt to cheerful faces. One or two people dourfully passed coins across a bar to a viera bartender, the rabbit-eared girl smiling and offering words as well as drinks in return in the hopes of lifting their gambled-away spirits. Laughter and chatter were the most plentiful sounds, though, an atmosphere of mirth filling the red-carpeted room.

As Percy stepped into the room with Mercurus closing the "Crew Only" door behind, she looked to the sides of the room. Both left and right walls were almost entirely glass, clouds rushing just decks below as the ship skimmed their surface, the lights from the bustling casino illuminating their lumpy surfaces and wisps of vapor. The sky was dark, an early fall night letting the stars shine through. Even despite the light from the airship's constantly active party, the faint curve of the galaxy could be seen with countless fainter points of color promising countless other worlds should any human or moogles or otherwise exhaust the mysteries of this world. Perhaps it was thanks the lack of bright moon that night.

"Wow," the red-masked girl gasped.

"The sky, or my casino?"

Percy looked down at the proud-looking cutie. "I mean, mostly the sky, admittedly. But this casino of yours...is this also what you meant by the rule of dropped titles and formalities?"

"The masks too," Mercurus replied, tapping his mask. "Here, we are all equal." He began to walk, waving at a serious-looking bangaa near the bar. The lizard-like woman grinned at the moogles' approach, straightening the quite battered breastplate she wore among her other pieces of old soldier-for-hire's gear. "Many here I consider my friends. The only thing we share in common is excitement and camaraderie. Gina, please meet Percy. She's our compass for the evening."

The bangaa reached out, grabbing the princess' hand and shaking it as she would an adventurer's. "Compassss, eh? Treat our captain right, and you're a friend of Gina'sss."

Before Percy could reply, Mercurus motioned for the bangaa to lean down. "How's it look?"

"Tablessss have not been too kind," she hissed back. "We are over our operating costss by a good margin."

Nodding, the captain grabbed a nearby stool and scrambled up upon it. At his snap, the games slowed to a halt, every crew member's eyes drawn to the bobbing pom now at most people's eye-level. Eventually, the crowd also followed the crew's eyes to give their attention to the moogles.

"Thank you, friends and fun-loving acquaintances, for coming on this cruise for the weekend!" he squeaked, high-pitched voice managing to carry with only significant training and the cooperation of the crowd to thank. "As a reminder to the regulars and a message to the newer members of this merry escapade, we are all equal here. If you see a mask you've never seen before, please say hello, talk of passions and dreams, and put your worries and reservations to the wind! ...don't worry, I can assure you the winds are quite strong up here."

A brief chuckle rippled through some of those gathered, though a few impatient faces looked on. Mercurus wasn't bad at reading a room, though. "But I of course wouldn't interrupt your games, tales, and sorrows for such a simple message. For your patronage and cooperation...next two drinks for everyone are coin-free!"

The cheer was equally emphatic across the room as Percy watched Gina help Mercurus down from the stool. Patting down the ruffles in his barely-fitted uniform, he returned to the waiting princess.

"Compass?" she asked.

"A term for the person the ship's course is owed to," he said. "It's sometimes purchasable with house credit, but people around here know it means someone I simply respect enough."

"Wouldn't that mean mostly nobilit-"

"You can only buy house credit with real gold up to a cap on my ship," he noted, preempting her question. "And every person who earns my respect also gets a regular allowance of house credit. So well-tempered shoemakers can earn just as many trips as impatient kings. Speaking of..." Mercurus held up a small pouch to Percy. Looking in, she spied tens of coins, each face marked with a propeller symbol.

"You said you would return me home the second I asked, yes?" she inquired, eyes still counting what was in the pouch.

"Of course; you're the compass. I would sad to see you leave without making a few friends, though."

"...does that mean I get to decide where else to go?"

"For a time, certainly. I'd advise not staying longer than a day or two, though, lest your kingdom call for a manhunt."

Percy closed the pouch's neck and looked up. "I think...I'd like to meet some people," she said. "So...I suppose Gabbiani would suggest our course to aim for the horizon, yes?"

The moogle's expression had never looked happier. "Consider the course already set. I hope you find many interesting souls on board," he said, gesturing out towards the crowd.

"Thank you," the princess replied, leaning down to hug the moogle. There sounded an indignant squeak followed by a sigh as he relaxed into the embrace. "I think I already found one." Percy released the captain to skip off towards a table, a human with a heavy canvas blacksmith's apron and a nu mou in sage's garb cheerily welcoming her in and offering introductions freely.

"Ssomeday, captain, you're going to get tired of making friendss and not finding loverss," Gina snickered from behind the moogle.

"What balderdash, Gina," he scoffed, straightening his loose clothes once more. "Besides, love can always grow in unexpected places...but I would be rude to make the first move twice. They all know my heart is always open."

"Sshe pinched your cheekss, didn't sshe?"

Giving a tiny roar, Mercurus quickly ran after the much faster bangaa, the armored girl laughing at the stumbling, small moogle pursuing her with shaking fist and a forced expression of rage. A pity the illusion was broken, then, by how the corners of his mouth were tucked up into those cute dimples.