

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 1. The Breakfast Declaration

Light filters through a grove of deciduous trees, casting long shadows against a golden tallgrass prairie. At the base of the trees, rainwater collected, forming a pond of shallow, turbid water. Amphibians and small mammals have gathered in the longing hours of the afternoon on the bank between the reeds and canebrake, seeking a soothing respite in the shade from the oppressive early autumn heat.

*Thump-Thump Thump. Thump-Thump Thump.*

Ripples spread across the pond as a thunderous noise grows in the distance, interrupting this peaceful scene. The creatures gathered there raise their muzzles and tails on high alert — they've never heard such an unusual noise. They know it to be the sound of an approaching feral, but not any feral they've had to contend with before. The cantering stops as a shadow overtakes the pond through the trees. For a breathless moment, the creatures don't dare move.

The trees dance, causing the ferals to jump and scatter. The grove parts, revealing the source of all the commotion: A Dragon.

A Dragon covered not in scales but brilliant, iridescent azure and cream-colored feathers. They shimmer in the lowering sunlight, resembling the peaceful skies and wispy clouds Dragons like them call home. It dwarfs over the pond, almost as tall as the trees behind it.

The scent of the pond has lured the Dragon here, though it doesn't seem relieved to see it. Upon entering the clearing it twists its nose and its expression turns dour. Crimson eyes scan the shoreline of the pond, spotting the boot prints of those who visited it earlier in the day. The Dragon breathes a sigh, shaking away hesitation to approach the water and examine the reflection on the surface.

The drake tilts its head and blinks, confusion growing in its gaze. Lowering further still to confirm a suspicion, the dragon touches its muzzle to the surface of the water, casting ripples across the pond. Its eyes grow wide, confusion changing to dismay.

***KREE-RAAK!***

The Dragon shrieks, recoiling violently from the pond. It takes a sharp turn away from the shore and charges through the grove like a battering ram to a prairie on the opposite side, ejecting a flurry of branches and tawny, dry leaves in all directions.

It takes off in a sprint, rumbling across the prairie distraught and aimless before using its massive wings to slow to a halt. The Dragon shuts its eyes, trying to tune out the truth of what it's seen. Heaving quick and heavy breaths, it strains to calm itself down.

Moments pass.

She opens her eyes and stares down at an unfamiliar body in disbelief. Probing her memories for answers, she ponders the unprecedented series of events that led her to this scene.

“Then it’s settled! We’ll head out to forage in the Eastern Weald this afternoon!”

The opulent dining room goes silent in confusion. Nobody seated, or standing, was expecting me to interject the conversation with such a decisive declaration.

Good.

This was, in fact, the reaction I was aiming for. A state of bewilderment that leaves little room for the snide condemnations and casual brushing-offs my plans usually attract.

A Ring-tailed Lemur maid carrying a half-eaten plate of food stops past an expansive landscape painting hung on our wall. She cranes to see what the commotion is, flicks her tail in annoyance, and turns back on her route into the kitchen. She must be thinking to herself, “Asha’s at it again.”

Damn right I am. And this time, I will not be silenced.

An overly dressed dutch Rabbit standing at the front of the table with a folio under one arm and a pen in hand nervously adjusts his vest and clears his throat. Out of everyone attending breakfast this morning he’s the most visibly unnerved by my outburst.

It’s understandable. He was the one who got me riled up by instigating this conversation a few moments ago — the fault lies squarely in him.

“Yes, well. Princess Asha,” he begins calmly, pushing up his rounded glasses. An intentionally chosen contrast of tone. “If you could humor me, as I’m not nearly as familiar with botany as you are. The plant that your brother is after, It’s some kind of, mmm—”

I cut him off. “It’s a lichen. *Pilophorus acicularis*, also known as Devils Matchstick lichen. When dried, ground, and combined in sufficient quantities, it has subtle restorative properties and can be used for making salves and tinctures.”

Being a Princess allows you a certain degree of punctuality, especially when your family’s head of staff, Duncan, is asking too many nosy questions. Just accept it and let me charter an airship! You’re not going to shut me up today!

I peer across the table at my younger brother, Sofl.

He’s beaming that I’m sticking up for him. I repay the heartfelt smile with one of my own. I’m doing this for him, after all.

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A few moments ago, Duncan casually asked Sofl about his plans for today. Sofl responded he was translating a recipe for a new elixir he found in an old pharmacopoeia and was interested in a particular lichen that was listed as one of the ingredients. Evidently, it's exceptionally hard to find samples of.

See, my brother is what's called an 'herbalist'. He's someone who takes ingredients that are found in nature, prepares them in any manner of ways, and combines them together to produce medicine. Herbalism isn't as well-practiced now with the advent of pharmaceuticals, but it still has its uses. I happen to think it's pretty neat.

Critically, however, my mom disagrees.

She's never liked that he took it up as a hobby and would rather see him off doing the things *she* thinks a young Prince should do. Like learning a mathematics curriculum that is far above his grade level. Or taking up a musical instrument as she did during *her* long days of loitering around the palace as an heir to the throne. Definitely not frivolous things like trying to track down a lichen sample no bigger than the tip of a finger.

So, my parents interrupted the conversation, pulling out their usual script for dousing water on Sofl's enthusiasm. 'It won't be possible to find something so

rare!' They claimed, hoping he would simply give up his plans. 'Why don't you try picking up the clariphone again today instead?'

They do this all the time whenever he gets excited about something. And they would've succeeded in convincing him today if I hadn't stepped in when I did.

My dad's head rises from the plate, unconscious of the scraps of food stuck to the bottom of the paled ruff that surrounds his neck. "Asha, you've been good at botany ever since you were young. You always know where to find this stuff, can't we just send someone down to the Crimson District and have them pick it up there?"

How ironic. Now that I've spoken up for Sofl, all of a sudden we shouldn't give up trying to find the lichen. Oh no, why don't we ask Asha if we can just go to the store and buy some, eh? She's the smart one, she knows where to find this stuff!

Well, too bad! It's not that easy.

I turn to him down the table and fold my arms. "Nope. The stores in Varecia rarely have alchemical quality ingredients. If Sofl ever wants a chance of acquiring a sample, someone will have to go into the wild and collect it for him. It has to be me."

When I was seven, I was given my first book about plants; A slim, basic primer gendered and written for young girls about the types of flowers I could find in my backyard in the Kingdom of Ellyntide. I read it front to back in half an hour.

Unsatiated, I marched myself down to the palace's library and found every book about plants that was appropriate for my age group. When I finished reading all those, I pulled out the textbooks for secondary school students about herbalism and botany and began pouring over those. Even though I could barely understand them at the time, I was hooked. Going back was no longer an option.

My interest in plants has never waned. I spent so much time in the library those days that I knew all the librarians by name. The only place I spent more time was the palace's gardens, taking up horticulture and helping out the palace's grounds crew whenever I could.

It's how I can imitate an encyclopedia whenever someone strikes up a conversation about their garden. If I had to guess, my reputation around here could be summed up as 'the Ruffed Lemur Princess who's irritatingly knowledgeable about plants'.

“Princess, is there anyone else in the palace who’s qualified to go searching for this lichen?” asks Duncan, sticking his neck out again. “I’m certain you can understand the risks in having the heir to the throne on an errand for something so... small?”

As you’ve probably guessed, we are a royal family. And I am, in particular, the heir apparent. If something unthinkable happened to my mother tomorrow, I’m the next in line to be Monarch. I run the Kingdom.

I shake my head, regardless. “It’s not risky at all. *If* you’re properly trained at species identification like I am then you have nothing to worry about while foraging. But since I’m the only one in the palace that’s done the training, we’ll bring Calypso with us on the airship. We’ll be fine.”

(I know that’s not *exactly* what he was getting at when he asked me to consider the risks, but *shhhh* !)

It’s fine though, really! The place I want to travel to isn’t dangerous at all. It’s a nature preserve known for its peaceful prairies, serene streams, and an almost complete absence of any sort of scary creature that may wish to unkindly separate my limbs from the rest of my body.

Someone as capable as my bodyguard, Calypso, would be terminally bored going to such a place if he weren't so dutifully loyal to me. That man would happily follow me off the edge of the continent, he's *that* committed. Still, if it calms down Duncan then he's a better choice than just taking along some of the palace guard.

An older Pine Marten noble who's joined us for breakfast named Orlando clatters his fork to the table.

Oh, boy. Here it comes.

"I find it hard to believe that you, Princess, are the singular person in this entire palace who can tell the difference between a Lilly and Lilac." He scoffs, using a napkin to wipe his mouth of scrambled eggs.

So, I don't have the best relationship with the royal court's courtiers around here. And it's no secret that I don't like them. At all. But this guy, Orlando? He's probably the worst of the bunch.

"If you are so determined to help your brother, then fetch one of those lamentable books you read so often and show a member of the Guard what

the plant looks like. They can perform the errand and get it *for you* without a risk to your safety.”

See what I mean? He’s genuinely an asshole! My tail flicks against the back of the dining room chair at his arrogance.

“Don’t be naive. Foraging for plant samples is not something any soldier can just do,” I respond, as bluntly as I can possibly put it.

“Oh?” he chides, staring at me past his crooked muzzle. “Then enlighten me, Princess.”

One of the things that happens when you’re a Princess is a lot of influential people become very interested in how your upbringing is going. They want to understand what kind of person you are, what your values are, and how it’s going to affect *them* once you’re in power. If they spot something they don’t like, they’ll try and flex their influence to see to it that you change.

I’ve been a rebellious liability ever since I was young. They’ve tried over the years to groom me in ways that would make me more obedient. Sometimes coming to me directly. Sometimes whispering convenient suggestions into my mom’s ear about what hobbies I should have, and what things I should be disciplined for.

But I've resisted them every step of the way. Cold shoulders, talking back to them, even an altercation or two with some of the girls my age. I have quite the reputation among them! I know for certain there is some genuine loathing of me.

Mom claims she won't bend to these people, but I know better. She has to at least consider their whims. And when their arguments begin to make even partial sense, she has little recourse but to agree. To condone their behavior toward me.

Mom may be the de-facto leader of our Kingdom, Ellyntide, but if too many nobles conspire against her it would be a disaster.

They could withhold their thanes from participating in the armed forces. They could orchestrate various dirty tricks on their vassals to degrade their quality of life and then claim it was the state who forced their hand. If too many people dislike what mom is doing, then surely our Goddess would notice. If *she* gets involved, then, well... it's not going to be a good time for mom.

Being Queen isn't all it's cracked up to be. When my time eventually comes, I'll have no choice but to start treating the nobles with more dignity. And I'm

certain they're going to attempt to take advantage of me every chance they get.

Oh, poor Future Asha. As much as she doesn't want to, it's a problem she's going to have to contend with. Right Now in the Present Asha pities her, but she's got her own problems with nobles to deal with! And she's not going to give up so easily!