

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

12. Kiss My Asteraceae

“So, *this* is the Eastern Weald!” I beam, hurriedly making my way down the landing stairs of the airship. Before me is an expansive unbroken sea of tallgrass prairie that decades prior was marked for preservation, spared the plow, and allowed to persist without interference. It stretches out in all directions to the horizon, glistening crimson and goldenrod in the warm afternoon sun, drifting back and forth in waves on the gentle autumn breeze. “Oh, wow wow wow!”

After all the complications that came up getting here, I’m light enough that the breeze could carry me off with it, depositing me somewhere amongst the grass. With a spring in my step and a tune in my throat, I bound the last step and scamper over to Duncan and the guard. They’ve gathered a short distance away from the ship, having descended earlier to scour the immediate area for anything dangerous. Me and Calypso were only allowed to depart once the all-clear had been given.

Trailing me down the stairs he pauses at the bottom rung and surveys the scene with growing bemusement. “It’s just a field.”

“Perhaps to you it is,” I scoff. “I see the untouched glamor of nature, endlessly bountiful, and fascinating.” You don’t need to read the gallant tales of fiction or listen to the edge-of-your seat radio dramas to discover amazing things in your life. They’re all around you, waiting to be found *if* you’re curious enough to go looking for them.

Most people are like Calypso, though. Apathetic and unmoved by the natural world. To them, nature is just something you see outside your window on the way to work — a liability that causes bugs to appear in your home and weeds to grow in your garden.

How could you see the beauty of nature and not want to learn more about it? Even just a little bit? I understand not everyone’s into this stuff as much as I am. But how can so many animals be so detached from the world around them?

“Besides,” I continue as Calypso catches up to us. “I don’t get to see, ‘just a field’ every day.”

Still missing the point, he simply grunts in response.

What a rude reply! I snatch some flowers from a nearby shrub and give them a quick glance. They appear to be some *Rubel*—JUST KIDDING, I DON’T

CARE!! They're *yellow*, and *I love them!* I separate the flowers from their stems and toss them into Calypso's face like they're confetti. "Lighten up, Bristlebody."

"Pffftbpt. I'll try," he deadpans.

Duncan grins and stifles a laugh. "Princess, we've completed our search of the area and everything checks out. Officers Laurent and Bodie will accompany you and Calypso while you're out in the Weald. I'll remain here with the others to keep an eye on the ship."

"Awh, you're gonna stay here? Don't you wanna come pick flowers with us, Dunc?" I tease. Standing next to me, Calypso's eyes grow wide at my remark.

Hey, don't act so surprised! We're practically pals now, me and Dunc.

"The planning for this trip has left me with a backlog of Sunday work I'd normally have finished by now," he sighs, pulling down on his waistcoat. "I'm afraid I'll need to stay behind and catch up on it. Perhaps some other time?"

"Fine. But I'm holding you to that! Next time, you're on flower picking duty!" I declare with a whimsical point of my finger in his direction.

Calypso stares at me with ever-growing dismay. "...Okay, right. Is there anything else we need before we go? Princess, you have something that'll tell you what the lichen looks like, right?"

"I'm ready when you animals are. I brought a pocket field guide just in case, though I probably won't need it. I've memorized what the lichen looks like, and I can tell by glancing what most of these plants are."

When it comes to what grows naturally on our continent, I'm familiar with just about everything. And the few times I've been able to freely explore nature has allowed me to hone my skills at identifying plants in the wild. I brought the book with me more as reference material in case Calypso or someone else has a question about the lichen. It makes things a lot easier to explain when I can just point at a diagram in a book.

Calypso stares at me dubiously. "Oh yeah?" he retorts, reaching out to a nearby thicket. He turns and presents me with a green orchid that has recently transitioned to spreading seeds. "What's this?"

"*Platanthera psycodes*," I say, without hesitation.

His brow curls, and he grabs another sample from the field at random. “And this?”

“*Vernonia fasciculata*

.”

He becomes flummoxed, swatting his tail and reaching deep into the underbrush to find a zinger of a plant that will surely stump me.

Duncan chuckles, amused by his partner’s fragile ego. “You won’t beat her, Calypso.”

I appreciate the vote of confidence.

He reappears, this time holding only a short, leafy stem hardly bigger than one of his fingers. “Okay. This is impossible, you can’t possibly know what plant this came from!”

With nothing visually striking to give it away, I examine it close up. My clues are green, rounded trifoliate leaves, and a soft stem that shined glaucous in the afternoon sunlight. I think for a moment, going through the book's worth of

knowledge I've accumulated, narrowing the list of possible choices until I have one left.

"Baptisia Alba."

"You're lying," he says, pointing an accusing finger at me. "Baptisia isn't even a real word."

"Should I pull out the field guide and prove you wrong a fourth time?"

Unwilling to continue, he growls and throws the stem to the ground. "Let's just get going."

"Gladly. Let's head out."

I fling my bag over my shoulder and turn to head through the underbrush, Calypso and the two members of the guard following shortly behind me into nature.

“Hey,” Dunc calls out after pacing a few steps. We turn and see him staring at Calypso, motioning his head for him to return. The Ruffy obliges with a quick jog.

“Please return before the sun starts setting,” says Dunc, anxiousness rising in his voice. “I don’t want to come looking for you in the dark.”

“Alright. I’ll make sure we’re back by five.”

“Love you.”

“Love ya too.”

Calypso gives him a quick kiss on the forehead and a pat on the head, then rejoins our group. With that, we’re on our way.

“You two were talking about something weird in private. Tell me what it was!!”

It's been all of 5 minutes since we left the vicinity of the airship, and Calypso has already gone off script to accuse me of... *something* about Duncan. I'm really not sure what he's on about.

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I guess it's not hard to tell me and Duncan's rapport shifted during our talk. I have a predictable relationship with all the nobles in the palace at any given time, and the only deviation that can be expected from me is to get *more* upset at them. But to act friendly with one? And to give the impression I *like* one?

Unthinkable. Impossible. Gotta be fake.

So, from that angle, I suppose it's plain to see why he's so curious. Especially when the animal in question is his partner, and the only person outside my family I really get along with is... Calypso.

...He's not jealous, is he?

No, that's gotta be it.

It doesn't matter if he knows me and Dunc are on better terms with each other, of course. I actually wouldn't mind it if more animals knew about that. But we did have a pretty frank discussion about things I'm certain can't get out. Like the way mom feels about my preparedness for taking the throne. I could tell him we talked about how Duncan was able to convince mom to let me go on the trip today, but he'll only want more details.

He's a chatty Ruffy. If I gave him an inch of gossip fodder, he'd take it a mile. And gossip tends to travel fast in the palace. Good thing being Princess means you can keep your conversations as private as you want!

"We had a nice, sensible discussion on matters relating to the Kingdom. That's all."

I didn't lie.

"Nuh-uh," he says, swatting an *Asteraceae* out his face. "You two came out of that meeting acting different around each other. You talked about something *personal*, didn't you?"

I shrug. "Why don't you ask Duncan about it?"

“I tried!” he says, lashing his tail. “He won’t tell me anything either! It’s like you two are conspiring on something!”

“And so what, if they are?” chimed the Ring-Tailed Officer Bodie, joining our conversation. “Not your place to snoop in on what the Princess is planning.” A valid point. I smiled and nodded my thanks to her.

“Listen,” explains Calypso, making sweeping motions with his arms. “Duncan is my partner. I have a right to know what’s going on when weird things happen to him. And this is *really* weird, okay?”

“Do you have a right to know everything about Duncan’s personal life? Is it weird that I’m acting nice to somebody?” I glance over to watch his reaction closely.

“Yes!” he declares. “Princess, you’re nice to everyone but the nobles. And believe me, Dunc’s family is as noble as it gets. Whatever you guys talked about changed something. And I’m going to find out what it was, one way or another!”

Well, he completely dodged the question of if he should know everything in Dunc's personal life. Yeah, I'm just gonna assume he's being protective of him, and this isn't indicative of anything problematic in their relationship!

Bodie, who's been trailing opposite Bristlebody on my left leans into my ear and whispers, "Ma'am, he isn't always like this, is he?"

I smirk and give her a swift nod.

So. *Pilophorus acicularis*. Devil's matchstick lichen. What *do* you need to do to find a sample of it in the wild? Well, in this part of Ellyntide, it grows on the underside of decaying wood. So, we need to find fell trees and take a look underneath their logs. Simple, right?

Except we're standing in the middle of a tallgrass prairie. There isn't exactly an abundance of trees to go around. The landscape is dotted with those lone ones that stand in the middle of fields, but what we're really after is the copses and groves where they bunch up in groups. That's going to be our best shot at finding what we're looking for.

And so far, we haven't had any luck. From the airship, we traveled to the nearest copse and turned over every log we could find. So, we walked across another field and did the same thing there with the same result. It feels awfully

quaint that after all the weird stuff that happened this morning we'd have such an ordinary problem now.

I decided to give myself a break by using my field guide to give Bodie and Laurent a bit of on-the-spot training in fungal identification. It wasn't much, but they should have enough knowledge now to notice anything closely resembling what we're looking for. They can come find me if they locate anything promising.

I step through a tussock at the point where the trees end and hear a rock skipping across water. Calypso is standing near a shallow, murky pond, gazing out across it. Seems like he's given up his search for unchecked logs and is passing the time by skipping rocks.

Hearing the sound of parting grass, he turns to face me. "Any luck?"

"Nope," I sigh. "Laurent found some other samples that Sofl will be interested in, but not the one we're looking for."

I tread over soft, muddy ground and step into the warm autumn sun to join Bristlebody by the shore. There's a clearing in the grasses near the water where he's standing, must be a popular spot for amphibians and other ferals to get a drink.

“So, what happens if we can’t find the lichen?” he asks.

“We’ll go home. Sofl will be disappointed, but he won’t be upset. At least we tried.”

“Really? You’d let it get away after all the trouble it took to get out here?”

“I would. If it’s not here, then it’s not here. I’d be disappointed too, but at least I had the chance to go out and have a little adventure.”

I mean, what does he expect me to do? Grow it myself under a log? The lichen has been found here this time of year, but it could be that it’s difficult to locate. Or it’s only found in a very specific location, like a single grove of trees out of the many that dot the landscape of the prairie. Nature is weird like that, sometimes.

After a brief pause, Calypso snickers under his breath.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Dunc told me all about what happened this morning at breakfast. It’s weird to hear you so resigned to something instead of fighting back against it. I could totally picture you screaming and kicking some tree like, ‘Give me my lichen, you bastard!’”

Erm, you could? Am I really so one-dimensional that the first thing he imagined me doing was having a meltdown?

“Oh. Is that so,” I deflated.

“Hey, don’t act like it’s such a bad thing. You’ll make a great Queen if you’re unwilling to stand down from what you believe in.”

Yeah, not really.

“A Queen that’s too stubborn to acknowledge the truth is hardly an admirable quality,” I say, thinking of mom.

He stares silently across the water. The only sound is the wind blowing gently through the cattails.

“Tell me, Calypso. Do you— “

“Bristlebody,” he grins. “I’m Bristlebody, remember?”

“Yes, that is your name, isn’t it?” I mused. I’d like to treat him with a bit more dignity than a nickname during a serious conversation, but we’ll play it his way. “Bristlebody, do you think I was right to yell at my mother this morning?”

“I think you’re right to stand up for what you believe in. Even if the person you’re standing up against is the Queen herself.”

Well, that sure is a non-answer. I asked for your opinion Bristlebody, not a deflection. “Not taking sides,” I scoff. “I see how it is.”

“I wasn’t in the room! I don’t know all the details of what happened!”

Oh, come on. It's so annoying when people try and stay neutral around me instead of just admitting who they agree with. Nobody is ever truly neutral about anything — you've sided with my mother, and you don't want to upset me. I get it.

"Uh-huh. Sure." I'm not going to get mad if you agree with mom instead of me.

...Alright, maybe a little. But I'll at least respect your opinion, okay? I genuinely want to know if I'm making an ass of myself or not.

"Hey, listen," he says, moving to stand in front of me. He's doing that thing men do when they want to get a point across by looking down on you. "I don't want to play favorites between you and your mother. I have a duty to her as much as I do to you — those are just my orders."

"Your orders don't prevent you from having an opinion on something," is what I want to say to him, but unwilling to escalate the tone of this conversation any further I hold my tongues.

"But I'll always be there to support you when I can. Whether it's with my words or my sword. That's what friends do for each other, right?"

Friends, huh?

“R-right,” I say, turning my head away from him. Calypso likes to brag that we’re friends, but I’m unsure how I feel about that. We spend a lot of time together, sure, but that’s because he’s my bodyguard; we don’t have a choice, we have to spend time together. Being forced to spend time with one another is way different from—

“Hey,” he interrupts, placing his hand gently on my shoulder. Again, like at the train station, my heart flutters at the sensation of his touch. What is this feeling, and why does it keep happening?

“You can trust me, *Asha*.” He makes that stupid, goofy grin of his again.

You can think whatever you want, Bristlebody. I do trust you, but... um, can you please stop acting like we’re closer to each other than we actually are? After what happened in the train station today, ‘closeness’ is not exactly the word I want to use to describe our relationship. ‘Strictly professional’ would be more appropriate.

I hear the sound of parting grass behind us and turn to see Bodie and Laurent, their faces crestfallen. “No luck, huh.”

They shake their heads.

“C’mon,” says Calypso. “All we can do is keep looking. I’m sure we’ll find it soon.”

We take our bags and leave the pond, crossing the field to the next grove of trees.