

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

13. The Descent

“It’s a good drama. If you have time, you should really listen to it.”

“Eh...”

“What’s the matter? Don’t like Maxwell?”

“I’ve never liked his stuff that much. The one about all the people living in that big house together— “

“—Is a classic! Be honest, how can you *not* enjoy it?”

Laurent and Bodie are arguing about their favorite radio playwrights as we make our way across the next field. At least I *think* that’s what they’re talking about. I don’t listen to the radio very often. So, when people start talking about it my eyes just kinda...

...Hm?

Speaking of my eyes, something just caught them on the horizon: a dark object has poked into view at the top of the next ridge, rising over the grass. It seems brown in color and bulbous in shape.

Is that a feral? It's, um, a pretty big one if it is.

"Uh, Bristlebody?" I call out over the conversation of the other two. Laurent and Bodie stare at me with puzzled expressions. We haven't told them yet about Calypso's nickname, have we? But more importantly, he seems to have noticed the same thing I have.

"What the..." he trails off, staring into the distance.

Suddenly, he draws his rapier with a quick flip of his wrist. "Everyone get down."

My heart trembles at the seriousness in Calypso's voice as I drop to the ground with him. Laurent and Bodie follow suit after catching on to what's going on. Through the visual noise of all the grass around us, I can make out they're crouching with their weapons drawn as well.

"Bodie, you're over here with me and the Princess!" Calypso orders as loud as he can whisper. "Laurent, can you tell what the hell that thing is?"

Bodie hobbles through the grass as Laurent peers up from his position to get a better look. It's well-known that Martens have better vision than Lemurs do.

After a moment of observation he dips back into the cover of the grass. "...No Sir, not from this distance. I'll need to get closer."

Calypso nods. "Do it. Carefully."

He sneaks through the grass with soft pawsteps, raising his muzzle every few feet to get a better look. With Bodie and Calypso both opposite of me, they could handle any of the ferals that are known to live around here. Still, I notice my hand open in the ready position to pull my concealed weapon if it becomes necessary.

A few tense moments pass before Laurent stands erect. He turns and retreats a few paces back towards us to call out, "It's dead, Sir!"

"Thank the goddess," says Calypso, rising promptly from the underbrush. I take his hand for an assist back up and he pulls me with such force I float in the air for a moment.

"What is that thing? asks Bodie as Laurent rejoins our group.

Laurent shrugs. "Not sure. Some sort of bear, I think."

Calypso turns to me expectantly. "Princess?"

Welllllll, as I thought, a bear here is unexpected, but not exactly unprecedented. The Eastern Weald is situated at the base of the windward side of the Caledon Mountain range where some species of bear live. "It's probably a bear that came down from the mountains. Perhaps it was here looking for food to stock up on for the winter. But..."

“But, what?” asks Calypso.

“There are no natural predators in the Weald that could have killed a bear. It doesn’t make sense that there’s a deceased one here.”

The bears that live in the Caledon mountains have few natural predators. Other bears, big cats preying on the sick and infirm, but that’s it. And those creatures all live in the mountains too, they wouldn’t have stalked a bear this far away from their natural habitat.

Calypso stared at the feral in the distance. “I see. That’s not good.”

“We should investigate the body and see how it died,” I suggest. “That will tell us exactly what feral it is and how concerned we need to be.”

I hate to admit it, but if there’s a feral bigger than a bear lurking around here then the best thing to do is head back to the airship. We could handle fighting off a feral that big, I have no doubt. But then Calypso would have to file an official report about the feral, and animals like Orlando would be downwind of something like that appearing. My prospects of ever doing another foraging trip would dissipate like seeds on the wind.

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“Alright. Let’s check it out,” says Calypso. “Bodie, you stick with us and keep your weapon drawn. Let’s not walk into any surprises.”

We move carefully through the grass with Laurent in the lead. It's not until we're practically on top of the feral that the distinct, unpleasant stench of death invades our nostrils.

“Oh man,” says Laurent, moving to hold his nose with his paws. “That smells so nasty!”

There, situated near a crop of borage is a deceased gray bear, lying on its flank unmoving. Its pelt is checkered gray and black, largely free of dirt, and its face is planted into the grass stoically like it was laying down for an afternoon nap. “Strange,” I say.

“What is it?” asks Calypso, sheathing his rapier.

“Well,” I begin, pacing around the bear. “I can tell for certain it’s dead — besides the stench, it’s no longer breathing, and flies are beginning to decompose the carrion. But there are no indications this feral was attacked by another feral. I don’t see any tears or dried blood on the pelt... It’s as if it just fell over dead.”

Calypso’s feet shift in the grass. “Is that possible? How long do you think it’s been here for?”

I examine the borage and grass under the feral. Strands of what appear to be a *Bouteloua* lie crumpled underneath it, still green and fresh looking. I insert my hand gently underneath the body - its pelt is still warm, and dry to the touch. “It died very recently,” I announce. “Possibly as early as this morning.”

I’d expect a feral that’s been dead for a while to at least have some moisture underneath it. Especially during the fall when the mornings are cool and dew forms. But it’s bone dry under its body. There’s no way it’s been deceased longer than 24 hours.

Zoology isn’t my thing, so perhaps I’m wrong, but this whole scene seems... unusual.

Calypso sighs and crosses his arms. "I really don't know what to make of this. Ferals that just fall over dead, all this stuff about plants... Do you think it's safe to continue, Princess?"

Oh? He's actually going to defer to me on this? Well, that's an awful lot of trust to put into me considering the circumstances. I appreciate that. What do I actually make of the situation, though? Well...

"The evidence suggests this bear died of natural causes." I see nothing to suggest otherwise. It's possible there could be signs of a fight on the side of the feral that's facing the ground, but I'd expect there to be some blood visible. "Based on that, I have no reason to believe we're in any immediate danger and we should keep going."

Yes, it's unusual that a feral would die like this. But it's not like animals don't drop dead for any number of tragic reasons, either. Heart attacks, aneurysms, or even just old age. If it can happen to us, it can happen to them. In matters such as this, we should trust what we can observe, and what we can test. To trust the science.

And yet... there's something *unusual* about this scene that lingers in my mind. Something intangible that feels off, more than just the strangeness of a bear

dying miles from its home of natural causes. I try to probe my subconsciousness to find the answer, but nothing comes to mind. Unable to prove it, I decide to forget about it.

“Well put, Princess. Very well, then. Bodie, you’re with me and her Majesty. Laurent, take the lead in case we run into anything else unusual.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Besides... I *do* have faith in Calypso’s ability to protect me. If I can’t trust him at what he does best, then what else do I have?

We stand at the top of the ridge, looking down the slope into the bottom of the hollow.

“There’s some logs down there,” I say.

A handful is gathered near the edges of one of the many tall bramble thickets that line the slopes of the hollow. It looks like the bottom is damp and muddy, a good breeding ground for lichen.

“Yeah,” agrees Calypso. “Let’s check it out. Laurent, if you would.”

Laurent nods and begins his descent by placing his paws sideways to navigate down the slope without slipping. When he reaches the halfway point Bristlebody flicks his tail, beckoning me and Bodie to follow.

It’s late afternoon, now. The trees in the grove behind us are beginning to cast shadows that trace their outlines against our bodies, down the slopes of the hollow. We’ve just traveled through them and once again come up empty-handed in our search for the devil’s matchstick lichen. The shadows seem to act as arbiters of our journey; there's only enough daylight remaining to search one more location. If we can't find it now, then we'll have to return to the airship empty-handed.

A chilled breeze passes through the trees and around our fur.

We reach the bottom and continue the ritual we've done so many times before this afternoon. Bodie (or Laurent) would flip over the logs, and I’d get blasted with a noxious smelling combination of decaying wood and mold. No matter how many times we perform it, it still makes my whiskers twitch. Then I’d crouch down among the angry bugs we displaced to inspect the bark and see if I could spot any of the lichen growing. The ones not on log duty would scour the area for more logs, keeping an eye out around us.

The first log we inspect is no different from the rest nearby. Only some slime mold and upset millipedes. But when we move to the second and flip it over, I hear Bodie's voice rise.

"Princess! Is this it?" she chirps.

But I'm not focused on the log. Instead, the contours in the nearby mud have caught my attention. The lines and patterns appear unnaturally shaped, almost like...

Bootprints?!

A caterwaul erupts from the side of the hollow, piercing my thoughts. I whip around to the source of the cry and catch a flash of light reflected off the side of a sword being drawn by a shadowy figure, exiting the side of a bramble. They're a step behind another dark figure, sword already at the hip and bearing down on Laurent. I hold my breath, watching helplessly as the blade punctures his abdomen.

"LAURENT!!" screeches Calypso. We watch, paralyzed by shock, as Laurent's limp body tumbles to the ground.

“Alright, nobody move!” a new voice orders over the chaos. I whip to my left where Calypso is standing and see a horned owl in light armor emerging from a nearby bramble.

It’s an ambush!