

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

2. My Mother, The Queen

So, Orlando thinks I shouldn't go out to forage? And I should hand the task off to some other animal? Hmph.

Nonsense. Hogwash. Poppycock.

There's actually a very sound reason why I'm the one who needs to travel out there.

"There are countless similar-looking plants and fungi that to the untrained eye are superficially different," I explain. "You need to be well trained to forage so you don't misidentify a hazardous plant. You could disturb spores that attract the attention of wild ferals. Or worse, get sap in your eyes that causes blindness."

To be fair, that is a bit of an... embellishment. In the Eastern Weald, the place I want to travel to, you're more likely to hurt yourself tripping over a log hidden

in the grass. There are no saps or spores or anything remotely dangerous out there. But who needs to know, right?

I'm not being entirely disingenuous though. You wouldn't accidentally pick a toxic plant without proper training. But there's a pretty good chance you wouldn't pick the *correct* plant, either.

Even if I gave one of the Palace Guard a crash course on what to look for, I don't trust anyone besides myself to do it right. And if some random, untrained animal doesn't get it right the first time, then I doubt I'm going to be allowed to plan another trip when it's already failed once.

In short, if we want to be successful the first time, it has to be me that goes.

Orlando snorted. "Dangerous ferals? Blindness? Princess. You are not making a very good case for your personal safety. That ring on your finger doesn't give you the freedom to be reckless."

Tch! Well, I guess I should have seen that one coming. Still, it's beside the point. There's no risk to me at all, and he knows it! Now he's being an ass on purpose!

“My *personal safety* is afforded to me by my training and my experience. If being a noble didn’t make you so slight of hearing, you would have understood this the first time I mentioned it to you.”

All at once, my burn goes over the dining room like a crown sheet exploding. Orlando exaggerates a gasp. Poorly. Duncan’s holding his hand up to his mouth in shock. Dad looks particularly upset by what I said. Even Sofl, always supportive of whatever nonsense I have going on, seems bothered by that comment.

Um, really guys? Give me a break. That was one of the nicest, most polite burns anyone’s ever received from me. Was it the intonation of my voice? I must have sounded particularly condescending.

I wasn’t *trying*

to be savage or anything. At least, I don’t think I was. I do understand that I have to be a bit tactful here if I want to convince that one, specific person in the room who has the final say on allowing me to go.

As a member of the royal family and the heir to the throne, I have the power to issue orders to members of the Ellyntidian government and certain officers in the armed forces. For sure, it’s a useful thing to have at my disposal, but my authority only goes so far.

The Eastern Weald, the nearest place where Sofl's lichen grows in the wild, is some distance away from the capital city Varecia and is only accessible by airship. *Technically* I have the authority to leave the palace whenever I want, but that privilege doesn't extend to chartering an airship to get there.

Whenever a member of the royal family boards an airship, it's considered a military vessel by maritime law. And as Princess, I don't have the authority to command the armed forces. The only animal who gets to do that is the Monarch.

So, in this case, I have no choice but to appeal to the higher power in the room.

Orlando bursts out of his chair, his bowler hat almost toppling off his bare head. "Queen Kelani! I demand that you treat this... this *blatant* insubordination— "

My mother — also known as the highest power, Queen Kelani — cuts him off. "That's ENOUGH, Asha!"

The dining room falls silent on the orders of the Queen. She parts her rustled hair and pulls closer the flaps of her tan morning wrapper. The wrinkles under her eyes seem deeper than usual this morning.

Heaving an exasperated sigh she continues, "Asha, I appreciate how enthusiastic you are to help your brother, but if there's any chance something could happen to you while you're out in the wild then it's not worth the risk. I'm sorry, but he'll have to get the lichen he wants some other way."

Jumping out of my chair I address her directly, "Mother please, let me do this for Sofl! I'll make sure we're as safe as possible! I promise me and Calypso won't take any unnecessary risks!"

Mom shakes her head, "I'm sorry, but it's too dangerous for you to go alone. Sofl will have plenty of other opportunities to improve at herbalism that won't require you taking dangerous risks."

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

No, he won't! Sofl never gets what he wants when he lives by your rules. He keeps getting shot down whenever he shows the smallest amount of

excitement, and then I have to come and intervene on his behalf. And I'm sick of it happening!

"Mother, every time Sofl tries to take the next step as an herbalist you always steer him away. There won't be another—"

"Asha, the answer is 'No'! I'm not going to argue with you, today! I won't allow it, and *that's final!*

"

Argh!

My teeth grind and my fur bristles. It takes all my self-control to not pick up my plate and fling it across the dining room.

That would get me in a colossal amount of trouble with mom. But right now, I'm struggling to think of a good reason to not do it anyways. How else am I supposed to get my point across about how important this is to me? To not see my brother get his life manipulated once again by animals who have no regard for his wellbeing?

I was convinced I was going to turn the conversation around in his favor, that I could pull some clever trick and get mom to go along with my plan. But boy oh boy, has that failed.

I have to take a stand against Mom. Right here, right now. After pushing the issue as far as I have today, if I back down now she'll always know there's a limit to how far I'll take an argument. To how far she needs to argue before I'll shut up.

I'll... I'll throw the plate across the room. That will show just how serious I am about this. Then, I'm going to let mom know exactly how I feel about what she's doing to Sofl. I don't want to be hostile to my own mother, but... it's for Sofl. For his well-being, to do what's right, I'll sacrifice myself.

Okay.

I take a deep breath.

"Your Majesty,"

...Huh?

Out of nowhere, before I can even open my muzzle, a voice rejoins the conversation.

Duncan sticks his head out to be heard more clearly. “With your permission, I would like to organize the Princess’s trip to the Eastern Weald.”

What?!

Duncan?! What are you...?

“I will ensure all the necessary precautions are taken and charter the airship Blue Daemon along with a small contingent of the palace guard. The Princess’s safety will be the highest priority, and I will personally ensure her safe return.”

You’re volunteering to organize the trip? You’d do this for me? *Why*
?

Mom blinks, bewildered as I am. “Duncan, you...? And you’d be willing to do this for Asha?”

“Yes, I would. The Princess is adept at her botany skills, which extends to foraging. And, as you’re well aware, I’m intimately familiar with Calypso. I’m certain he can protect the Princess under any circumstance.”

This is insane! Why would one of mom’s nobles go so far out of their way for me? What could he have to gain from taking such a big risk?

“Hmmm...” Mom scratches her ruff in contemplation. “Duncan, how is the foreign affairs brief looking this morning?”

In another surprise, mom changes the subject to... foreign policy? What does that have to do with me going to the Weald?

Duncan’s expression is unwavering. “I’ll have the latest on the border situation with Melicola Province, as well as some encouraging new intelligence received overnight from Sarlain.”

“Finally!” blurts mom, unexpectedly curt. “A little good news around here for a change. Very well then, Asha. You may have your trip out to the Weald. I want you to follow Duncan’s discretion to the letter. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Yeah...” I say, fumbling words as I pick my metaphorical jaw up off the floor. She just... agreed to let me go after all? Based on some good news about foreign policy?

Huh?

“Good. Duncan, I leave the Princess in your capable hands.”

Duncan nods, “Yes, of course. Thank you, your Majesty.”

...What on Jade just happened here?!

Sofl is smiling ear to ear, and I can tell by his body language he’s itching to come to the other side of the table and give me a hug. Duncan’s grinning as well and seems quite content with himself, having executed this stunning reversal.

No joke, he just pulled off the same trick I tried to do earlier — butting into a conversation between two animals to propose something so decisive and unexpected that it dumbfounds everyone into thinking it's a good idea. But unlike me, he completely nailed it!

Oh, wow!!

Bravo, you exceptionally well-dressed and handsome-looking bunny!

I don't know what he did differently that made his approach work, but who cares? What matters is, it worked! I'm not going to ask too many questions!

“Well, then,” says mom, eager to change the subject. “Lord Orlando, can you tell us a bit more about your hunting trip to Isle Burgess this week?”

And Orlando... oh man, his brow is furled, and his lip is stuck in a sneer — he is completely dejected. I'm sure he would have loved to see me and mom get into a big fight, just to watch me taken down a few notches. I think mom is trying to cheer him up by changing the subject to his hunting trip.

I can't explain anything that's happened here. Why Duncan went out of his way for me, and why mom's decision was swayed by something so arbitrary. But all of a sudden everything has turned around in my favor.

What a fantastic change of events!

Oh, gosh! I need to find all my gear, gather my field guides and containers for collecting samples... it's really happening! I'm leaving the palace to go on an adventure today!