

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 4. Formalities

Mom's physician soon arrived at the chapel and gave her an on-the-spot examination. Happily, all they could find wrong was a bruise on her shoulder from where she hit the ground. They still need to perform some more tests back in the palace's main medical room, but it sounds like she's on the mend.

With so many people attending communion today, word got out quickly that the Queen had a fall in the chapel. Acting on mom's behalf, Duncan made the call to cite her health as the official excuse. 'A sudden sense of vertigo during communion with the Goddess caused the Queen to collapse,' will be the line given to radio and newspapers. Naturally, mom will be exercising her right to privacy about what happened during her meeting with the Goddess.

It's all a bit overwhelming, nothing like this has ever happened before. The Goddess refusing to speak to a Monarch is unheard of — if she has nothing to say, she simply won't engage in communion. The Monarch won't become motionless.

At least, this is unheard of as far as history records it. With the Monarch's prerogative to privacy, the Goddess refusing to speak could be more common than we think. If it ever happens to me, do you really think I'll go public about it?

Haha! I'd crawl into a chapel confessional and quietly sob.

No Monarch can keep collapsing in front of a chapel full of animals a secret, though. I actually feel a little bit bad for mom, this event is going to be talked about and speculated on by the faithful and unfaithful alike for a loooooong time.

I'm not sure what to think of the whole thing. Her health seems to be alright, and it's not like the Goddess would have intentionally caused her to collapse. Why would Etain do something so aggressive to a sitting Monarch?

Me and Sofl stayed in the Chapel for a little while with Mom until her nausea subsided and she was back on her feet. Now we're passing through the halls of the palace to his lab where I can pick up the supplies I'll need for today's trip.

Yup, that's right. Despite the fall, the trip is still happening. I'm relieved to be moving forward with our plans, but Sofl still seems stuck in the moment. He's staring at the floor downhearted, tail drooped as we walk next to each other.

"You alright?" I ask.

He raises his head and mutters, "Y-yeah, I'll be fine."

"Just let me know if you need extra time before we start getting ready, okay?"

"I will. Thanks, Asha," he says, forcing a smile.

I'm not surprised it's still bothering him, he's always had trouble coping with traumatic events like this. When one of his cats died unexpectedly a year or so ago, he was *miserable*. Sat in his room crying for days and refused to leave. Whenever dad tries to regale us with stories from the last war with Sarlain, he always has to excuse himself from the room.

It's curious how we turned out so differently. The Queen herself can't intimidate me if my mind is set on something. But Sofl has never raised his voice once in his life, and I'm convinced he's simply not capable of such aggression.

We turn a corner into a more dimly lit hallway at the back end of the palace and pass through a set of plain, wooden doors into a corridor. This hallway is reserved for the service workers to carry out their duties, away from the discerning eyes of nobility.

Our rubber shoes squeak as they slide around on the linoleum floors. Smoothed out over time by the constant passing of heavy, wheeled laundry carts and the hand trucks that carry boxes of food to the kitchen. The hall is completely free of decorations, and dirt has built up over time in the dimly lit sections of the plain, cream-colored walls.

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This area is a lot less presentable than the rest of the palace. Mom and dad never pass through here, and a noble wouldn't be caught dead wandering around such a sordid-looking place.

I like to use it as a shortcut.

Down the hall a chrome door leading to the kitchen flings open, smashing into a well-worn dimple in the wall with a metallic-sounding crash. A tawny-colored Hare in a food-stained apron trots into the hall with a full bag of trash over his shoulder. I recognize him as one of the line cooks I'm friendly with.

"Oh, hi Roscoe!" I say, waving to him down the hall.

He looks up to see me. His expression, sullen by the morning breakfast rush, changes to surprised relief.

"Well, hello there Asha! Or should I say, the brawler Princess!" he cackles.

"Brawler Princess?" I ask coyly. "Now where on Jade did you get the idea I like to pick fights?"

"Sally came back from serving plates and said you was stirring up trouble again," he says, waving his free hand around in a circle. "Next thing I know there's all this yelling and screaming coming from the dining room. We all knew who started it, haha!"

“Oh, well it was for a good cause, really!” I contend. “Mom’s agreed to let me leave the palace to find some lichen samples for Sofl. He’s going to use them in his herbalism experiments!”

Roscoe’s eyes light up, “Really! Well, good on you for having the chance to get out! And Sofl! You’re an herbalist? I didn’t know you were such a budding little scientist! You’ll have to show me what it is you come up with, alright?”

I turn to see Sofl's reaction, only to find he’s no longer there. I look back further and spot him hovering slightly behind my back. Without me noticing, he’s managed to slink himself out of view during our conversation.

“I-I will, sir!” he stammers, poking his head out to be heard more clearly. Roscoe stares at me incredulously.

Don’t ask me!! I don’t know why he’s being so shy right now, either.

Roscoe's expression turns soft. “I’ll let you guys back on your way, alright? I gotta’ finish cleaning up the kitchen before my lead gets back from their break.”

“Okay! Bye, Roscoe!”

“Later, Princess!”

He strides past us, on his way to the rail dock in the back of the palace where trash is collected and taken away. As he does, Sofl shifts farther behind me.

Okay, really Sofl? Extreme shyness is kind of your thing, but... you called Roscoe ‘Sir?’

I haven’t taught you enough about when it’s appropriate to drop all the formalities! A friendly conversation with one of the palace cooks isn’t the right time to call someone, ‘Sir’. You’re just going to weird them out, treating them as one of the nobles.

*Mental Note:* Need to give Sofl another talk about the importance of acting casual.

“Come on,” I say, tapping the back of his shoulder with my tail. I begin walking and hear his footsteps catch up to mine.

We pass through another door to exit the hallway and arrive at the wing of the palace where residences are located. It's back to the usual sumptuous decor, here.

A palace guard sees our approach and opens a set of gilded wooden doors that bear our family's crest at the top — a set of lines with a circle representing the Goddess in the middle. Passing through them, the hard marble flooring changes to plush red carpet, muffling the sounds of our footsteps as we pass under an impressive oil painting of a Dragon in flight.

With nowhere appropriate to put it in the palace, Sofl's lab was shoehorned into a converted bedroom at the end of the first floor of the residence wing. Like most things involving my brother, I had to fight with mom for him to even have a lab, and it came at the expense of giving up my old reading room for it.

It was an acceptable loss. Watching Sofl ease up and get excited as he returns to the lab is always the proof I need. As we approach the door his tail relaxes and his mouth curves into a smile. He quickly pulls a gilded key from his pocket and unlocks the wooden door. It creaks open, and we enter.