

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 5. Sofl's Lab

The first thing that hits you walking into Sofl's lab is the *smell*. The thick, musky scents of bunches of herbs and other plant samples left out to dry, strung from the walls and hung in the windows, placed upside down so the essential oils can drain to the tips. This portent cocktail of odors pervades every corner of the room so strongly that even I, with my dreadful sense of smell, get a little overwhelmed every time I enter.

Stocks of ingredients and lab equipment were stashed haphazardly in seemingly every available crevice of the room. Tall shelves of books line the walls that aren't used for hanging or storing samples, filled to capacity with various encyclopedias, pharmacopeia, and other reference material. Large jars and other containers weigh down the bottoms of the book-heavy shelves to prevent them from toppling over. There's not much in the way of decorations — only a lunar calendar hung in a small crevice between two bookshelves.

Two wooden tables take up the center of the room. Sample preparation occurs at the one closest to the door, the extraction of essential elements in large distillation chambers and other equipment, at the other.

This may come as a surprise, but I don't actually know a whole lot about what his equipment does or how it works. Herbalism is fun, but I prefer to do all my botany stuff outside and not be cramped up in a lab all day. Even when I read books these days I usually do it outside somewhere.

Despite the blinds being drawn to let in sunlight, the lab always seems darker than it actually is. I'm not sure why.

I walk inside and kick my shoes off near the door — I only wear them when I know I'm going to be around mom. Lemurs who wear footwear all the time are weird.

A large, worn book is open prominently in the center of the preparation table. Its binding is beginning to come apart at the seams, and the pages appear dry and brittle. A lined notepad, some crumpled pieces of paper, and a stack of smaller books were placed next to it.

"Is this the pharmacopoeia that calls for the lichen?" I ask, inspecting the well-aged tome. Running my fingers over the texture of a page, I try to parse its contents. But the text is faded and written in an alphabet I don't recognize.

“It is!” chirps Sofl, pulling some books off a shelf. “It came from the Nortanian city of Hoarfrost. The librarian thinks it’s at least 200 years old and was written before the common Avian tongue was established.”

The ancient Avian tongues were combined into a single, unified language about 150 years ago in their home country, Nortane. It’s possible to translate the majority of their old alphabets into ours, the Goddess language, though there aren’t a lot of resources available on how to do it. Our Kingdom hasn’t had the rosiest relationship with the Birds over the years.

“So, you found a new recipe in the book and we're translating it into the Goddess language,” I say.

I look over to see Sofl’s eyes lighting up. “Yup! I just finished the preparation of ingredients last night and today I’m going to translate how to combine them into the elixir.”

Sheesh. And here I thought I was the smart-aleck of the family, being the walking encyclopedia on plants.

It blows my mind that mom and dad keep squandering Sofl’s potential. When was the last time you met a 14-year-old boy who could translate an ancient

language that's almost completely forgotten about? He's so smart. He'll grow up to do wonderful things if his passions are allowed to nurture and grow.

"Well! Then I better get out there and find you those samples," I declare, opening a drawer in the table loaded with small utensils and other items. "What does the recipe call for? How many sample dishes do you think I should bring?"

"Less than a gram of the lichen should be enough, but it would be great if you could find some more for my stocks. This might be our only chance to ever find samples of *Pilophorus acicularis*."

Right. Six dishes it is, then. I take them from the drawer, stack them up on the table and go to fetch a backpack from a bookshelf to store them in. While I'm over here, one of Sofl's little field guides wouldn't be a bad thing to bring with me. Not that I really need one, but it's nice to have in case we come across anything especially exotic in the Weald.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

"Hey, Asha?" Sofl calls out to me while I rummage through his clutter.

I poke my head up. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Before you leave, I wanted to ask you something. Why did you stand up for me in front of mother?”

Hm? What’s this about, now? I stop my search for the field guide and stand to give him my full attention. “Why did I argue with her? Well, you want that lichen, right?”

“I do,” he says, adjusting his vest. “But you and mom got really upset at each other. I don’t want you two to be enemies just for me.”

*Oh.* So that’s what this is about.

I guess I better tell him.

“Sofl,” I begin, dropping the bag on the opposite side of the preparation table.

“You need to understand there are things in life that are worth fighting for. This was one of those things.”

His reaction is unwavering. "I don't think you should fight mother just so I can have a lichen sample."

I shake my head. "It's not about a lichen sample, Sofl. It's about sticking up for yourself and not allowing other people to determine the course of your life."

He stares at me perplexed. "What do you mean, 'determine my life'?"

"You were so excited when you told Duncan you translated the ingredients list for the elixir. But as soon as you mentioned it called for a rare lichen, mom and dad sprang into action to try to get you to forget about it. Sofl, why do you think they did that? Why do you think they always want you to forget about herbalism?"

"I-I don't know why they do that..." he trails off, grabbing his tail from behind his back to stroke it nervously. "I wish they didn't. It makes me upset."

"It's because they know how obedient you are, Sofl. And that you'll never object when they obstruct your hobbies."

“But I’ve told mom before how important herbalism is to me. She told me she understood and would listen to me more often.”

“Sofl, you had to hide behind me earlier when I was talking to Roscoe. Everyone understands how shy and subservient you are.”

He stares past me, unable to respond.

I move my head in closer to Sofl’s and speak in a more discrete tone, “Listen to me. Mom, dad, all the nobles, and every other *important* person who passes through here wants us to live and act a certain way. They see us, the heirs to the throne, as *their* future. If they see behavior they don’t like, they perceive it as a threat. They’re going to try and manipulate *us* to be more agreeable for *them*.”

“They would really do that?” he asks, his expression turning from confusion to disbelief.

“Sofl, they tried to do it to you today. They’ve done it to us our entire lives.”

Sofl slams his hands on the table and explodes, “But what’s so bad about being an herbalist, huh? Asha, there’s nothing harmful about trying to create medicine!”

Sofl’s outburst catches me off-kilter, causing me to retreat a step from the table. He stares at me with bared teeth, a fire burning in his eyes that I’ve neverwitnessed before. Where did *this* come from?! I never believed he had it in his gentle soul to get this frustrated, this visibly upset.

I readjust myself and stare him in the eyes. Sofl hasn’t realized it yet, but his innocence is starting to crack. I have a chance to break through to him, to get him to realize he’s being manipulated. If he’ll listen to what I have to say right now, I’m certain he’ll come to realize it’s true.

“What’s so bad about botany? When have the plants in our garden ever hurt someone?” I pause as if waiting for a response but continue before he can give me one. “It doesn’t matter. The only important thing is your values and your politics align with theirs so if you become King, you won’t be a threat.”

“I don’t want to believe they would do that to us,” he says, staring at the floor like his whole world has been shattered. He needed a reality check, but I hope I wasn’t *too* real with him.

I move around the table and place my hand on his shoulder, “Well, promise me you’ll think about it, alright?”

“I...” he trails off, then looks up at me with a determined expression. “I will. I’ll think about it.”

“Alright,” I smile gently. I turn to grab my bag off the desk and flip it over my shoulder. This is a good spot to leave him, it’ll give him some space to ruminate on what I’ve said while I’m out in the Weald. I still need a field guide, but I can just grab one from my room on the way out.

“I think that’s everything I need from here. I’ll be back in the evening, alright?”

“Yeah...” he says, staring across the room again at nothing in particular. Sounds like he’s already deep in thought. I smile at him and turn to leave.

“Oh, Asha!!” he calls as I place my hand on the doorknob. “Please be careful out there.”

“I will. I promise.”