

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 6. The Royal Garden

I step out onto the back portico of the palace and catch a glimpse of the late morning sun just poking over the white walls of the state wing. The light cascades down and into the sprawling backyard of the palace, aptly known as the Ellyntide Palace Gardens.

There's one last errand I need to perform before I can get dressed for our trip this afternoon, and it involves a quick detour out to the garden. It shouldn't take very long.

Rows of apple and pear trees, meticulously groomed, line a path leading to a reflecting pond where a statue of my grandmother, the late Queen Beatrix stands. Beyond that, groomed hedges encircle a large field of grass used for events with the Monarch. At the southern edge of the field was the entrance to the area I typically hung around, the collection of flora from nearly all points of the moon. It's basically my favorite place, ever.

As big as the gardens are, they're minuscule in comparison to the most prominent feature of the palace grounds... actually, make that the entire city of Varecia: The centuries-old Elder Tree.

An ancient tree as old as the city itself, its immense size towers over everything in sight, eclipsing the height of the palace by at least half. Its dark green branches bear the appearance of motion, windswept and tangled by centuries of the powerful windstorms that sometimes strike Ellyntide. The base of the tree is so wide it stretches from beyond the grounds of the garden, past the palace itself, and clear to the train station on the opposite side of the complex.

I sling the backpack from Sofl's lab off my shoulder and store it by the gilded doors leading back inside. It'll be safe here for a few minutes while I get things squared away in the garden.

I trot down the stairs of the portico and make my way up the stone path through the fruit trees. The scent of morning dew lingers in the air, still clinging to blades of grass shielded from the morning sun, mingling with the musty smell of fresh mulch. Someone from the grounds crew on their morning shift must be out here spreading it.

My theory is immediately proven correct when a Marten carrying far too many bags of mulch ambles around a pear tree. He grunts and his legs waver with

each step he takes, causing the bags to sway precariously from side to side. I can tell he's in way over himself and it won't be long before the bags topple to the ground.

If he falls back on himself and the bags topple onto him... ugh, I better do something!

I scan the area and spot a wheelbarrow under a pear tree next to the one the Marten is working at. I hustle over and snatch it before he can get very far.

"Hey!! You're going to fall, tip a few into my wheelbarrow!!" I shout, rushing to his side.

"Nrggh... Okay!"

I drop the wheelbarrow to the ground and the Marten angles the bags downwards, causing two to slide off the top. They tumble and crash into the wheelbarrow with a loud whop.

“Phew!!” he exclaims, crouching to drop the remaining bags into the grass more elegantly. “Hey, thanks for the assist! That was a close one, bit off a bit more than I could chew, eh?”

No longer obscured by sacks of mulch, I get my first look at his face. He’s unfamiliar to me, sporting a small mop of hair (typical for Marten boys) and atypically clean slacks for a groundskeeper. They’re held up by a pair of suspenders over a similarly clean button-up top.

The evidence is clear. He’s a new hire in the garden — a greenleaf.

“You’re welcome! It’s a good thing I happened to be walking by. Did you just start this morning?”

“Yup, it’s my first day. Didn’t realize how heavy those bags were,” he laughs, scratching the back of his neck. “Name’s Clayton, Clayton Buggs. Yourself?”

“Asha, Asha Lordanou. She and her pronouns.”

His ears twisted. “Ha-ha! But seriously, what’s your name?”

Oh gosh, are we really going to do this again today?

“I’m *being* serious, Clayton Buggs,” I say, folding my arms.

“I...” his voice dwindles as his green eyes scan my physical features, going over me with an invisible checklist. Ruffed Lemur? Check. Obnoxiously expensive clothes? Check. Azure-colored hair? Check. Relative age he understands the Princess to be? Check. At this moment, the realization is occurring in his head.

This is how it usually goes.

“Um,” he stumbles, tail drooping. He looks like someone ran him through a garden hose.

“Oh, relax! You’re fine, Clayton!! You’re gonna be seeing me come through here a lot, okay? I just like to say ‘Hi’ when greenleafs start.”

“Yes ma’am!” he cries, dipping his head clumsily in respect. I hold back the sigh growing in my chest.

“Didn’t Horatio tell you I visit the garden almost daily?” I ask, tilting my head to match his.

Horatio is the head groundskeeper of the palace. Typically, when greenleafs start he’ll give them a heads-up in orientation that the Princess likes to come down and visit the garden. We try to prevent awkward introductions like this from occurring.

“Yeah”, he explains. “I just wasn’t expecting you to—”

Be so casual? I get it.

“—I understand. You’ll get used to me,” I smile. “I need to go talk to Horatio. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Y-yeah...” he says, still trying to keep himself composed. He’ll get over it soon enough.

I give him a friendly wave and turn away on my feet. Clayton replies with an awkward smile and waves back.

Once an earshot away I release the pent-up sigh that's been building under my breath. Despite being the Princess of a Kingdom, my likeness is not well known. Awkward interactions with new workers in the palace are inevitable.

After the assassination of my grandmother, Queen Beatrix, our family stopped attending nearly all public events, save the ones where mom's attendance is mandatory. The Mourning Day parade in summer to grieve for knights lost during the Kingdom's many wars is a good example.

But I'm to stay in the palace on those days to preserve the line of succession should the unthinkable once again occur. The only time I'm seen by the public is when I leave the palace to travel to somewhere in Varecia. Which doesn't happen often.

Yeah, I know we have cameras and photographs these days. But mom is... suspicious of them. Claims they're going to steal your soul and send it to another dimension when they pull the shutter. I've only been photographed a few times clandestinely by my father when mom wasn't around. The photos are private to the royal family and have never been released to the public.

Consequently, the most people tend to know about my appearance is from some cute illustrations of me that were released when I was a child. One of them had me in a rocking horse with a fanciful dress on, playing in one of the palace's guest rooms. In another, I'm out here in the garden, playing with my toys and smelling the flowers. At least they got that one right.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

Since then, the plan has been to wait until I'm a *liiittle* bit older before they begin introducing me to the public at large. Mom's approval ratings are good at the moment, so I'm seen as a strategic tool in case they begin to slip. If they fall too low, they can roll me out to prop them back up again. The grand introduction of the next heir to the throne will be a big event that sparks a lot of nationalistic pride.

I make my way past the statue of a screaming Queen Beatrix — her rapier pointing to the sky as if she was giving the inane order for all the plants in the garden to grow most hastily — and spot a crowd of animals gathered on the other side of the hedge that separates the courtyard from the grassy field where events are hosted. They're staring at the ground, deep in conversation.

I spot the animal I came here to find: a lanky, old Ring-Tailed man in well-worked overalls named Horatio, the head groundskeeper of the palace. A likable, easygoing fellow that rarely raises his voice and cracks a lot of jokes. I

like him plenty well enough, though I must confess I preferred the woman who was his predecessor.

Flanked to his sides are some of the other groundskeepers I'm familiar with, but what catches my attention is a Fisher man standing next to them in a cream, buttoned-up shirt. Where did he come from?

"Hey! What's going on?" I call out, approaching the group.

Me being the Princess, the discussion ceases, and everyone's attention is diverted. Horatio's eyes light up.

"Asha!" he cries, his worn face filled with glee. "You won't believe what's happened overnight!"

"A sapling of the Elder Tree sprouted!" says Corya, the Ruffed girl nex—  
Wait, *WHAT?*

"A seed germinated?!" The words involuntarily leave my muzzle. I dart over and the group parts, giving way to a disturbed patch of ground. Ignoring any regard for the cleanliness of my clothes, I crouch down in the grass to get a closer view.

In front of me is precisely what's claimed: Jutting through the grass at roughly a foot tall is a sprout of *Elderus Lithanteum*. Its stem is soft and green, with a scattering of bushy branches covered in green needles. So recently did it rise from the ground that pieces of dirt remain stuck to its sides.

Oh man, this is incredible! I hold my hand out and compare the branches to the size of my fingers.

"Amazing that it could grow so much in only a few hours, huh?" says Horatio.

"Will it keep growing out here in the field?" asks Gypsum, a Ruffed groundskeeper about my age.

I frown and shake my head. "There's no understory here to support the growth. Without decaying plant material and needles from other *Lithanteum*, the soil isn't nearly acidic enough. And without any mycorrhizal plants to shade it before it grows thicker bark, it'll get cooked by the sun's ultraviolet light in no time."

"Or any of the *Liliaceae* we suspect are prevalent on the Northern Continent," says another authoritative speaker, panging a distant memory in the recesses

of my mind. I look up to the source of the voice and it all comes back to the present.

“Professor Willow!” I beam, pleasantly surprised. The Fisher I spotted is actually the tenured Professor of Botany at Varecia University. I was so fixated on the sprout that I didn’t even recognize him!

“Hello, Asha. It’s encouraging to see you as sharp as ever,” he says, with that sultry accent Fishers often have.

Horatio pushes his drooping spectacles back up. “Oh! So, you two already know each other, eh?” he asks, crossing his arms as if he were setting himself up to hear a particularly good story.

Sorry, not this time old man. “I once tried to enroll in Professor Willow’s botany program at Varecia University. But the course requires a lot of fieldwork, and I require a security detail every time I leave the palace. It was a logistical nightmare to plan, so I made the difficult decision to drop the program.”

I lied.

Fieldwork is the official excuse, but it's only half the story: The real reason is exponentially more embarrassing. Worse yet, it directly involves Professor Willow, who's standing right above me. No, we're not going to revisit that particular unpleasant memory today.

The Professor flicks his eyes from me. "It's a pity it didn't work out, you would've been an exemplary student. But at least you could be here now to witness this historic moment now, yes?"

I spring to my feet, as eager to change the subject as he is. "Oh, absolutely. I've only seen one other sprout of the Elder Tree, and that was when I was a pup. It's exceptionally rare for a seed to germinate."

"Indeed, only 6 times in the past century. We don't get many chances to try and grow the first successful offspring of the Elder Tree" he sighs as if bearing the collective shame of botanists everywhere.

"How come the saplings always fail?" asks Gypsum. "Everyone knows The Elder Tree is from the Northern Continent, but the climate there can't be that different from Ellyntide, can it?"

The Professor shrugs. "Until a proper scientific expedition can be carried out on the Northern Continent, all we can do is speculate on why the saplings fail.

It may be that these trees simply cannot mature anywhere else besides those northern regions.”

The Northern Continent, far to the north of Ellyntide, remains unexplored to this day. Two distinct species of Dragon inhabit the continent and drive away any attempts at exploration: the feathered, territorial Lithans and the diminutive, but equally as dangerous Redaga.

“Have you tried politely asking one of those Dragons over there how the trees work?” jokes Horatio.

The Professor chuckles, “If you’re able to hold a conversation with a Litan and live to tell the tale, I encourage you to pose the question.”

Even though they’re feral, it is known that Lithans are intelligent creatures, possibly equaling the cognition of ascended animals. The holy book goes so far as to say they follow their own deity named Keuvra, in the same manner Lemurs from Ellyntide and Sarlain follow the Goddess Etain. Creatures worthy of Azurrel’s grace must have something going for them.

But attempts at communication with Lithans have always failed. Supposedly, their vocalizations include noises that aren’t possible for us to make. If they happen to have a communicable language, then it’s unlikely we’ll ever have a

chance to learn it, let alone use it to engage in conversation. With Dragons standing in the way and no way to negotiate, the chances of science learning more about the Elder Tree from The Northern Continent are almost nothing.

Armed only with speculation, when rare events like this occur we have to act quickly to ensure the survival of the sprout.

“We need to get the sapling under some shade,” I announce, taking the intuitive. “Corya, can you get one of the canopy tents we used at my mother’s party last week?”

Having received an order from *me*, Corya goes bug-eyed. “Oh! Um, the Professor has already called to have the botany department from the University come out here. They’re going to be here this afternoon.”

Erk! I’m getting a little ahead of myself, aren’t I?

“Oh, fwegh! I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Now, there’s no need to cuss about it,” says the Professor, with the true demeanor of someone who spends most of his time in a university lecture hall. “I appreciate your enthusiasm nonetheless, Princess. You’ll be able to

watch us this afternoon as we work to prepare the sprout for extraction to the University tomorrow. If we're lucky, this may represent an adaptation to grow in less acidic soil."

Oh, sheesh, they're moving fast on this. I'd actually really like to be here to watch them work on the sapling, but the steam is already flowing on our plans for this afternoon.

"I'll have to check in tonight after I get back. I'm traveling to the Eastern Weald this afternoon to do some foraging for my brother! I actually came down here to let Horatio know I wouldn't be attending my shift this afternoon."

The Professor gives me a sidelong glance. "Your shift?"

"Asha volunteers her spare time down here in the garden. We always appreciate the extra set of hands and feet!" Horatio responds with glowing eyes.

I started volunteering in the garden when I was a teenager. It began as an excuse to get out of the palace more often, but over time I grew to enjoy the time I spent outdoors on my hands and feet, getting dirty and feeling like a part of a team.

I get to talk to *real* people out here, folks with actual lives, goals, and dreams. Corya is going for her literature degree at university and works here on her days between classes. She wants to become a journalist and better support her family. And Horatio... that dude used to be a Knight! He was a member of a Knight's order for many, many years before he decided he'd had enough and turned his passion for gardening into a full-time career.

*Fweeee!!!*

The shrill cry of a locomotive whistle from the opposite side of the palace interrupts our conversation. Last call for passengers on the 10:45 train on its return trip into downtown Veracia. Before I left the chapel, Duncan mentioned we'd be leaving on the 11:20 train and to be at the palace's train shed 10 minutes before departure — I gotta get ready!

"Hey, I don't mean to cut our conversation short, but I actually need to board the next train out of here. We'll catch up later tonight, okay?"

The Professor nods. "Yes, of course. Have a fun time out there, Asha. Bring me back a sample of *Rhododendron* if you get a chance, will you?"

I give a wave to everyone and take off skipping toward the palace. "I will!"

“Bye Asha!”

“See ya later!”

Finally, I can get ready to leave!! I just need to go pick out an outfit and grab a pocket field guide and I'll be set. I'm cutting the timing a little close, but I should be able to make it to the train shed with plenty of time to spare.