

Just Maagy
Book 1 in the Maagy Series
Excerpt for Perusal

Chapter 7
The Summit

Five-thirty Monday morning came much earlier than Maagy had anticipated. Once awake, she threw back the covers and stretched toward the ceiling anticipating the fun which was about to begin. King Henry had told her she would be sitting in on the League of Kingdoms Summit and she was giddy with excitement feeling oh so important. Estelí had awakened her with bath drawn, and Maagy was in and out of the tub in no time. She threw on overalls for early chores before breakfast. She flung open her door to find the hallway completely dark. She was so busy she hadn't notice that daylight had not yet dawned. She immediately burst into laughter and had to stifle the noise, as no one else was awake. She ran down to the family dining room and slipped inside. Once safely behind closed doors, she couldn't stop laughing out loud. Surely the anticipation of the up-coming events heightened her emotions and laughter was the perfect release. Finally, she emerged from her giggle-fest and realized the smell of bacon frying was creeping into the dining room. She looked toward the kitchen to see light under the door. She peeked in. Grandma Polly, Josephine, and an army of helpers were already well under way with meal preparations.

"Good morning, Gram-P. Good morning, Josephine. You're both awake early. Do you always begin cooking before daylight?"

"Well, well, look who's awake already!" Grandma said.

"Good morning, Your Highness Princess Maagy," Josephine added, with a bow of her head.

"Yes, we begin before dawn. It's the most peaceful time of day," Grandma Polly replied with a twinkle in her eye.

"I had to laugh at myself for not noticing it was still dark. I hope I didn't awaken anyone with my outburst."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Dear. All the guests are asleep on the third floor and most of the staff is awake already. The only one you could have disturbed would have been your father, and he sleeps like a rock if I remember correctly. So, I'm sure your sweet little giggles wouldn't have interfered with his slumber. Are you hungry? We've just started cooking. Breakfast won't be ready for a bit. Can you last?"

"Of course, I'm hungry. I'm always hungry. But I'll be fine. Can I help you do something?"

"Well, those apples over there need to be sliced up for frying. Would you like to do? You may snack on a slice or two if you like."

"Yes, I'd be happy to. Josephine showed me how to handle a sharp knife properly. I'd love to test my skill."

"Good. Be careful then."

Maagy sliced and snacked on the apples until all were done. Then she watched as Josephine fried them to perfection with sugar and cinnamon. Grandma Polly finished cooking the bacon and made stacks and stacks of pancakes. She scrambled a mountain of fluffy eggs and filled the huge silver urn with hot coffee. There were muffins, croissants, and scones. There was a large bowl of berries and cut peaches. Maagy took the dishes of butter and various cheeses into the dining room and placed them on the buffet. Josephine had followed with a tray of jams and jellies and a pitcher of fresh fruit juice. A flurry of constant activity with

workers in and out of the kitchen had chaffing dishes of piping hot food set in no time.

Without her notice, daylight began streaming through the windows. The rising sun bounced light off the western tower wall and the lingering mist on the lawn to give a golden glow to the dining room. She stood back for a moment to appreciate the picture knowing that as soon as the sun rose higher into the sky this particular phenomenon would be gone. It occurred to her there were probably many things like this which only exist for a moment and should be enjoyed for as long as possible. Just as all the food was in place the door opened and in strode the handsome Prince Rudolpho. He was in uniform, sword and dagger on either side. This was his *working* military attire. It was equally as sharp but fewer tassels and less gold than the one he'd worn for opening ceremonies. He looked more like a man of authority rather than a boy prince. He seemed to have gotten even taller overnight.

"Good morning, Duchess. I must say, another stunning pair of overalls!"

She wasn't expecting anyone so soon, least of all *him*. She thought breakfast would be private with only her father. She lost her breath for a moment. Her heart pounded like a drum and felt as if it would jump out her mouth. The day before had been so pleasant. Maagy felt as if she had gotten to know Asanna and Rudy. She didn't expect the reaction. She was sure her knees were rattling, as they felt like the bowl of strawberry jelly on the sideboard.

"Oh! Hello! Good morning! Yes... hello... top of the day!" She stumbled as she struggled to control her mouth and her emotions at the same time. "Yes, good morning, Rudy... Prince Rudolpho. You look... rather... much... like... you look stunning, as well! I mean handsome... I mean... are you hungry? Breakfast is almost ready."

She ducked into the kitchen to take a deep breath. She had thought all these funny feelings were gone after having spent the entire day with him. She thought she was under control and she could behave like a normal person, but here she was telling him he looked *stunning*.

"*Oh bother!* He must think I'm daft*," she mumbled. "Maybe he didn't hear what I said."

"Pardon, Dear?"

"Oh... nothing... Gram... nothing."

She grabbed a basket of bread from someone's hands and went back into the dining room to face her fears.

"Good morning... *again*. Breakfast will be ready soon and I helped prepare it. Did you know Grandma Polly and Josephine Penning get up well before dawn to begin cooking? I didn't. I only just discovered it this morning. I've been up since before dawn," she rattled at breakneck speed. "When the sun rose, it reflected off the west tower wall and gave the room a golden glow. You should have seen it! It only lasted for a few minutes. Oops! Talking too much, right? Would you like a croissant?"

"Not yet, thanks. Just getting a cup of tea," Rudy said with a grin. "Why up so early?"

"I just woke up... I mean... Estelí woke me... so I'd have plenty of time to do chores... and visit Cupid before the Summit... so I got up... and took a bath... and dressed... and came down... to find them in the kitchen busily working already. So, I helped... and now... I guess I should be quiet... and let someone else... get a word in edgewise."

She was embarrassed at her enthusiastic tongue rattling and took a deep breath to calm herself, as she put the basket on the sideboard.

"I'm sure the sunrise was quite the show," he responded, amused by her ramblings. "I wish I'd seen it, too."

"Wasn't that whole exchange with the letter hilarious the other evening?" Maagy continued, nervously.

"Indeed, it was," Rudy agreed with a chuckle. "I've not seen that side of Father. He's always so serious

when dealing with state matters. It's nice to see such affection between the three of them after all these years. They're like brothers. So... I'll see you for breakfast in a bit?"

"Yes! I'm going to do my chores... now... so... in a bit."

Rudolpho took his tea and swept out of the room as quickly as he swept into it leaving Maagy speechless and almost lightheaded.

As she walked alone to the barn smiling in the warmth of her infatuation, her mind drifted back to every detail of the day before and the budding camaraderie with Asanna and Rudy. Maagy learned Rudolpho had an older married brother named Raul and a sister named Consuela. They were twelve and ten, respectively, when Rudolpho was born, which put him second in line for the monarchy behind Raul. However, Rudolpho had secured a valuable place in his father's administration with his intelligence and negotiating skills. Asanna told her about collecting porcelain dolls. She had made up stories about their lives and written them down in a book she planned to give to her children, someday. She invited Maagy to come and visit and meet her '*friends*'. Maagy shared with them her sadness at never knowing her mother and talked about the images that haunted her dreams. She told them about her birthday party disaster and the tantrums, which prompted King Henry to bring her along on the trip. She admitted how unhappy she had been when he had awakened her before dawn, but how the experience had changed her life.

Sunday had been a perfect day. There was a pick-up game of *Creckett** on the lawn, egg hunts and pony rides for the children, and lazy afternoon naps. The evening haze, which hung low over the mountaintops, had yielded an unusually spectacular show of colors. The frogs and night bugs delivered their customary serenade with fireflies blinking in time with the music. The evening had ended early, as the next week would be full with meetings and much work. Rudy had walked her to her door and, once again, kissed her hand. Once again, he made her heart skip and flutter. She had watched him ascend round the third-floor staircase until he was out of sight.

Her dreamy thoughts carried her through her chores and she returned to the moment as she entered through the mudroom, kicked off her smelly boots, and washed her hands for breakfast. She arrived at the table promptly at six-thirty, as instructed, and was pleasantly surprised to find Prince Rudolpho already there with her father. When she opened the door and laid eyes upon him, her heart pounded wildly, her breath was taken away, and she couldn't repress a great smile.

"Good morning, again," she gushed.

"*Always* a good morning with you in it, Duchess."

He stood quickly, stepped boldly forward, and took her hand before she could blink. He kissed it as he bowed and then pulled out the chair for her to sit next to him.

"Your father and I have a few strategic details to discuss before the meetings begin. I hope you don't mind. May I get your tea?"

"No... yes... I mean, no! I... I don't mind a... a bit... not at all... it's... I'm... I mean... of course! Discuss whatever you like. Tea would be lovely... sugar only, please," she stammered as she gazed at him.

As he delivered a cup of piping hot drink, their eyes locked. Rudolpho actually blushed a little.

"Good morning, Maagy Dear," the King interjected smiling at his daughter's foibles*. "Sleep well?"

"What? Sleep? Oh! Yes, Father, I slept quite well. Thank you," she said as she got hold of herself and went to the buffet.

Henry and Rudolpho discussed what seemed to be important matters. She felt left out of the conversation, but didn't mind much. It gave her the opportunity to sip tea and stare at the handsome guest. When they had finished eating, Prince Rudolpho excused himself, kissed her hand, and took his leave. She was still basking in the warmth of the moment when her father broke the spell.

“Now Maagy, you’re not wearing overalls to the meeting, are you?”

“Sir? Oh... overalls! No, of course not, Daddy. I’ll change clothes. I ran to the barn for chores and to say hello to Cupid first. Oh, good grief! I hope I don’t smell like horse!”

“Good. I want you at your best and at my side in the meetings. It’s important you learn to conduct yourself in these sorts of negotiations. This will be your responsibility in a few years. Nine o’clock, sharp. And, no. You don’t stink.”

Maagy had never seen her father in such a way. He seemed on edge, nervous. The meetings were obviously more important than she’d realized.

“Don’t worry, Daddy, I’ll be dressed appropriately and on time. I promise.”

“Good, good. And Maagy, please remember for the rest of the week if we are in the presence of anyone else you must follow protocol when addressing me.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, a little intimidated. “I shall.”

“Very well then. I’ll see you shortly in the grand ballroom.”

He exited without any familial * affection leaving her alone and stunned. He had never left her without some sort of kind word or kiss on the forehead, even in her most impetuous moments. She felt uneasy and lonely. Her heart pounded again, but this time in *not* such a good way. She ran back to the barn as quickly as her feet would carry her and flung herself into Cupid’s stall. The spirited horse jumped and whinnied, startled by the intrusion. Maagy wrapped her arms round Cupid’s neck and sobbed quietly. She really couldn’t identify what had injured her feelings so badly. All she knew was she wanted to cry and Cupid seemed the most logical choice for a sympathetic ear.

“Oh, Cupid, Daddy was cross with me and I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve it! My heart will surly break any moment,” she sobbed.

The filly seemed to comprehend Maagy’s emotions and stood quietly. She nudged the weeping girl gently as if to reassure her. Finally, Maagy wiped her tears on her sleeve and took a deep breath.

“Thank, you, My Sweet Girl. I feel much better.”

She gave Cupid a quick currying before leading her to the pasture. She ran to the mudroom and kicked off her boots. She dashed through the kitchen and ducked into the shortcut in the coat closet. She flew up the stairs to find Estelí with clothes laid out on the bed. She had become more than a chambermaid. Maagy considered her a Lady-in-Waiting, though she was not aristocracy, and a friend. Estelí had been reluctant to cross the line between service and familiarity, but Maagy had convinced her she genuinely enjoyed her company. These arrangements were kept discreet, of course, as such a relationship would be quite improper under normal circumstances. Maagy really didn’t care. She just wanted a friend.

Maagy dressed hurriedly and Estelí put her hair up in a dignified chignon*. Maagy ran down the grand staircase and ducked into the service hall. She dashed into the main dining room, which was already set for the midday meal. She saw her father standing outside the ballroom among the other heads-of-state and sidled* close to him. She took his arm and he instinctively put his hand on hers, but didn’t look at her with his usual warm smile. Instead, he remained deep in his own thoughts. Again, she felt the urge to cry, but knew this was not the time. The pocket doors were pushed open as far as they would go. Maagy was shocked to see an enormous round table set precisely in the center of the ballroom with chairs placed at equal intervals. She had never seen a table so large and was curious as to how people would speak to each other across it without shouting. Smaller desks and chairs were placed round the perimeter of the room for the many assistants to the delegates.

“Daddy, why is the table so big?” She whispered.

“Shh!” Came quickly.

She was stunned by the abrupt response and shrank behind him motionless watching the scene. Finally, everyone seemed to be present and in place. The trumpets sounded and the entrance procession began.

Since Emperor Zinrahwi of The Empire of Terrasicus was the focus of the negotiations, he was an honored guest. He was introduced first and could choose which chair he preferred. He and his entourage had arrived late the previous evening with another Darhambian chieftain and had gone straight to their quarters. This was Maagy’s first look at him. She surmised he must have been the one all the whispering was about. She had never even heard of him until that week and didn’t know what to expect, but immediately got an uneasy feeling as she watched him move. She thought he looked rather like a buzzard stalking a rotting corpse. He was not excessively tall, slight of build, and his shoulders were hunched forward. She knew he was relatively young... round the same age as Queen Haideh... but appeared much older and weathered. His dark eyes were beady and close together. His skin was ashen. He looked as if he had lived underground for a long time like a mole.

“What’s the matter with him, Father? Is he ill?”

“Shh! No!”

The two Darhambian chieftains accompanied the emperor. They were large, muscular men with brightly colored robes and hats to match. Their very dark chocolate skin was smooth and shiny as if oiled, and their heads... what she could see of them... were bald. They were Chief Obuku of the southern region and Chief Nandu of the northern region. Obuku was the father of Owanu, the strangely quiet boy who huddled in the corner at the ball. It was clear the emperor was in charge, though she could not for the life of her figure out why. The chieftains were confident and powerful looking, while Zinrahwi seemed weak and mousy. He slithered into the room and walked round and round the table several times. His henchmen were close in tow as if they were eyeing a fine horse for purchase. He looked at each corner of the room and up toward the ceiling. The other two followed suit. It was actually comical. She thought they behaved rather arrogantly. She couldn’t help but smile at the folly.

“It’s round, for goodness sake. What difference does it make?” She mumbled under her breath.

She felt the warm hand on hers squeeze firmly and realized she must have spoken out loud.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Zinrahwi finally settled on a position and stood behind a chair. The other two men flanked him with Owanu accompanying his father. King Henry was the host and was introduced next. He and Maagy walked in together and the king immediately and decisively... *almost defiantly*... chose the seat directly across from the emperor. She moved to the next chair right of her father, but he reached out and drew her back to his side. A page appeared with a tufted stool and placed it close to his being careful not to move the chairs on either side.

Prince Rudolph was the third introduced and moved quickly to the chair on the other side of King Henry. She tried to catch his eye and smile, but he never glanced in her direction. Queen Haideh positioned herself beside Maagy, but she did not divert her eyes from the emperor. Maagy was delighted Asanna had joined her mother. Once again, a stool appeared for her and was placed on the far side of the only female head-of-state at the table. Father-King Afarnae and Prince Shamir took positions on the other side of Asanna. Maagy tried to discreetly peek round the queen to catch her friend’s eye, but the king took her hand and squeezed. She frowned and straightened up. The rest of the participants followed the same protocol until no chairs remained empty. Another layer of assistants stood or sat behind their respective delegates.

The princess looked round the table and thought she understood the strategy in the arrangements. Her father was in direct eye line of the one about whom the Summit had been called. It was a show of strength

on his part. Zinrahwi's allies were flanking him, so King Henry's allies flanked him. The other leaders chose seating in a similar manner with the Commonwealth delegates together. Premier Chamberlaine of Senecia seemed caught in the middle. Martha sat *in a chair* beside her father several spaces away from Rudolpho. She was watching him like a hawk watches a mouse, much to Maagy's distaste.

"Daddy, why can't I have a chair?" She leaned close and whispered.

"You're not here to negotiate or advise. You're here to observe. Now please be silent and observe. And when you address me, do it properly," he chided under his breath.

"Martha Chamberlaine has a chair," she mumbled unfortunately loud enough for her father to hear.

"*Shhh!!*"

Maagy felt a lump rising in her throat and she couldn't stop the tears from welling. She looked down and wiped them away with her handkerchief and then folded her hands in front of her. Her instinct was to run screaming from the room and bury herself in bed pillows, but she set her jaw and stared at the center of the table, determined not to let the situation get the best of her. The trumpets blared again and the opening ceremonies began with the customary '*welcomes*' and '*thank yous*'. It seemed to drag on for hours as everyone stood in place behind his or her chair. Maagy's feet were hurting, so she stepped out of her shoes and stood in stocking feet. The pins in her hair itched, so she unceremoniously rearranged them. She scratched her nose and her leg, and her arm, and fidgeted, and sighed loudly. Again, the king's hand squeezed hers.

Finally, the speeches were done and the last part of the formality was at hand. As a gesture of good will and trust, each participant was expected to lay down his or her weapons on the table and leave them for the duration of the Summit. King Henry started the process. He drew a formidable sword and laid it in front of him with the handle toward the center of the table. Maagy had never seen the instrument out of its housing and was amazed at the sheer beauty of it. She'd always thought the shiny silver scabbard was the sword. What could she possibly know about such things? The hilt was intricately carved gold and silver, inlaid with Mother-of-Pearl. The pommel was ornate with a large emerald encased in gold. The guard also of gold and silver was wide and curved down away from the grip. The broad double-edged blade was forged steel with gold inlay. It was glistening and razor sharp. She was spellbound.

Emperor Zinrahwi was next. The blade of his sword was oddly curved and narrow with a black onyx hilt and guard. It reminded her of the thing Grandpa Kris showed her in the barn used for cutting tall grass and hay. He called it a sickle*. He had warned her not to touch it as it was quite sharp and could cut off her finger with one swipe. She was loath to think how lethal the emperor's ominous weapon might be. He positioned it slightly sideways in front of him so the handle pointed toward the center of the table. His fellows followed suit in blind obedience. The humor was not lost on the princess. Rudolpho drew his sword. It was a one-handed, double-edged Claymore with a basket hilt. He also drew a dagger and followed the same procedure.

Maagy's jaw visibly dropped as Queen Haideh produced an ornately embellished dagger from underneath the folds of that delicate silk garment she wore so elegantly. The hilt was full and carved from jade in the shape of a horse's head adorned with a halter of inlaid gold, rubies, and emeralds. The blade was considerably long and wavy. Forged from Damascus steel, it too was inlaid with gold. Her Royal Highness couldn't suppress her amazement and admiration.

"Brilliant!"

"Shh!"

She looked round embarrassed and then back at the table. This bit of business took another several moments before it was time to sit and presumably begin negotiations. She had looked forward to seeing her father and Prince Rudolpho in action, but nothing happened and no one said anything. She looked round the room to see who might speak first. What she saw instead were clusters of two and three huddled together

whispering with their assistants. Premier Chamberlaine was going back and forth between the Terrasican camp and the Commonwealth delegates, Martha in tow. The Ministers of Trade for Poseidonia and Aquatain, and Marinia's Prime Minister were in hushed dialogue with the Aradinian Foreign Minister. King Henry, Prince Rudolpho, Queen Haideh, Prince Shamir and Father-King Afarnae were sending hand written messages back and forth. Maagy was charged with relaying them. At least she had something meaningful to do, but she was dying to know what was being discussed. She craned her head over her father's shoulder in hopes of catching a glimpse of one of the notes, but his eyes met hers, went sharply to her stool, and then back to hers. She frowned and plopped down with her arms crossed and a pouty grimace.

"Oh, horse feathers!"

The king snapped round and glared at his daughter.

"Did I say that out loud?"

"You did."

"Sorry."

The hushed meetings continued, as she tried her best to maintain dignity, but once again, she began to wiggle in boredom. She tapped her toe on the stool rung.

"Shh! Princess Maagy!"

She drummed her fingers on the table while the other hand held up her head.

"Princess Maagy, please!" Her father discreetly admonished, as his impatience grew.

She sighed loudly and stood to stretch. The king cleared his throat *deliberately*. She sneezed and the room fell even more silent than before.

"Excuse me," she said timidly.

"Bless you," was the response from several.

She looked up to see all eyes trained on her. Some of the expressions were not pleasant, especially Zinrahwi and his two followers. They all had the exact same scowl. She was greatly amused.

"They remind me of three blind mice each following the other for fear of getting lost," she ruminated*, this time *thankfully* silently.

Asanna and Rudolpho had exchanged passing glances during Maagy's calamity and could hardly contain themselves. While the prince found it all wildly entertaining, he could not be a foolish boy. He never looked back at Asanna nor did he look at King Henry, directly. He certainly didn't look at Maagy for fear he would burst into laughter. There were several who found the child's behavior delightfully refreshing and were working to suppress their smiles, one being King Afarnae with his unique sense of humor.

"Oh, for goodness sake! Why don't they just get on with it?" She whispered, impatiently.

"Princess Maagy, be quiet!" Her father instructed under his breath.

King Afarnae could refrain no longer and snickered out loud. He tried to cover it with a cough. Henry glanced his way and they made eye contact, which was the last thing either of them needed. Just as both were about to burst out laughing, the luncheon bell tinkled and saved them. King Henry quickly stood and announced a casual buffet would be served in the main dining room and the conference would reconvene at three o'clock. He and Afarnae beat a hasty retreat, as everyone else slowly exited in small groups leaving Maagy standing alone.