

Chapter 8

Fishing Lessons

Maagy had hoped for personal time with her father but not so. He was sitting at the head table in the grand dining room with Father-King Afarnae, Queen Haideh, and Prince Shamir and it looked as though they were involved in serious conversation. Rudolpho joined them. Even Asanna was engaged in the conference. Maagy looked round the room at all the others and a sudden wave of panic overtook her. She bolted through the dining room, into the coat closet, and through the service hall. She burst into the kitchen and found a buzz of activity as she located Grandma Polly and rushed to her side.

"There you are," she said breathlessly. "I need a friendly face!"

"Oh, My Dear, Your Highness Princess Maagy! You cannot be in here. You must leave at once."

"But *why*? I come in all the time."

"But not this week, not while the meeting is in session, Your Darling Highness. Your presence in the kitchen is highly inappropriate."

"I don't care! I hate it out there! No one has time for me and Daddy is ever so cross. I want to hide."

"Oh my. I'm sorry you're so miserable, but you cannot hide in the kitchen. Now scurry along. Slip out through the service hall and into the ballroom and then double back into the dining room. I'm sure you're hungry and it's putting you at *sixes and sevens**."

"I don't want to eat with the adults. They're all stuffy and *busy*. Can't I eat in the family dining room with the children?"

Grandma Polly's heart was aching for the sad little girl.

"No, Your Precious Grace. You're the Official Hostess. You must eat with His Royal Majesty King Henry."

Even Grandma Polly was using all the formal designations, though somewhat modified.

"Oh goodness! You are in a bad way, aren't you, Dear?"

"Please Gram-P?"

"I'm sorry. You must go now... but..." then she whispered, as she brushes a bit of stray hair from the child's face, "come back later when there's no one about and we'll have tea and a good talk. I promise. All right, Your Dear Highness?"

"All right... I suppose."

The woman gave an affectionate wink and Maagy returned to the foyer by way of her secret route intending to do as she was told. However, she slipped into the family dining room where she fixed a plate of food and took it outdoors to a secluded area on the lawn next to the pond. She found a good spot in the grass and took off her shoes and stockings. She ate slowly and picked at her food as she pondered the day's events. She was just about to melt into tears when Estelí appeared with a fishing pole and bucket.

"Oh! Your Highness! I apologize for interrupting your *repas**. I will leave you alone *tout de suite**."

"No! Wait! Please don't leave me alone. I've been alone all day."

"But, Your Highness, I should not be here with you in such a casual way. Someone might see us. It is highly inappropriate."

"*Highly inappropriate!*" She mocked. "I don't care! I want you here and I'm the Crown Princess! Do my wishes mean nothing?"

"I am sorry, Your Grace. I did not mean to make you angry."

"Oh... you didn't make me angry, Estelí. I'm so frustrated. No one has time for me. My father only snaps at me and he *never* does that. The meeting is *mind numbingly* boring and the Emperor of Terrasicus

keeps looking at me and scowling as if he's going to cook me for dinner. I just want friendly company."

"Well then... I am at your service, Your Highness."

"Oh, call me Maagy. And that's another thing! My father insists I address him formally when anyone else is present. I have to call my own father, 'Your Royal Majesty'! *Unbearable!*"

"I see your dilemma. Perhaps you need a distraction... like... fishing."

"What's in the bucket?"

"*La pollo piel.*"

"What?"

"Chicken skins. It sounds better in my language."

"Eeewww! What on Earth for?"

"Bait!"

Estelí proceeded to take a glob of the slimy mess and tie it to the end of the string attached to the pole. She gathered the string in her hands and threw it and the bait into the water. She took hold of the pole and sat on the grass beside the princess.

"Now what?"

"Now, we wait."

"Wait for what?"

"For a fish to grab the morsel and swallow it and then we pull him ashore."

"Oh... How long will it take?"

"As long as it takes."

"As long as it takes for what?"

"You ask too many questions, Your Highness... Maagy."

"So, I've been told!"

Suddenly, the pole bent almost in half and the line zipped out across the pond.

"You've got one! *You've got one!*"

Both girls shrieked with joy. The fish was pulling so hard Estelí almost went into the water headfirst.

"I cannot hold him! I am going to lose the pole! He is pulling me in!"

"Hang on! I'll help you!"

Maagy jumped to her feet and wrapped her arms round the angler's waist. She pulled with all her might, both girls hysterically laughing and squealing. Their feet dug into the mud and both slid to the edge of the bank. Suddenly, the tension on the line gave way. They flew backwards and landed on the ground on their backsides still giggling.

"What happened?" Maagy asked, as she gasped for air.

"The string came untied and our catch got his belly full, I suppose!"

"Was that a fish?"

"Whatever it was it was big! That is all I know!"

"That was the funniest, most exciting thing to happen in a long time. Let's try for another."

"Oh dear, my free time is over and we are all muddy. I shall need to wash up before I go back to work. I am sorry, Mam."

"Not to worry. You gave me a good giggle and I needed it. Thank you for the distraction."

"It was my pleasure, Your Highness... I mean... Maagy. *Adieu.*"

"See you soon."

Estelí hurried back to the castle. Maagy gathered her plate and utensils in one hand, her shoes and stockings in the other, and walked slowly through the soft grass. She was looking down to make sure she didn't step on a bee, when a familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Maagy, The Barefoot Duchess.”

She looked up to see Rudy standing in front of her.

“Oh, hello! Where did you come from?” She asked, flustered.

“The question is where did *you* come from? You have grass in your hair. Here let me get it for you.”

He stepped closer and reached out toward her. She shivered and closed her eyes. She had never felt such a strong wave of... *something*... she didn't know what. She wanted to lean against him as he removed a blade of grass. He gently brushed a few hairs off her face and tucked in an errant pin.

“There, good as new,” he said smiling. “Wait, weren't you wearing something on your head earlier?”

“What?” She said. “*Oh no!* My tiara! Here, hold these!”

She shoved the contents of her hands at Rudolpho's chest. He instinctively caught it all, as she flew back to the pond in a panic.

“Where is it? *Where is it?*” She muttered, as she searched.

She found the precious headpiece several feet behind where she and Esteli had crashed to the ground. The tiara was her mother's and was a birthday gift from her father. She plopped it on her head and ran back to the prince. He could only chuckle at the entertainment. She noticed Captain Sistrunk a discrete distance away, but ever watchful.

“Does he follow you everywhere?”

“Yes. It's his sole job to follow me... *everywhere*,” he whispered mischievously.

“How annoying.”

“You didn't eat much,” he said, as he looked at the plate in his hand. “What's this? The royal bottomless pit not hungry? Are you ill?”

“No... just... not hungry.”

“Are you going in? May I walk with you?”

“Yes, and you may,” she said, as she took her belongings.

“So, what did you think of the morning session?” He asked.

“Are you interested or just being polite?”

“Oh... I'm *quite* interested,” he reassured with an ironic grin.

She was oblivious. They entered through the main door and ducked into the family dining room. No one was there except the cleaning staff, so she placed her dish on the tray with the others and sat down to put on her footwear.

“Oh bother. My feet are caked with mud. I can't put my shoes on over that. I'll have to wash up.”

“There's plenty of time. It's just one. We have until three. Are you trying to avoid answering my question?”

“No... but I'm not sure how honest I should be.”

“Be brutal. I can take it.”

“I've never been so *bored* in all my life. Did I say that out loud?” She mocked herself. “Yes, I think I did. How's that for honest?”

“I could tell it wasn't your cup of tea,” he replied, as he poured each of them one. “Sugar and milk?”

“Sugar only please. How do you do it? I would go positively batty if I had to do that all the time.”

“I'll be honest this time. I actually love the excitement of brokering deals,” he said, as he brought their drinks to the table and sat. “This morning was just the beginning, the posturing phase where each is calculating what the others are thinking and what they might offer in compromise. It's a game really, like cards only the stakes are much higher.”

“It seemed as if nothing happened in all that time. No one said a thing out loud... *except me*... and I was chastised for it. And that Terrasican Emperor gave me chills. He glared at me the entire morning.”

“Shh Maagy, careful what you say. If I’ve learnt one thing from this process it is there are always people about listening,” he whispered, as he sipped his tea. “I don’t mean to chastise you, as well. You’ve had enough of that today. Take it as friendly advice.”

“I will. And you’re right. I do know better. I’m just so cross today I don’t know what to do. My father is acting completely unlike himself and I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Maagy, there’s a tremendous burden on his shoulders. Don’t judge him too harshly. You’ve probably never seen him in this setting, have you?”

“No, I suppose not. But even you and Queen Haideh were different,” she said softly then quickly changed the subject. “*Speaking of*, did you see that enormous dagger she pulled from I don’t even *know* from where and laid on the table?”

“I did! I have a whole new respect for the gentle queen.”

“I, as well!”

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. We’re all a bit apprehensive.”

“Oh, it’s fine. No worries,” she replied somewhat embarrassed, as they sipped tea. “Rudy... or should I address you as Your Highness Prince Rudolph?”

“In this setting, Rudy is fine,” he chuckled fully understanding the reference.

“Rudy, how is it you are representing your entire kingdom? You’re so young. Your father must have great faith in you. I can’t imagine being in the same position.”

“I began accompanying him to meetings when I was twelve. He does trust me, but he would be here himself if... I shouldn’t speak further.”

His voice trailed off and he became serious. She knew she had touched a nerve. They finished their tea.

“Rudy, is there something wrong? What is it?”

He drew his chair closer and whispered, “You must never *ever* speak of this. It could have repercussions throughout the region.”

“I won’t, I promise. I’m good at keeping confidences. What is it?”

“My father is not well. He has been ill for some time, but no one knows save the family and King Henry... and now you. I’m worried out of my mind. My brother is grooming to take the throne and elected to stay with him. Since I’ve always shown a keen interest in military strategy and diplomacy, Father sent me. I fear something terrible will happen... and I won’t be with him.”

“I’m sorry,” she said gently. “Will Raul be a good king? Oh, I shouldn’t have asked such a personal question.”

“Nonsense, nothing is off limits to you. Yes, he will be, but he has no interest in military issues. That will be my job. He will lead by example and I will lead the troops into battle. Together we’ll be an excellent team.”

“Do you and he get on well?”

“Surprisingly well, considering he’s twelve years older.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. My father wants to retire and give me the crown. Can you imagine me at the head of the table being diplomatic? I haven’t the first clue what’s going on in there. I want to smack some of them, but I’m quite certain it’s not acceptable. I’m never going to be ready... and I don’t want to be. It sounds nice saying, ‘I’m going to be Queen!’ But actually doing it is another whole ball of yarn. It’s too much. I don’t want to be responsible for an entire kingdom. I want to play hide-and-seek and have adventures. It’s all too overwhelming!”

“Would you like some help sorting it out?”

“I didn’t mean to rant at you, Rudolpho. It must be nice having siblings. What about your sister?”

What is she like?”

“My sister... my sister... Consuela is a bit hard to define really. I suppose she’s like a sprite... a free spirit. She doesn’t conform to any of the normal expectation of being a royal. You’re a bit like her actually. She isn’t at all interested in the pomp and ceremony. She is happiest working in the garden or carrying food to a family in need. You could pass her on the street or in a confectionary and not know who she was,” he said, smiling at the memory. “I admire her. She’s one of a kind.”

His words were steeped in *double entendre**. Maagy blushed as her heart raced. He continued to smile and absorb her with his eyes.

“What can I do to help you through the meetings this afternoon, Maagy?”

“I don’t actually know why the Summit is taking place. Why is everyone so serious and secretive?”

“Well, no wonder you’re bored. Let’s see, where to start? First of all, your instincts about Emperor Zinrahwi are dead on the mark,” he murmured, as he drew closer to her. “I assume he is one you’d like to smack?”

“Absolutely! And the other two blind mice following him.”

Rudolpho snickered and continued in a hushed tone. “Are you familiar with the geography of the region?”

“Of course! Yes. Well... we studied it this past quarter... but *honestly*... I didn’t pay attention. So the answer is no. I’m not familiar.”

“Let me see if I can explain it to you. The Ascondia and Crying Wind rivers are vital to the prosperity of the valley nations. The two rivers... a map would be nice...”

“A map? You want a map?”

“Yes, a map would help.”

“Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Just come with me. Be *nonchalant*.”

As Maagy went to the door to make sure the way was clear, Rudy noticed the back of her skirt and chuckled.

“Maagy, your skirt is covered with mud and grass stain. What in the world were you doing on the lawn?”

“Fishing in the pond,” she retorted, indignantly. “That’s why my feet are muddy. Follow me.”

She led Rudolpho up the stairs to the second floor and round to the science library. She opened the doors with a flourish and pointed to the large map¹ hanging on the wall.

“Will that do?”

“Oh, wonderful! Yes, it will definitely do. What is this place?”

“It’s a library devoted entirely to science complete with a laboratory. Isn’t it fascinating?”

“Indeed, it is. This is a beautiful map, one of the most detailed I’ve ever seen,” he said, as he perused it.

He had been careful to leave the library doors open with his ever-present guard Captain Sistrunk just outside. It would not have been proper etiquette for him to be behind closed doors in the presence of such a young girl and certainly not the Crown Princess.

“You think that’s good, come see this!”

Maagy led him to the steps which spiraled upward to the observatory. She took them two at a time and he had no choice but to follow.

¹ Please see Maps for geography lesson in Glossary at book’s end.

“How about this? Isn’t this just extraordinary?”

“What is it?” He asked looking at the enormous thing in the center of the room.

“It’s a machine called a telescope. It makes the moon and stars look as if you could reach out and touch them.”

“A telescope! I’ve heard of such but have never actually seen one. It is indeed extraordinary! Why is it here?”

“Why not? It’s the farthest north of any manmade structure in the kingdom and the highest elevation possible without being on a frozen mountain peak, according to Grandpa Kris. He knows how to use it. I discovered it while exploring the castle and asked him to show it to me and he did last week. I swear I could have touched the moon.”

“How does it work?”

“The way he explained it, there are lenses and mirrors inside this tube. The lenses are shaped such that they magnify the image and each additional one magnifies it more. The image is reflected into the mirrors... and bounced... round... in there... until it reaches the eye. Or something like that... I think. I don’t really understand it, but it works, so I love it! Unfortunately, it only works at night. You can’t look at the sun. It’s far too bright.”

“I’d love to see it in action.”

“I’m sure Grandpa Kris would happily demonstrate.”

“So, shall I continue with your geography lesson, Princess Grass Stain?”

“Oh, Rudy,” she said blushing. “Yes, please continue.”

The two descended the stairs and went back to the map. She climbed onto a stool and gave her full attention to her instructor. He found a pointer and began the lesson.

“First, in order to understand the delicate nature of the talks you must know something about the geography and history of the kingdoms in attendance. Here is Berensenia, the largest and most prosperous of the valley kingdoms.”

“That one I know.”

“And these are the kingdoms of the Commonwealth.”

“I know that, too.”

“Now, you see here to the south Aradinia, Senecia, and my home Estadore. All our borders are friendly with an open trade policy...”

She began to drift off into fantasy, as she watched every move the handsome prince made and barely heard a word.

“... Senecia and Estadore have ports to the Sea of Melania... shipping access to Greco, Italanía, Franciné, and Hispania... through the Aegean Sea into the Mare Medio Terrae. The tricky part... strait between Adriaca and Ottoman... access to open water... trade with Isle of Reland, Reland Main and Skodinovia. Questions?”

“No,” she responded dreamily, “I follow you so far.”

“Good. So, trade and shipping are two significant reasons for the Summit, as they affect all the valley kingdoms.”

“I see...” noticing the silence, she snapped back to reality and added, “I overheard something about water rights. What is that about? It seemed awfully important.”

“Well that’s the rub,” he said with authority. “Several major rivers run through Berensenia and on into the southern kingdoms. Those rivers are critical to agriculture and as shipping lanes. It all starts with the Ascondia River which originates far north in the frozen region here, you see?”

“Yes. It begins in a rather large lake, isn’t that right? I forgot the name of it.”

“You are correct. The river flows out of Frost Proof Lake in the Depopulos.”

“What a funny name for a lake surrounded by snow covered mountains.”

“Well, the Berensen Sea, just a few miles north, is completely frozen over, but the lake never freezes.”

“That’s odd.”

“Indeed. It is believed the lake is fed by a hot spring deep inside the inactive volcanic crater which forms the bowl of the lake. The water bubbling from the depths is quite hot so it never freezes. It’s fresh water rather than salty.”

“That’s interesting,” she said genuinely engaged again. “My tutor never said that when we studied it before. How do you know all this?”

“Because explorers from Estadore discovered the lake and the mouth of the river. It’s all well known at home.”

“Oh... I see,” Maagy said with a great yawn.

“Have you had enough? Am I boring you?” He asked completely charmed by her.

“Oh no! So sorry! Continue, please,” she responded slightly embarrassed, as she propped her chin on both hands and smiled sweetly. “Five thirty came quite early.”

“Indeed, it did. So, the Ascondia runs east and slightly south to here...”

She could hear the dulcet tones of his voice, but the words meant nothing, as she watched him adoringly, her thoughts lost in her own head.

“Can you see that? Maagy, did you hear me?”

“What? Oh... yes, then what?”

“Then it branches with the Crying Wind turning southwest... Rainbow Falls... Dragon’s Den Canyon... Berensenia and Terrasicus... a sort of no-man’s land...”

His words were dancing round her like a butterfly ballet. She tried to pay attention, but it was difficult to hear past her eyes.

“The canyon... natural barrier... treacherous rocks and raging currents... impossible to navigate... Maagy, are you listening?” He said abruptly noticing the dreamy look on her face.

“Yes...” she whispered through a faraway grin, then caught herself. “Yes! Of course, I’m listening! The canyon... a barrier... raging currents... something about a dragon... Dragon’s Den Canyon...”

“Hmm... you had a strange look on your face. Anyway, the river follows the entire length of the canyon to where it dumps into Buzzard Lake, then out the other side... through the most strategically vulnerable area... Buzzard Lake Gap back into Berensenia toward Estadore.”

“I love that name, Buzzard Lake!”

“You know how it got the name, don’t you?”

“Of course! No, not really,” She said too curious to pretend to be knowledgeable.

“It’s also a volcanic crater and is said to be deeper than anyone has ever measured. There are legends the lake is under some sort of spell,” he said mysteriously, leaning on his elbow eye to eye with her. “Many have tried to cross the lake but few have succeeded, thus the name *Buzzard... Lake!*”

She couldn’t breathe. Her heart pounded from his closeness. Her eyes widened. She was totally taken in by his charisma* .

“*Oh stop!* You’re not scaring me,” she finally managed to admonish playfully. “It’s just legend which means it’s not true.”

“Not so. Some legends are based in fact. It does make for a good story though, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose, but keep going,” she said sitting up straight and being more serious about the business at hand. “I still don’t understand what this has to do with the Summit.”

“Ah, now for the good part. You see here the mountains on the Berensnian side of the canyon are

colored green?”

“Yes...”

“That’s because they’re heavily forested and are teeming with plant and animal life. Now, on this side of the canyon is Terrasicus.”

“It’s painted brown.”

“That, my barefoot lady, is because it is a desert wasteland. Nothing grows there, not crops, or animals, or even many people, thus, another important piece of the Summit puzzle.”

“Water rights! So, it has to do with Terrasicus needing water!”

“Brilliant! You’re beginning to get the idea. Look back here at Buzzard Lake Gap. The Jaldahr River originates at the lake and flows east into Terrasicus, but goes deep underground before exiting the mountains. It’s theorized the sandy desert is too porous for the riverbed and the water sinks into the aquifer. There is not one other river flowing through Terrasicus.”

“How does anything live there with no water?”

“Nothing does. The entire population of Terrasicus lives along the southern borders with Darhambi and Nihmrobi or the eastern border with Asiana. Estadore is somewhat protected by the mountains. Those areas are the only places with water, so even though the total population is small comparatively, there is extreme overcrowding and resources are stretched to the limit. One hundred thousand people are crammed into cities where only a few hundred once lived.”

“One hundred thousand? You call that a comparatively *small* population? That seems like a lot of people to me!”

“Maagy, how many people do you think live in Berensenia?”

“I have no idea. I never thought of it.”

“Well over five hundred thousand.”

“Half a million people? My father is king for half a million people? Oh... I think I feel sick!”

“And that number is just Berensenia. There are four other kingdoms in your Commonwealth of Realms over all of which you will preside. There are well over a million people.”

“*Oh lord!* I’ll never... *ever...* be fit for the job!”

“I think you will. I think you’ll be just fine when it’s your turn. You’re smart, strong willed, and the most unique individual I know. I have faith in you, Princess Grass Stain, Duchess of Barefeet.”

“Unique? Strong willed? I do hope those were compliments.”

“Most assuredly.”

“Do you really think I’ll learn enough in five years to lead all those people?”

“I do. Shall we continue?”

“Yes,” she answered now fully engaged in the conversation.

“The emperor is constantly crossing into one or the other of the bordering territories to plunder.”

“Well, that’s a rather sad existence. I suppose he’s trying to feed his people.”

“I would agree with you if it were anyone other than Zinrahwi. He has twice dammed the major rivers in attempts to divert water to Terrasicus. The first time was far north in the mountains. He attempted to dig a new riverbed that in theory would have changed the course of the Ascondia into his kingdom completely. The work went on for years before it was discovered. A small volcanic eruption in the area destroyed all their clandestine achievements. Lava flowed into the trench they had dug and filled it. It was then the plan was discovered. Your father led a military assault and drove them back into Terrasicus. It was an ugly confrontation called the Battle of Ascondia River. Look it up when you go back to Avington.”

“I never knew that. I will.”

“The second time was last year. He managed to get into Dragon’s Den Canyon and do the same

thing. He has so far diverted almost half the water flow from the Ascondia toward his nation. The water level in the lake is declining and the river into Estadore is well below its banks. If he continues this quest, Estadore will lose its major fresh water supply and Nihmrobi will lose its only river.”

“Why can’t we drive him out of the canyon and tear down the dam?”

“Because the canyon is not within your borders or his. It’s a sort of neutral zone between the kingdoms, so there is no jurisdiction to force him out. The only alternative is to offer him something he wants in return for more water. Do you understand, now?”

“I do. I’m beginning to realize the complexity of the problem, but I don’t see why we have to allow him to continue. If he can go into the canyon, why can’t we? It seems simple enough to me.”

“It’s anything but simple. Historically, Terrasicus has been led by a legacy of vicious, aggressive rulers. Wars with their neighbors to the east have raged on for decades throughout the centuries with only brief periods of calm. Your father managed to broker a peace years ago with the western kingdoms and now that peace is threatened.”

“But you said the population is small, so how formidable could their forces be? Can’t we subdue them?”

“Again, not so simple. Here’s the real irony. While the flat land is barren desert, the Sagamathias are rich with precious ore and gems. Zinrahwi possesses wealth beyond imagination from the sale of those resources, but he keeps it for himself rather than use it for the good of his nation. He could easily trade for goods and services his people need. Instead, he hoards personal riches while he steals from all of us. When his victims have had enough and push him back, he hires mercenary* soldiers to fight his battles and increases his forces by a hundred-fold with an unlimited number of combatants to go on forever. He’s an evil man, pure evil, as was his father before him, and his before him. And now you know.”

“Now I know... but I’m not sure it does me any good.”