

Chapter 9

Diplomatic Tutorial

The geography and history lessons were food for thought. Maagy returned to her room to clean up and change her clothes before the afternoon session.

“Oh, crumbs, I’m a mess,” she muttered, as she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

There was mud on her feet and legs. Grass was caught in her petticoat, and her tiara was sideways. When she removed her skirt and saw it ruined with grass stains, she threw it under the bed. Her hair was disheveled. She paused for a moment to recall his gentle touch when he removed some twigs and brushed hair from her face. She shivered again. Back to the problem at hand; she had no alternative except to take it down and start all over. She had washed up and dressing while pondering the gravity of her future when she heard strange noises coming from the fireplace. She leaned into it and listened. It was the faint sound of crying coming from Estelí’s room through the shared chimney. Maagy went even closer and realized it must be her friend in anguish on the other side. She rang the bell cord. The chambermaid tapped on the door and Maagy was ready to welcome her.

“I need some help with my hair if you have the time,” she said nonchalantly.

“Of course, Your Highness,” the girl responded not looking up and inconspicuously wiping her eyes with her apron. “I always have time for you.”

“Estelí, what is the matter? Why are you crying?”

“I am not crying, Your Grace. I have dust in my eyes.”

“That’s nonsense and you know it. I heard you crying on the other side of the wall. I demand you tell me now, *and truthfully*, what has made you cry,” she said, as she folded her arms and took an authoritative stance. “I am still your Crown Princess and as such I demand honesty. I am also your friend and I want to help if I can.”

“Thank you, but it is nothing... silly, really. I do appreciate your concern.”

“If it’s nothing then tell me what it is.”

“No... really... it is not necessary...”

“Let me be the judge of that. Now, why were you crying?”

“Your Highness, I...”

“*Tell me!*” She demanded, stomping her foot.

“I was assisting on the third floor. One of the girls is ill. I was cleaning the room of the son of one of the Darhambian chieftains when he walked into the room. We are not allowed to be present with anyone of the opposite gender while working. So, I excused myself quickly and was about

to leave, but the room was not finished and the bed was not yet made. He demanded I finish and make his bed. I told him I was not allowed to be there with him and I would come back and finish later. He demanded again. When I respectfully declined to break the house rule, he picked up a crystal paperweight from the desk and threw it at me. It smashed against the wall and glass flew everywhere. He said now I could clean up that mess too when I returned. I ran to my room and did not know what to do next. I cannot lose this position, Madam. *Ma mère* * is ill and I care for her with the money I make here. I am so sorry to cause such an incident.”

“You poor dear. You didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, you did exactly what you should have done and you need not apologize.”

“I should have done as he told me and finished the room. No one would have been any the wiser for my breaking the rules... and the paperweight would not have been broken... and I would not have cried... and upset you.”

“Stop right there! First of all, *you* would have known you broke the rule and would have carried the burden of it. Second, you handled the situation precisely according to protocol and did absolutely nothing wrong. Third, the fault for this sits squarely on the boy’s shoulders. He is the one who was rude and even violent. I shall take care of this and you will not lose your position because of it. What would I do if you were gone?”

“Oh, Maagy! Your Highness! I am so sorry for the trouble... really. Just let it lay. I do not want you to be inconvenienced.”

“Look here, I’ve had a huge wake-up, today. I’m going to be the queen in a few years. I’ll have much more than this to deal with soon enough. I can handle this small problem.”

Maagy knew immediately it was Owanu Obuku who had committed the offense. She marched up the stairs to the third floor and knocked loudly on his door. He opened it with a sour look on his face, and it didn’t get better.

“Are you Owanu Obuku?”

“I am.”

“I am Princess Melania Abigail Alice Grace, Duchess of Wentworth, Crown Princess of Berensenia and the Commonwealth of Realms. Might I have a word with you please?”

“I know who you are. You may come in,” he said, as he stepped aside and gestured.

“Our protocol dictates unmarried young women and young men are not allowed in a bedchamber together without chaperons present,” she stated firmly but respectfully. “Since there are none, I would appreciate your stepping into the hallway.”

“I’m resting,” he said indifferently. “I’d be more comfortable sitting in my room than standing in the hall.”

“Be that as it may, I must insist you come out here. I wish to speak to you concerning this same protocol, or rather, *your breach* of it,” she said

deliberately with her hands on her hips.

“Excuse me?” He responded indignantly*, as he stepped out of his room to confront her.

She was not the least bit intimidated even though he was several inches taller and much heavier than she. Maagy stood her ground looking up at him. She spoke calmly but was positively seething inside.

“My chambermaid, Estelí Barrineau, was the young woman at whom you threw a crystal paperweight. I don’t appreciate your treating our staff with disrespect. She was only following the rules which you demanded she break.”

“I don’t appreciate you treating me with disrespect! I am the son of a tribal chieftain!”

“And I am the *daughter* of a *king*! That has nothing to do with this discussion. You owe her an apology.”

“I owe no one anything. She disobeyed my command. She is but a lowly servant girl. What do you care and why are you involved at all?”

“We do not consider our staff to be servants. They are paid a fair wage by the Commonwealth, and as such, deserve respect *and your regrets* for your rudeness.”

“You are just a female. I do not have to listen to you.”

He tried to step into his room and shut the door in her face, but she reached out and pushed the door further open.

“*I say you do!* This is *my* home and you’ve disrespected *our staff* and therefore *me*. So, you will hear this!”

“This is not your home. You do not even live here. You are visiting.”

“*As are you!* It is my summer home. Therefore, it is *my* home and you are a guest in it. You should have better manners!”

“Your ‘*staff*’, as you put it, should have better manners and so should you!”

“You arrogant, obnoxious *brat!* Don’t you dare speak to me that way! And do not ever speak to anyone who lives or works here with disrespect again... or... I’ll tell my father... and he will... *invade your kingdom!*”

She whirled round and stomped downstairs to her room and slammed the door. Estelí was still there waiting for her.

“That *boorish brute!* I cannot believe his behavior! How can he be so discourteous?”

“Oh no! *Mon dieu!* I knew it! I knew this could not end well. I am so sorry, Your Grace.”

“It’s not for you to be sorry about anything. He’s the offender. Oh dear, look at the time. I have five minutes. Can you do something with my hair, Friend?”

Estelí worked her magic with the hair and Maagy was out the door in three, down in two, and back in the meeting on time, even if her tiara was

slightly askew. As with the morning session, the afternoon was more posturing and whispering, but Maagy was more engaged. She occasionally glanced at Rudolpho who smiled and winked. Finally, King Henry called the group to order and suggested all participants present their proposals and begin discussions. Emperor Zinrahwi took offense at the idea. He stood for several *very long* minutes ranting about the injustices imposed upon his kingdom and then stormed out leaving everyone in the room scratching their heads in wonder. The meeting adjourned for the day and a light dinner buffet was served.

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Later that evening, King Henry called Maagy into his room and shut the door.

“What is this about words between you and the son of Chief Obuku?”

“You heard about that?”

“I did. Would you care to explain?”

“He was rude to Estelí... and I told him it was unacceptable... and he should apologize.”

“The way I heard it, you threatened to invade his kingdom!”

“Not exactly! I threatened... *you*... would invade,” she said sheepishly. “Daddy, he made her cry! I heard her sobbing on the other side of the wall, so I pulled the bell cord and sure enough she had been crying. At first, she wouldn’t tell me, but finally, I got it out of her. He went into his room while she was cleaning it. She tried to follow protocol and leave, but he demanded she finish. When she started to leave anyway, he *threw* something at her! I will not tolerate such behavior, Father!” She explained, as she finished her rant and took that defiant stance he had seen so many times.

“So, you interceded on her behalf. Is that when you threatened invasion?”

“Yes Sir... but not before he was *rude and dismissive* of *me*! He said because I was *a female* he didn’t have to listen to me. That’s when I got really angry and threatened...”

“Maagy you cannot confront people in such a manner! He is the son of an extremely important individual in these negotiations. You must make amends to the boy.”

“I’m sorry to disagree with you, Father, but I shall not do anything of the sort. He is an *arrogant brat* and I told him such!”

“Maagy, you’ve no idea what you’re doing here. Your behavior could undermine this entire effort.”

“Yes, I do know, Father. Rudolpho gave me a tutorial on the geography and politics of the region. I understand the water rights negotiations are critical... but so are principles. And I will *not* apologize for

doing the right thing. Standing up for Estelí *is the right thing.*”

“Zinrahwi is looking for an excuse to leave the Summit and go build his dam even higher. He would love to justify an invasion and that is the last thing any of us needs. Maagy, you must back down on this and tell the boy you were wrong.”

“Father... I... I... *cannot* believe my ears. I cannot believe you would ask me to compromise my ethics and go against what I *know* is right and honorable to appease those barbarians!”

“Oh, Maagy... you make it so hard to find fault with your reasoning,” he admitted, as he paced the room. “The fact is... life is not always white or black. Sometimes it must be shades of gray in the middle. Sometimes we have to *swallow our tongues** to keep from speaking our minds in order to achieve the greater good. This conference and the water agreement with Zinrahwi are the *greater good*, Maagy. This mess is endangering the entire negotiation.”

“I *am* sorry... but only for making your job... and Rudy’s... much harder. Perhaps I *shouldn’t* have confronted Owanu, but having done so I will *not* go back on what I said. He was mean spirited and *violent* toward one of our own. That cannot... and *will* not be tolerated by me... and shouldn’t be by you. Daddy, you’ve always encouraged me to be brave and stand up for what I believe. Now, you’re asking me to abandon all that and give in to a tyrant. I just cannot.”

“Oh, Child,” he said sinking onto a chair, “what am I going to do with you?”

“There must be a way round this to save face for all concerned. I’m sure something will come to mind, Daddy. May I go to my room now? I’m frightfully tired and I’m sure you are.”

“Yes, you may go. Good night.”

She turned and walked slowly to the door hoping to have a small bit of the father she recognized come through the gruff exterior of the *King* in her presence.

“Sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

She spun round on her heels and ran to him. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek as he did to her.

“I love you Daddy. I’m so sorry. Sleep well.”

As she was walking to her room, Rudy came up the stairs headed to the third floor.

“Rudy! You’re just the person I need to see.”

“Now, Maagy? It’s late and we’re all worn out from this difficult day.”

“Please? Just a quick word?”

“I suppose, but it must be quick. I’m dead on my feet.”

“Follow me,” she whispered.

She led him round toward the railing overlooking the grand ballroom. Mak took his place a respectful distance away to give them

privacy.

“Look down. Look at that *enormous* table and all those weapons on it. Isn't it bizarre?”

“What a vantage point. It certainly is a different perspective from here. Why do you need to talk to me?”

“I have a... *tiny* problem... I need to sort out.”

“Yes... I've heard.”

“*What* have you heard?”

“Only that the Impetuous Princess and Owanu Obuku had a... shall we say... *tête à tête* *... and it didn't end well.”

“*What else?*”

“Nothing.”

“So, you don't know what *actually* happened?”

“Not really... no. But I'd love to hear your version.”

“Suffice it say, he was insolent to someone in our household. I confronted him on her behalf and demanded an apology.”

“There's the girl!” He smiled and said admiringly. “Who was it?”

“My chambermaid... and friend.”

“I see.”

“Are you judging me?”

“Not at all.”

“Now, Father wants me to apologize *for the good of the Summit*, and I've refused on principle.”

“On principle, is it?”

“What's *that* supposed to mean?”

“Only that you have been known to be stubborn... from time to time... for the sake of being stubborn.”

“That's not the case, this time,” she scowled wondering where he got that bit of information. “He threw a crystal paperweight and almost hit her. It smashed and glass flew everywhere. She could have been hurt.”

“Now that's a different story. Violence against one's household... or friend... cannot be allowed. So, you confronted him and what happened?”

“He dismissed me as a *lowly female*! He told his father *his* version of the story I suppose. Now, I'm a *pariah** and he's a *victim* of my impetuosity! *Brilliant!*”

“Shall *I* speak to this fellow? I'm quite sure I'd get an apology out of him.”

“Heavens no! I think I've done enough damage.”

“He made several mistakes, as I see it, the biggest of which was dismissing you. He obviously didn't know to whom he was speaking.”

“Then I lost my temper and... sort of... *threatened*... to tell my father to invade Darhambi.”

“Ohhhhh! Now I see the rub! My dear Maagy! You do have a knack for digging a trench, don't you?” He said laughing out loud and then whispering, “I'm glad you're not on Zinrahwi's side or else none of us would

have any water at all!”

Rudy held his sides laughing at her precarious* predicament. She folded her arms, pouted her bottom lip, and sulked until he was ready to talk.

“I hope you enjoyed that at my expense.”

“I’m sorry, Duchess, but you never cease to amaze... or amuse me.”

“Well? What am I going to do about it? I need to find a way to smooth things over without telling that lout* I’m sorry... because *I’m not* and I *won’t* give in!”

“Think about it for a moment. Someone who was *not* in a position of power was insulted by someone she perceived to be more powerful. But then someone... *you... in* a position of power defended her. What does that tell you?”

“That... hmmm... I’ve no idea. What are you saying?”

“Look at it this way. She came to you...”

“Not really. I had to pry it out of her. She would have never told me had I not heard her crying.”

“The point is she went above *his* head with her grievance. Perhaps... *you...*”

“Could go above *his* head with mine! Rudy, you are a genius!”

“You never heard that from me,” he whispered, as he took her hand to kiss it gently. “Now, I must go to bed. I’m done. Good night, My Lady.”

“Good night, Friend,” she chortled, as her heart fluttered and she tried to take a breath. “Thank you for your wisdom... and good humor. By the way, her name is Estelí... Estelí Barrineau... and she is a dear person.”

“I’m sure she is, and she’s lucky to have you as her friend.”

Exhausted, he slowly climbed the stairs to the third floor, as she walked to her door. She looked up in time to see him glance back at her and smile before he rounded the last step and disappeared. She entered her room with renewed resolve.

The second day of the League of Kingdoms Summit started as early as the first for the host family. King Henry and Maagy were at the breakfast table by six-thirty as was Rudolpho. Asanna joined them soon after.

“Good morning all. Another fun filled, exciting day ahead,” Asanna greeted with a bit of sarcasm in her tone.

They chuckled and made small talk as they ate. The king and the prince were again embroiled in serious whispers. The two princesses caught up on some gossip and Maagy relayed her side of the Owanu debacle.

“It was nice to have breakfast with you, Asanna,” she said. “Yesterday was a lost cause. I didn’t see you at all.”

“I know what you mean. Mother had me tied up in strategy

planning when we weren't in the meeting. I found it excruciatingly boring. Speaking of Mother, I really should find her and Father for last minute instructions. Breakfast tomorrow then?"

"Lovely. I look forward to it."

As Asanna left, Maagy went to her father's side.

"Pardon me, Father. May I have a moment?"

"Yes Maagy. What is it?"

"I'd like to be excused please. I have something to attend. I'll see you at the door at nine sharp."

"I suppose. Don't be late."

She exchanged smiles with Rudolpho and left. She took a deep breath and slipped quietly into the main dining room. She paused to locate the right person and then made a beeline for him. She slipped a hand-written note on the table beside him and was gone before he knew who had done it. The note read:

Your Excellency,

Please do me the honor of having audience to discuss the events of yesterday. I will be in the first-floor library for the next half hour if you will be so kind.

My humble appreciation

Chieftain Obuku folded the note and concealed it in the pocket of his robe. He finished his last sip of coffee and moved through the room making sure he was not being watched by anyone. He found the library and Maagy waiting for him. She took a deep breath and stood to face him. She nodded her head as a sign of respect.

"Your Excellency, Chieftain Obuku, thank you for meeting me. I feel I owe you a personal accounting and explanation of the incident between your son and myself."

"You are the Impetuous Princess Maagy of whom I have heard much. What do you wish to say?"

"I deeply regret handling the situation as I did. However, I do not regret interceding on behalf of my chambermaid who was doing nothing more than following the rules of etiquette with regard to unmarried young men and women being together in a bedchamber without proper chaperons. The protocols are for our guests' protection as well as that of our household. Surely, there are similar requirements in your culture. I'm certain you understand."

"According to my son, the young woman refused to make his bed and when he chastised her for it, she smashed a piece of crystal on the floor and stormed out. Is there anything you would like to add?"

Maagy was furious that the boy had told such a blatant falsehood. Her instinct was to scream at the top of her lungs what a liar he was, but since her goal was to resolve the dilemma and not make it worse, she did as her father had said and '*swallowed her tongue*'. She maintained her composure and continued respectfully, as she chose her words carefully.

“All I can say is... my chambermaid is an honest person... who cares for a sick mother with the money she earns in humble service to our household. I do not believe she would jeopardize her position... or her mother’s welfare... to behave in such an irrational manner. She told me it was *he* who threw the paperweight *at her* and she ran out in fear. I went to your son on her behalf to elicit an apology and he *dismissed me* as a lowly female not worthy of his respect,” she said seething under her skin. “I’m afraid it was this last straw that broke the camel’s back. I allowed my anger to get the better of me... and... I threatened invasion. Fortunately, my father His Royal Majesty King Henry is a fair and wise man. He has a much more tranquil temperament than his daughter. I would never *actually* ask him to commit an act of war for such a small offense. Neither would he do it... even if I did. That, Sir, is what I wanted you to know.”

Obuku stood looking at the plucky girl who was standing straight and as tall as her tiny frame would allow. She likewise, looked him squarely in the eye never diverting her gaze.

“You are a brave young woman to speak to me this way. I know my son all too well. I also know your father and agree he is a wise man and has raised an equally wise daughter. Things are not always as they seem, are they Princess Maagy?”

She got the distinct impression from his tone the chief was trying to tell her something without actually saying it, a sort of coded message. ‘*Things are not always as they seem*’; she thought she might have understood.

“I suppose... *sometimes*... perception is its own truth, Your Excellency.”

“No truer words were ever spoken. What is it you wish from me?”

“The only thing I’ve ever wanted was an apology for my chambermaid.”

“And if you get it... you will not ask your father to invade us? And you will give him the message... *all is well?*”

“You have my word, Sir.”

“Then things are truly *not* as they seem.”

She was sure now this was the message, not for her, but for King Henry.

“How shall we accomplish this apology? Tell me when and where and I shall see to it my son is there.”

“On the west lawn down the hill in front of the castle there is a pond partially obscured by shrubs. The spot is adequately secluded for privacy of this matter. Everyone seems to take their leave after luncheon and go to their rooms for some quiet time. One o’clock beside the pond if you will, Your Excellency.”

“We shall be there.”

“Thank you for your kind understanding and willingness to resolve this matter peacefully, Sir,” she said with a slight bow of her head.

“You *will* give your father my regards, will you not, Your

Highness?”

She was positive she was right.

“I shall, indeed, Sir.”

The chieftain left the room and Maagy stood for a few moments sorting out what had just happened. She was giddy with joy at the outcome of her bold move. She raced through the ballroom and up the stairs to her bedchamber. She tugged frantically on the bell cord. Esteli was there immediately. Maagy told her the news and that she was to be at the pond at one o'clock. It was a few moments before nine when she checked her appearance and proudly placed her mother's tiara on her neatly coiffed head. She flew down the stairs and into the ballroom where she found her father ensconced in hushed conversation with the usual group.

“Your Majesty, may I have a word with you?” She asked breathlessly.

“Princess Maagy, can't you see I'm in the middle of something? You'll have to wait.”

“Excuse me, Your Royal Majesty King Henry, but I *must* speak with you... *now!*”

“Your Highness Princess Maagy, I am busy with important matters of State. Please mind your manners.”

“I *am* minding my manners, *Your Royal Majesty*. I have something to tell you, which is important as well!”

“Your Highness, your role here is to observe! So, *observe quietly!*”

All of this back and forth was done in whispered tones, which were becoming increasingly louder until finally...

“Daddy, you must listen to me, *now!*”

Fortunately, the only ones to hear the commotion were close friends who were rather amused at her persistence.

“What is it, Maagy, for heaven sake?”

“I have a message for you...” then she whispered in his ear, “from His Excellency Chieftain Obuku.”

“What do you mean a message from... *him?* Maagy, what have you done?”

“Do you want the message or not?” She said defiantly.

“What is it?”

“He said, *‘Things are not always as they seem’*, and *‘all is well’*, and to *give you his regards.*”

“When? When did he say that?”

“Not more than thirty minutes ago in the first-floor library *to my face*,” she crowed proudly.

“Prince Rudolpho, please come closer. Queen Haideh, if you please. You all should hear this,” he whispered. “Repeat the message, Maagy.”

“Chieftain Obuku said, and I quote, *‘Things are not always as they seem’*, and *‘all is well’*, and to *‘give his regards to His Majesty’*.”

“Maagy, tell me exactly how you came to be in the library with His Excellency.”

“I regretted the run-in I had with Owanu over Estelí, but I was not about to apologize for it either. I knew it was causing some concern for the future of the negotiations,” she explained to the group, “and something had to give, but still save face for everyone. Since I am Estelí’s superior... in so much as *her work* is concerned... I thought I should go to Owanu’s superior, *his father*.”

“Oh, Maagy! You didn’t,” the king groaned.

“I did! I slipped him a note to meet me in private, which *he* did. He listened to my explanation of the incident and my reasoning. Then he said what I told you and reiterated it. I took it as clandestine* communication. He told me he knows his son all too well. When he asked me what I wanted from him, I told him all I wanted was an apology for Estelí. He promised to meet us at the pond at one o’clock with Owanu. Then he asked if I got the apology would I give you the message, quote, ‘*all is well*’. By this time, I knew we were no longer talking about the incident. He was clearly sending the message he is not in Zinrahwi’s pocket, as we all presumed. I don’t believe Chieftain Nandu is either. They are willing to work with us!”

“And you’re sure those were his exact words?” Rudolpho asked.

“*Pre-cisely*.”

He smiled at Maagy and gave her a subtle wink when no one was looking.

“Maagy, this is good work... *good work* indeed!” King Henry complimented. “You turned an ugly situation round and made contact where we couldn’t have. I am proud of you, My Dear.”

“Thank you, Your Royal Majesty,” she said bursting with satisfaction.

King Henry, Prince Rudolpho, Queen Haideh, and Father-King Afarnae quickly planned a new approach to the morning session. Maagy was only too happy to pass communiqués to the allied representatives. Terrasicus was out of the loop completely. Even as the Darhambian chieftains seemed to show solidarity with Zinrahwi, the occasional glances toward Maagy insured they were playing a game to protect their own interests, but were aligned with the valley kingdoms if push came to shove.

Maagy had absorbed the lessons of the last twenty-four hours like a sponge. She found negotiating to be intuitive. Her command of sophisticated vocabulary aided her immensely. She could find the words to say what needed saying, without saying it at all. She had always been direct in her communication, but this newfound skill was exhilarating. She realized diplomacy was a balancing act which sometimes pits what is right and fair

against what is necessary for the benefit of everyone. She began to understand the complexity of her father's job and discovered she loved it.

Berensenia and Estadore had the most to gain or lose. King Henry and Rudolpho took the lead in brokering a mutually beneficial arrangement for trade. Estadore was particularly vulnerable, as it bordered Terrasicus. However, Rudolpho was prepared to make the greatest concessions on allowing both land and shipping routes through his kingdom, provided he had a pledge of protection from Berensenia and Nihmrobi. Once those issues were agreed upon, the other Commonwealth nations and Aradinia came on board quickly.

Finally, the proposal was hammered out and ready to be presented to the Emperor. All participants had agreed to open trade with Terrasicus and Darhambi. In addition, they agreed to allow Terrasican and Darhambian cargo transport vehicles to cross their borders with restrictions in place. The possibility for ships under the Terrasican flag sailing into ports in Estadore and Nihmrobi was briefly mentioned, as was a shipping route from the Sea of Aragon through Poseidonia, Aradinia, and Senecia to the Sea of Melania, but no firm commitment was made. Prices for goods were set at reasonable rates. A council would be created with representatives from each kingdom to ensure fair trade practices.

In addition, the valley and coastal sovereignties pledged to prevent all future hiring of mercenary soldiers from inside their borders. In return, Zinrahwi must open the dam and allow water to flow freely again. The terms of the document seemed fair and equitable for all concerned, but no one knew how the emperor would react. He was unpredictable at best and downright nasty at his worst. King Henry stood and called the general session to order. He addressed the Terrasican and Darhambian delegations formally.

“Your Excellency's, Emperor Zinrahwi of Terrasicus, Chieftain Obuku and Chieftain Nandu of Darhambi, I am pleased to inform you we have come to agreement on a proposal which we believe will be in the best interest of all our kingdoms not the least of which are your great sovereign nations. We sympathize with the difficulties you face living in a desert region. Therefore, we have proposed generous trade routes and fair pricing to effectively move much needed food and other staples to the good people whom you represent. The document is being drawn up officially as we speak and will be ready by afternoon session. I would like to suggest we break early for a meal and resume our exploration of these matters at three o'clock. Is there anyone who opposes that plan? Good, then three it is. Enjoy your leisure time.”

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Maagy, Rudolpho and Asanna ate together in the main dining room. King Henry, Queen Haideh, and Prince Shamir were also at the

table. Premier Chamberlaine, his wife and Martha were directly across from Maagy and her friends. Martha's blatant fixation on Prince Rudolpho invoked in Maagy feelings of jealousy she had never felt before. She recognized the need for some alone time to sort things out and was anxious to see Cupid, since she hadn't been to the barn all day. She excused herself and changed into overalls. She had to carefully time her escape from the castle to avoid encountering any of the dignitaries. She peeked out the barely open door. No one was on the steps either up or down, so she made a break for the staircase. Rather than running down and making noise, she flung her leg over the rail and slid all the way to the bottom at break-neck speed. She dismounted and disappeared into the coat closet, safe from spying eyes. She raced through the kitchen and past Grandma Polly who was about to speak.

"I know... 'Highly inappropriate'... I'm not here! You didn't see me!" She said, as she grabbed an apple from the basket.

She was gone in the blink of an eye leaving the elder woman smiling in appreciation. Maagy ran to the pasture and called. Cupid raised her head from grazing and whinnied.

"That's the girl. Come get your sweetie!"

Cupid kicked up her heels as she galloped. The two enjoyed a visit while she held the apple for the filly to take bites. She had forgot about the one o'clock appointment until Rudolpho appeared at the fence.

"Isn't there somewhere you're supposed to be?"

"Oh, hello. What? Oh no! What time is it?"

"A few minutes to one."

"The pond!"

"Run and you can make it!"

Maagy took off as fast as she could round the lower part of the yard to the front lawn. It was farther to run, but she had less chance of being seen by anyone. She reached the pond just as the chieftain and his son were arriving. Her face was red and beaded with sweat and she was out of breath. Her hair was falling down and bits were hanging in her face. The tail of her blouse was crawling out of her overalls and she was barefooted. She was not at all the well put-together young woman Chieftain Obuku had been so impressed with that morning. Estelí was already there and had been waiting long enough to become nervous.

"What a mess! This is to whom I am supposed to apologize, Father? A servant girl and a stable hand?" The sarcastic boy remarked. "Surely you must be jesting."

Maagy wanted to pounce on him and take him to the ground. Instead, she once again remembered her father's wisdom and *swallowed*.

"I do realize my appearance is shameful, but I'm training a young horse and, as you know, Your Excellency, it takes a lot of time and patience," she said deliberately.

She glared at Owanu and brushed back her hair. He glared back knowing full well the double entendre she intended.

“And you spend all the time you can accomplishing that task, no doubt,” the senior Obuku returned.

“I do, Sir,” she acknowledged with a slight smile and dip of her head.

“Owanu, tell the chambermaid... what is your name, young lady?”

“Estelí, Your Excellency... Estelí Barrineau.”

“Tell Mademoiselle Barrineau you regret your impolite behavior and will never again ask her or anyone else to break the house rules.”

The boy stood defiantly looking down at the ground. His father put his arm round him firmly, as he whispered close to his ear and then let him go.

“I regret I put you in a compromising situation. I regret I lost my temper and threw the paperweight. I will never again do such things,” he said almost inaudibly.

Maagy felt the apology was half-hearted, at best. She’d hoped for much more but realized she’d pushed her luck as far as it was going.

“*Merci, Monsieur**. I accept your kind words,” Estelí replied, as she curtsied respectfully.

She could hardly breathe for trembling. Maagy stood close and gave her a reassuring nod.

“Now to Princess Maagy... go on, boy.”

“I deeply regret speaking to you... in a condescending* manner... Your Highness. I hope you will accept my... humble apology,” he said choking on the words.

“I do... accept.”

“Your Highness, we will let you get back to your horse training... and I will get back to mine,” Obuku said. “May we all have much success in our ventures?”

He nodded politely and put his arm round his son’s shoulders, as they walked back to the castle.

“How did you make that happen, Your Highness? I thought I would come to pieces shaking.”

“All a matter of knowing to whom one should speak and what *they want* in return. I think that is the business of negotiating.”

It was only half past one when she got back to the barn. She found Rudy and Asanna there talking to John Miles. They were saddling horses for a ride. Rudolpho had Sunrise, a big dark bay with black stockings. A former dressage* competitor and high-spirited, he was the largest riding horse in the stable. He was a lot of horse for most people, but Rudolpho handled him with authority. Asanna who was also an accomplished rider was on Dinah, the black mare with a white blaze on her face.

“Maagy, just in time. Have a ride with us, won’t you?” Rudy said

cheerfully.

“Oh... a ride... um... I’m not sure...” she stammered embarrassed to tell the two she had never been on a horse’s back. “Um... well...”

“Mister Miles, who do you have for the Duchess?”

“I believe Carmela would be a good fit, Sir.”

Carmela was a chestnut color with flaxen mane and tail. She was patient and responsive with a smooth gate, which made her an excellent choice for a first-time rider. She was also smaller than the other horses and would fit the diminutive * novice*.

“She’s Cupid’s mother. I think she and Her Royal Highness will get along famously.”

“I... know Carmela... yes,” Maagy said.

John knew she had never ridden but was chivalrous enough to save her admission of such. He also knew Rudolpho had surmised the same and their unspoken words were communication enough.

“Shall I saddle her for Your Highness?”

She was desperately afraid but just as desperately wanted to ride with them. She gave John a terrified look.

“Yes... please. Carmela is quite acceptable. Wait, I’m barefooted. I can’t ride without boots.”

“Where are they? I’ll send someone for them and he’ll be here by the time I have her saddled,” Mister Miles said.

“In the mudroom, outside the kitchen.”

He sent one of the stable hands who was back in no time with her boots. She had no more excuses. As she walked toward the horse, John turned the mare round so she would be on the proper side to mount without anyone knowing she was clueless. She approached the horse and panic set in, but he came to her rescue.

“Your Highness, let me give you a leg up,” he said.

He whispered close to her ear, as he cupped his hands for her foot.

“Relax, Your Highness. Follow my lead. Take hold of the front and back of the saddle firmly and use it to pull up. Put your left foot in my hands and swing your right leg over the horse and sit in the saddle. Take the reins in both hands.”

She did exactly as she was told and executed a perfect mount, her heart pounding out of her chest.

“Thank you for the assist, Mister Miles,” she said.

“My pleasure, Your Highness. She’s a sweet girl, no need to use the heels or speak loudly. She responds to a gently tap of the crop on her withers. Her mouth is soft, so no hard pulls on the reins. A gentle touch is all you need with this one.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll take it slow for a while and have a good chat,” Rudy said, picking up on John’s continued clues.

“I’m all for that. It’s been a whirlwind for days. We all need a quiet

moment,” Asanna added.

“How was your *meeting*, Maagy?” Rudolpho asked.

“Quite good, thank you! Excellent, in fact,” she replied with a proud smile.

They had a slow ride through the meadow and round the fields behind the castle, as they discussed the day’s events. She watched the other two more experienced riders and tried to mimic their posture and actions. By the time they were back at the barn, she felt comfortable in the saddle and looked forward to the next ride.

“I say we should do this every day after luncheon. What do you ladies think about that?” Rudolpho asked.

“I’d love to,” Asanna said, as she dismounted. “How about you Maagy?”

“Yes, I’d love it as well. I’ll be honest with you both. That was the first time in my life I’ve been on a horse. It was incredible! I want to do this every single day!”

“I never would have known. You did very well, Maagy,” Asanna complimented. “The first time I tried to mounted a horse I went over the other side right onto the ground.”

“*Really?*”

“Very well done, Duchess. You’re a courageous one,” the Prince said, as he took her by the waist and helped her down.

“Thank you. Perhaps I should have a few lessons. What do you think, Mister Miles?”

“It would give you confidence, I’m sure.”

“Rudy is an excellent equestrian,” Asanna added with a mischievous smirk. “You could give her some pointers this week, couldn’t you?”

“I’d be happy to if you’d like, Maagy.”

“That would be fabulous. This may be my new favorite passion!”

Time was moving quickly. The new horsewoman was in a frightful state of untidiness in need of washing, dressing and coiffing* of the hair. She excused herself and ran back to the house and kicked off the boots in the mudroom. She retraced her earlier escape route through the kitchen again crossing paths with Grandma Polly.

“I know! You’re not here! I see nothing!” The lady snickered.

Maagy giggled mischievously, as she grabbed another apple, this one for her, and raced through the coat closet. She stopped at the door and peeped out, as she munched on the snack. The coast was clear, so she scurried up the stairs and into her room undetected.

“I’m getting good at this stealth business,” she mused proudly.

Her afternoon clothes were laid on her bed complete with shoes and clean stockings. A fresh face cloth and towel were waiting on the basin, as was warm water just right for a refreshing wash. She pulled the bell cord and Estelí was at her service immediately to rearrange the royal hair, while

the proper princess finished her apple.

“Thank you, Friend. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

She had but seconds to get to the ballroom on time but somehow managed. As expected, the proposal was ready and each participant had a copy. Protocol was for the representatives to read, discuss, and sign the document. That process could go quickly since all of them except Zinrahwi had already agreed on the terms, or it could take the rest of the week if he chose to argue every point. Most everyone anticipated the worst.

The meeting was called to order and the business began. Zinrahwi was the first to speak and went immediately on the offensive accusing the other delegates of conspiring to overthrow his reign. He had not even read the document, but he was sure it was unfair. Chiefs Obuku and Nandu seemed to try calming the Emperor and mitigating the terms. Oddly enough, he listened to them. King Henry did a masterful job of diffusing the situation and preventing anyone else from over reacting. Rudolpho assured the Emperor the proposed routes through Estadore were legitimate and guaranteed as long as the Terrasicans followed the guidelines. Other representatives likewise assured him of their sincerity. The discussion continued, sometimes heated, for almost two hours. Finally, King Henry stood again and called order. He suggested, since the hour was late, it might be best to adjourn for dinner and give His Excellency the opportunity to read and digest the proposal in private. The majority agreed and the meeting ended.

* * * * *

Dinner was served formally in the grand dining room and the quiet evening ended early for most of the guests. However, Maagy had a surprise up her sleeve for her friends. She had asked Grandpa Kris to demonstrate the telescope for Rudolpho and Asanna sometime that week if weather permitted. He had whispered to her during dinner that it was a perfect night and to bring them to the observatory at ten thirty. It would be dark enough by then. The moon was in the right position for a grand show. She found the Prince and her father in the foyer saying goodnight and joined them.

“Goodnight, Daddy. Have sweet dreams.”

“You too, Darling,” he answered, as he hugged her and headed upstairs.

“Be in the science library at ten twenty-five. Don’t ask questions,” she whispered as she brushed by Rudolpho.

He picked up on the clue immediately and gave her a subtle nod. He enjoyed her newfound sense of intrigue. Asanna was on the third-floor landing bidding her parents sweet dreams. Maagy waited until they went down the hall to approach Asanna.

“Psst... Asanna,” she beacons from the top step. “Come with me.”

“Oh, Maagy Dear, I’m quite exhausted. I was just headed for bed.”

“Trust me, you’ll want to see this. I promise it won’t take long and it’s well worth the lost sleep.”

“If you insist. Whatever it is had better be spectacular.”

Asanna followed her down the staircase and round to the library. She opened the door with a flourish and stood with arms wide.

“Isn’t this a magnificent library? It’s devoted entirely to science. Look at that map and all those bottles and beakers and... *things*. What do you think?”

“It’s... interesting... I suppose... but not so much that I’d rather lose sleep for it,” Asanna replied somewhat cross.

“Oh no! *This* is not what you’re losing sleep over...”

“I’m here. It’s ten twenty-five. Oh hello, Asanna. I see she pulled you in as well,” Rudy said, as he entered.

“You know what this is about, do you?”

“I have a guess.”

“You’ll both thank me later. Now come on.”

She led the way up the winding steps to the top of the tower where they found Grandpa Kris. He had already turned the complicated maze of pulleys and cables and the entire roof of the observatory was wide open to the sky. That view alone was spectacular, but promised to get even better.

“There you are, Children. Right on time. It’s almost in focus. Ah! There she is. Come, have a look.”

Rudy and Asanna were spellbound. Maagy was about to burst out of her crown. She was so excited to share her discovery with them.

“How did you get the roof open like that? What is that machine? I’m positively overcome!” Asanna gushed.

“Amazing! *Brilliant!* Maagy, what a treat. Thank you, Sir. I can’t imagine anything more spectacular,” Rudy added.

“It’s my pleasure, Your Highnesses. Look, the moon is within arms-length. This is a telescope, Princess Asanna. It brings the moon and stars close enough to touch. At least they *look* that way. Here, see for yourselves.”

The young ones took turns looking at the heavens and marveling at such a wonder. They giggled and asked questions and looked some more as Grandpa Kris showed them several constellations and explained basic navigational secrets. Finally, he brought the session to an end.

“It’s getting late, my dears, and you all have an early morning. The show is over for this evening, but I’ll do this again when time permits.”

They thanked him profusely and offered to help close the roof. He declined and assured them it was no trouble to do alone. They suspected he wanted to keep the exact mechanism secret. The three descended the stairs still talking about the telescope and how extraordinary the experience.

“Maagy, thank you for asking Grandpa to give us this treat,” Asanna said. “You were right. It was worth losing sleep over!”

“I told you...”

“You are a woman of your word, Princess. Thank you is not nearly

sufficient, but it's all I can say.”

“It was my pleasure. I'm the lucky one here for having met such nice friends. Goodnight to you both. Sleep well.”

* * * * *

Day three began as days one and two, with family breakfast. Maagy took time to care for Cupid before dressing for the morning session. She was punctual as usual and was curious to see what the irascible* emperor would do today besides glare at her. The meeting came to order and the first business was to read aloud the entire trade agreement in case there were errors. The Document was titled *The Valley Fair Trade Treaty*. Once the official reading was done, the participants placed their personal seals in wax to certify authenticity. Next would be the arduous* task of signing it.

Zinrahwi stood, immediately. The others were waiting for his bombast to begin when he abruptly announced he would sign the document as it was and *then did so*. The room was silent with amazed glances hopping like frogs from one to the other. King Henry rose, and without speaking a word, took quill in hand and wrote his name quickly. Queen Haideh looked to her father and then to the king. She and Prince Rudolpho followed suit* simultaneously, starting the chain reaction for the rest of the representatives. Maagy guessed they all wanted to sign as quickly as possible before Grumpy Gus changed his mind. The process continued, as the documents were passed to the left and signed again and again until each had gone completely round the table and ended with its original owner. These identical documents became official records once King Henry's Royal seal was affixed. The process took the entire morning. He thanked the Emperor and chieftains for their cooperation and asked if anyone had other business to discuss, but no one dared. The League of Kingdoms Summit officially ended early. Everyone was cordially invited to stay and enjoy the rest of the week on holiday before returning home.

Emperor Zinrahwi and his entourage left almost immediately after a quick repast*. It was as if their bags were packed and the horses hitched before the day began. Maagy couldn't be sad about that. He had given her a foreboding feeling whenever she saw him. The Darhambian delegations departed together, but not before Chief Obuku had a private moment with King Henry and Prince Rudolpho. She was ever so curious to know what was said but chose to ask later. She had been gracious to Owanu, as it was her duty as Official Hostess to see all the guests off, but he knew her smile was paper-thin. Several other representatives left soon after eating due to their long journeys. The Senecians were among them. Maagy was pleased to see Martha Chamberlaine leave.

The Nihmrobi delegation decided to stay until Friday as did Rudolpho. Maagy was thrilled, as it would give her more time to visit with them and have a few riding lessons. She thought about the bizarre turns and

twists she had encountered and the strides she'd made in just a few days. It was a bit dizzying, as she began to comprehend the enormous future which lay ahead of her. After dinner and some warm goodnights, she sat on her bed and pondered it.