

## *Chapter 1*

### *Intruders*

*May 2<sup>d</sup>*

“By god, no one leaves this castle! No one sleeps until my father is found!” She barked.

It was early afternoon. Princess Maagy steeled her heart in much the same way she had on the night of her Début putting her raw emotions in a box. She replaced fear and despair with anger and determination. Dressed in her combat uniform with the Battle Wreath of the Heir firmly on her forehead and weapons at her sides, she made a solemn vow to bring her father home. She had become the warrior she was trained to be. Lord Farnsworth advised that the king’s absence should be known to only a select few, as there were those in Parliament who would seize the opportunity to create significant political unrest. She had signed the Temporary Order of Abdication in secrecy, taking the oath with Rudolpho, Mary, and Wesley as witnesses. After administering the oath, Lord Farnsworth pinned the Chief Commander bars to her red sash, but advised she fold the material to cover them until Parliament had been informed.

Family members of the newly dubbed Knights had left Avington Palace having been thoroughly scrutinized by several of Maagy’s classmates who had been apprised of the situation and sworn to silence. Timothy, Patrick, and James surreptitiously delayed departures while searching for clues under the guise of helping to load personal luggage into the many carriages. No one had become any the wiser. Lord Farnsworth notified the HMRG commanding officer to cancel leave for all the newly dubbed Knights and to find housing for them in palace barracks. In addition, he ordered the Elite Guard Service to provide heavy guard presence around the royal residence but gave no explanation as to why. He surreptitiously sent word to all other Knights still present at Avington to be on high alert and ready for additional duties. Maagy called for an assembly to meet in the War Room, a place that in her wildest dreams she never imagined she would be so soon after dubbing. In attendance with Maagy and Lord Farnsworth were Rudolpho, Wesley, Mary, Mak, and Ohno.

“Uncle, have all the guests been allowed to depart?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. The...”

“Do not call me that! This is only temporary. He is not...”

“Of course not, my dear. He is alive, and we shall find him. My apologies. It’s just that you *are* the ruling monarch, if only temporarily.”

“Be that as it may, do not address me as Majesty. That is his title. Call me Commander or Dame or Your Highness, but not Majesty.”

“As you wish, my dear. The guests have departed. It would have drawn too much attention to delay them any longer.”

“And nothing was discovered in their caravans?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“They must have got him out whilst we were sleeping,” Wesley speculated. “Did any supply wagons depart through either gate in the night?”

“According to the guards on duty, no,” Prince Rudolpho added, “no wagons in or out.”

“Have they been questioned thoroughly?” Maagy asked forcefully.

“Yes, my dear. No one saw or heard anything unusual all night,” Lord Farnsworth reiterated. “There was no activity in or out from either post.”

“How is that possible? Question them again! Were they sleeping? I’ll have their heads. Who could have done this? How could they have smuggled him out right under our noses? Where were his guards? They are Knights, for god sake! How did they allow such atrocity?” She demanded pacing and growing ever more agitated.

“Your Highness, we are still trying to assess the situation,” Lord Farnsworth explained.

“Why have we no clues?”

“Detection work takes time. We are working as quickly as we can whilst remaining discreet. It has only been a few hours since we discovered his absence.”

“Work faster, damn it! I swear on my mother’s grave if they harm a hair on his head, *their heads* will roll! Prince Rudolpho, why that look on your face? What are you thinking?”

“There is another way into and out of the palace.”

“What do you mean?”

“The catacombs... the Aving River... there are dozens of underwater caves all throughout under the palace.”

“How do you know about the catacombs?”

“There was an invasion from underneath. They came up the river in boats in the dead of night. Papá told me about...” he stopped abruptly and looked away.

“What? Told you what? Spit it out.”

“He told me about the night... about Aftanisbahr’s invasion from the tunnels.”

“I see. No, no, they didn’t come that way this time. Father had iron gates installed,” she said, then quickly changed the subject. “The back road... the guards must have been asleep. It’s the only logical explanation.”

“All due respect, Your Highness,” Rudy interjected rationally, “the catacombs are the most logical way to spirit someone out without being heard or seen. The access is deep inside the mountain. It is quite remote. Iron gates are strong but not impenetrable.”

There was a knock at the door. Mary and Mak drew their swords and opened it to find Sir Timothy.

“Lord Farnsworth, Sir, may I speak with you in private?”

The two men whispered, and Arrowsmyth left without another word. Lord Farnsworth closed the door and leaned against it. He took a moment before he spoke. He was pale and clearly distraught.

“Oh god, Uncle Percy, what is it?”

“His Majesty’s guards... both of them... their bodies were found hidden in a cellar. Their throats were cut, no doubt taken by surprise... rendered unconscious... then carried down and murdered.”

“*Oh god n-o-o-o-o!* They’ve been his trusted sentries as long as I can remember,” Maagy wailed in anguish. “Who is behind this heinous act?”

“I cannot be sure... but my best guess is... I’m afraid it was...”

“For god sake, Uncle Percy, what are you trying to say?”

“I believe it is the Terrasicans. Rather... you know who I mean.”

“Zinrahwi,” she uttered with resolute calm. “If you’re correct, he wasted no time. The challenge is on.”

“What do you mean?” Rudolpho questioned.

“I mean this is the beginning of *his* ending,” She threatened, as the reality of the two dead men flooded her mind. “Have their families... the guards’ families... been notified? They were husbands... fathers, both. I know their children.”

“I shall attend the details personally, my dear,” Lord Farnsworth responded gently. “Do you need a moment alone?”

“No, I’m fine. Let’s continue. We should go down there and examine the caverns... but...”

“What? What is it, Maagy?” Rudolpho asked.

“I don’t know how to get there,” she whispered. “My own home... and I don’t know how to get there.”

“I know the way only too well,” Lord Farnsworth said. “Come, I’ll show you.”

The entire entourage exited the War Room and began to weave through the halls toward the entrance to the labyrinths hidden below. Maagy was looking down deep in thought, as they turned a corner and almost ran into Sir Simon James.

“Oh, good lord, Simon! What on Earth are you doing here? I thought you left hours ago.”

“So sorry, Your Highness. By the look of displeasure on your face, perhaps I should have done.

“What? Oh... no, I’m so sorry. I’m quite preoccupied at the moment. Why are you still here? Where were you going just now?”

“May we speak privately for a moment?”

“I suppose... yes,” she replied. “Gentlemen, a moment please?”

“Your Highness...” Lord Farnsworth whispered, as he nodded toward Mary with a stern look.

“Yes, Uncle, of course. Mary with me, please.”

The three moved away from the crowd. Rudolpho’s blood boiled at the thought of Simon with Maagy in any context. Wesley took note of his discomfort and added a bit of his own.

“I’m sorry, Simon, but I must be accompanied by my personal guard. You remember Dame Mary, Second Lieutenant Gray?”

“I do. Nice to see you again. Maagy, why are you in uniform? You have a month furlough, do you not? Why must you have a guard in your own home?”

“Answer my questions, Sir. What are you doing here and where were you going?”

“It’s obvious this is a bad time...”

“Answer me!”

“The answer is personal,” he said looking at Mary and then back to Maagy.

“Mary is not only my guard she is my best friend and confidant. We were roommates at Academy. She knows everything about me. You may speak freely.”

“The truth is I was looking for you. I found your company last evening quite enjoyable. I decided to stay and perhaps share another meal with you. I’d hoped to make a plan to see you, again... soon.”

“Oh,” she responded taken aback. “I thought you... knew something.”

“About what?”

Maagy was quite flustered. Her face blushed red and she began to shake. Her stone-solid warrior resolve was beginning to crack.

“Has something happened, Maagy? I have heard rumblings round the hallways.”

“What? What have you heard? I demand you tell me this instant!”

“Only snippets. His Majesty has not been seen today. The palace physician has ministered to his Man. Now I find you in uniform with those very serious looking soldiers surrounding you. Has something happened to your father, Maagy?”

“Tears fought to spill out her eyes, as she stared at him unable to speak. She didn’t want to lie, but she didn’t want to tell him the truth either.

“What can I do? I’m here to help if you’ll allow me.”

She looked down and swallowed hard. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly while she made a decision.

“My Father... the king... has been abducted... stolen out of the palace... in the dead of night. We have no leads as to where he is... or if he is...” she whispered unable to finish the sentence.

“Don’t let your thoughts go to that dark place, Maagy,” he said trying to be positive.

“We believe Emperor Zinrahwi is behind it,” Mary interjected. “That’s all we know at this moment.”

“These men are my trusted friends and are sworn to secrecy, as you now must be willing,” Maagy continued. “I have temporarily taken charge of the throne and assumed command of the forces. Parliament is not even aware as yet.”

“Oh, Your Highness, I am so very sorry. Please allow me to be of assistance in any way you deem necessary. I’m certain His Majesty King Gerdán will be more than willing to ally with the Commonwealth to defeat the emperor. Even though His Majesty and King Henry have not always seen eye-to-eye, Zinrahwi has been a thorn in all our sides for decades. After all, your father... and you for that matter... are of Aradinian blood.”

“Thank you, Simon. I appreciate your offer of support. You must tell no one what I have told you or whatever you figured out on your own. We are going to the catacombs to see if the gates have been breached. We think they may have taken him away by boat down the Aving.”

Simon joined the group and followed them to the depths of the palace. The catacomb gates had indeed been forced open and there was evidence at least two boats had been tied in one location. Maagy ordered the gates be repaired and re-enforced and a guard detail posted to prevent any further invasion. Upon their return above ground, Rudolpho was on his way to speak with King Rafael when he encountered Heath Wooldridge in the hallway.

“Heath, I didn’t know you were still here.”

“I could say the same about you, mate. Perhaps it’s a good sign that things are improving with the lovely lady.”

“Just the opposite, I’m afraid.”

“Oh dear, what now? Wait, is that Aradinian in the way? Shall I take care of it?”

“If only it were that simple. How long are you staying?”

“I’m on furlough for two weeks, but I just got word all Knights have been ordered to stay put, anyway. So, Rachel and her parents are planning our wedding for late summer I think. I’m unwillingly along for the ride. Why? What’s happening, Rudolpho? I suspected something was amiss by the order to stay.”

“We may need your particular skill at Millfort.”

“Oh, I see. Is it something, which might require... discretion?”

“Indeed. I know I can trust you, Heath. What I’m about to tell you must be kept completely to yourself.”

“Of course.”

“His Majesty King Henry has been taken against his will, we believe into the underground and out the palace by boat during wee hours. We’ve no idea where. Maagy has assumed the monarchy and command of the forces, but frankly, she is distraught and grossly inexperienced. I’m worried.”

“Do you know who is behind it?”

“We think Emperor Zinrahwi.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Some of the information I’ve gathered points to rumors of his... shall we say... discontent of late. What can I do?”

“I hate to ask, as you’re on holiday...”

“I’m a soldier first, loyal to the Crown. I shall tell Rachel some emergency at Millfort has arisen. She thinks I am in charge of administrative duties for hospital. I cannot tell her what I really do.”

“Perhaps speak to Lord Farnsworth. Let him know I spoke with you. He has the authority to allow you to leave unnoticed.”

“Will do. I’ll let you know if I gather any pertinent information.”

“Thank you, Friend. Godspeed.”

“To you, as well. Will you tell Her Highness of my involvement?”

“No... not just yet. She has enough to think about at the moment.”

Heath bid farewell to his fiancée and left quietly. Rudolpho informed his father of the situation, as he had advised Maagy it would be a good strategic decision. She had finally relented and agreed. The two elder kings were like brothers. Rudolpho knew his father would never forgive not being allowed to aid in the search.

\*\*\*\*\*

### *May 3<sup>rd</sup>*

It was early evening on the second day of the king’s absence. Despite the best efforts of emissaries to gather intelligence, there was still no word on the king’s whereabouts or who had taken him. Gossip was rampant and members of Parliament were becoming suspicious of the additional guards at the residence and other subtle changes in the normal routine. They questioned Lord Farnsworth vigorously as to why an entourage of Elites had been assigned to surround Maagy. Why was she in uniform? They demanded to know why King Henry had not been seen since Dubbing. So far, he had fended them off with excuses of fatigue and the sniffles, and that the Elites were simply her friends. However, it was becoming obvious they wanted answers he did not want to give them. Rudolpho and Simon were still at Avington Palace giving their best military advice and moral support while competing for Maagy’s attention. No one in the inner circle had slept more than an hour at a time since the ordeal began. Maagy and Mary Lu were spent physically and emotionally.

“Maagy, Dear, you should sleep,” Lord Farnsworth said.

“No! We must keep searching. There must be something we’re missing.”

“You’re dead on your feet and there is no new information.”

“We must find *something!*”

“I promise I shall wake you immediately if there is any word.”

“I’m not going to sleep until my father is at home!”

“But Maagy, darling...”

“You forced me to take this damnable job! Now leave me alone and let me do it!” She turned and shouted.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” he responded quite taken aback. “I shall leave you to it then.”

The others in the room were stunned at her outburst, especially toward Lord Farnsworth. No kinder, sweeter man existed. He turned toward the door to leave.

“No, Uncle Percy, I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. Please forgive me,” she cried, as she ran to his arms. “I can’t do this without you.”

“Your Highness... Maagy darling, you will be no good for anything if you cannot think straight because of fatigue. I insist you sleep, my dear.”

“Maagy, he’s right. I’m sorry to intrude, but you’re frazzled,” Rudy added gently.

“For once, I agree with Prince Rudolpho. You really should rest,” Simon chimed.

“And eat something,” Wesley added with a gentle hand on her back. “You’ve been eating like a bird. You need food.”

“I’ll have a meal for you and Dame Mary sent to your suite. Please, my dear.”

“I suppose. All right. Wake me the moment you hear anything... *promise.*”

“Of course, my darling,” the elder man said reassuringly. “Please, Dame Mary... Lieutenant Gray... take her to her room. I’ll have Samantha attend you both.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll stay awake and keep the watch,” Mary said, as they walked toward the suite. “You can sleep.”

“No, Mary. You’re exhausted, too. I have all these guards in the hallways. You need rest as much as I.”

“But my job is to guard you.”

“And you cannot do it effectively any more so than I can do mine if you are beyond exhausted. I’m ordering you to sleep.”

“Whatever you say, Your Highness.”

Shortly after they arrived, Samantha and two other handmaidens brought in a tray of food and drew hot baths for both. Maagy and Mary ate, bathed, and redressed in combat uniforms, agreeing they might have to be ready on a moment’s notice. They fell across Maagy’s bed and were asleep immediately. They had slept for several hours when Maagy was awakened by the glow of the bracelet. She was again baffled by the phenomenon, but her attention was soon diverted when she realized there was someone prying at the bedchamber door.

“Mary Lu, wake up,” Maagy whispered.

“What? What’s going on?”

“Shh! There’s someone at the door. The ruby lit up again. It woke me. That’s when I heard the noise.”

They leapt out of bed and grabbed their weapons. Their only light was from the dying embers in the fireplace. They assumed strategic positions and waited

for the intruders' success. The first one in went straight to the bed and thrust his sword deep into the covers, thinking he was stabbing the princess. The other one lagged back seemingly hesitant to enter. Mary Lu took the first one from behind, his pedestrian skills no match for a trained warrior. She quickly had him subdued with a dagger at his throat. Maagy dragged the other in and threw him on the floor. She pounced on him with her sword against his neck.

"If you swallow you'll cut your own throat, which is fine by me!"

He stopped struggling immediately and was clearly terrified and perplexed by his predicament. Mary Lu threw her prisoner to the floor still struggling and defiant. She hog-tied him with one stocking and shoved the other in his mouth to keep him quiet.

"Well, there you are," Mary said panting, as he continued to glare at her. "Now, what are you going to do about that?"

Maagy stood with her foot on her prisoner's chest and her blade point pressing on his throat.

"You don't look Terrasican," she sneered. "Surely you're not Berensenian. Where are you from? Think carefully before you speak. A lie could make me angry and I tend to behave badly when I'm angry."

He was pale with fear and trembling but said nothing. He did not dare to move a muscle.

"Did you not hear the lady? Who are you? How did you get in here?" Mary demanded.

Still the man spoke not a word. Maagy peered out the door cautiously and saw no guards anywhere in the hallway. A foreboding shudder washed over her, as she thought about her father's guards slaughtered. They were trusted and respected friends. Now others have been ambushed. Maagy's heart pounded.

"Mary, there are no guards. We're on our own," she whispered so the men would not hear. "God knows what's happened to them."

"Oh, bloody hell!"

"Let's get these sacks of manure out of here," she snarled menacingly at her prey. "I don't want their innards on my floor. Take that one out the family quarters to the main corridor. Lock him in that small closet across the hall for the time being. This is the one we want. I'll take him into the sitting room. Be careful. Watch your back."

"I shall... and I shall watch yours, as well."

"Get on your feet," Maagy commanded turning her attention to her hostage. "Walk backwards out the door. Keep going. Down the hallway. Don't even think about escape. This sword will open your belly before you take two steps."

She marched him into a small sitting room on the main corridor keeping the point of her sword on his abdomen the entire time. Mary Lu dispatched her charge then entered the sitting room. She helped Maagy secure the prisoner to a sturdy chair as she questioned.

"Were you the only two in the hallway tonight?"

"No, there were several others who took care of the guards."

"Are they dead?" Mary demanded, as she grabbed his head from behind and put her dagger to his throat.

"No, Lieutenant! We need him alive!"

"*Are they dead?*" Mary insisted.

“I don’t know! I swear, I don’t know! We had nothing to do with them. They were gone by the time we arrived.”

“Let him go. That is an order, Lieutenant,” Maagy instructed.

Mary slowly, reluctantly released her grip and moved away.

“Go and wake Arrowsmyth, Phoenix, and Red Fox<sup>1</sup>,” Maagy whispered. “Tell them... oh god... I don’t know. Just tell them the guards are missing and to do whatever they must to find them, but don’t tell them about these two yet. Use the back stairs at the end of the hallway. It leads directly up to their quarters.”

“What about you? I can’t leave you alone.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine! I don’t want our friends lying somewhere bleeding to death while we wring our hands over Parliamentary protocol. Now go!”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” she called over her shoulder.

“Where are you from and why are you here?” Maagy asked, as she glowered at the prisoner and he trembled in fear. “I’ll give you one last chance to speak the truth. If you do not, I shall give you over to the dungeon guards. They don’t take kindly to invaders. I’ll never know what they do with you or your cohort... and I won’t care. Speak now or take your chances with them. Hold on, now I see you in better light... I recognize you. I’ve seen you before. Who are you? Speak, man, or I shall slit your throat and go on to the next one to find out the information.”

“Please, no! I... I... I... have a wife... and six children... my aged parents... and my invalid brother. They all depend upon me.”

She pressed her sword deeper into his chest until it broke through his shirt and pierced his skin. Blood began to ooze. She moved closer to his face and glared into his eyes, as he winced in pain.

“Who are you and why do I recognize you?”

“I... I... am... Perseus... Perseus Whettle... a stableman... here.”

“That’s it! I knew I’d seen you! You were there at the birthing. Now you’re trying to kill me? Are you daft?”

“No!” He exclaimed, then softened his tone to one of guilt. “Paid.”

“Paid? You’re a mercenary? In our employ?”

“I have no choice. I... I need the money.”

“Well, you’re not very good at it!” Maagy sneered.

“I’m no soldier... never claimed to be.”

“That is painfully obvious. Two women took you down. You should explore other vocations,” she reiterated. “Where are you from?”

“Senecia.”

“I don’t like Senecians,” she growled, as her blood boiled at the thought. “I should kill you for that alone! What are you doing *here*... in our stables? How long have you been here?”

“Since January,” he sighed resigned to confession, his dark secrets unraveling.

“January? Who hired you?”

“Cambrin Davenport, the Stable Master.”

“Mister Davenport? I don’t understand. He’s been here for years. You’re lying!”

“No! I swear it! I was told to go to him directly. He would hire me.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Mottistone, Robert Bradbury and Joseph Ferguson

“Why? Why on Earth would he hire a Senecian?”

“Because... he is... in on it, too.”

“In on what? What is it? In on what? Answer me!” She demanded, as he hesitated too long.

“The... the... plan.”

“Plan? January...” Maagy repeated beginning to unravel a plot. “How did you get into the palace?”

“We came in... my family... came with...”

“Speak!” She barked.

“His Excellency’s entourage.”

“Zinrahwi brought you in?” Maagy growled.

“No, Premier Chamberlaine. My entire family came. He gave us leave from Senecia if I agreed to do this.”

“Chamberlaine, that scoundrel! What do you mean he gave you leave? Why did you want to leave Senecia?”

“Not leave the kingdom... leave from our debt... relief. We owe the government a large sum of money. My crops have failed for several years. I have borrowed heavily to feed my family.”

Maagy was angered but not surprised. She remembered Rudolpho had told her Chamberlaine was duplicitous and to be wary of him. Now it was confirmed. The Premier was using coercion. The question was why. As she paced and mulled over the revelations, Mary crept in the door breathless from running.

“Did you find them?”

“Yes. They were ever so curious, but I told them to stop asking questions and do as they were told. What have you found out?”

“This is Perseus Whettle. He is Senecian. He is also one of *our* stablemen! He and his entire family were brought here in January by none other than Premier Chamberlaine, that deceitful bastard. Mister Whettle and his cohort are to be paid for their services.”

“Mercenaries?”

“Hardly! He’s a farmer head over heels in debt to the state. Chamberlaine is extorting him into committing this act. Apparently, there is some bigger plan, which we were just exploring... right Mister Whettle? You accept our wages and accommodations for your family and then betray us this way? You rodent. Who paid you for this mission?”

“No one yet. We don’t get paid until...”

“Until...? Until what?” Mary snarled.

“Until... the job is done.”

“The job? The job to kill me?” Maagy barked.

“We’re... we’re... supposed... to...”

“Oh for heaven sake! Spit it out, you mouse!” Mary demanded.

“We’re supposed to bring back... bring... back... your head.”

“My head?” Maagy repeated incredulously. “And what of the rest of me?”

“I don’t know. We were never told what to do with the rest.”

“You’re being paid to kill me and take my head, not abduct me?”

“That’s right. Your head... and a bauble... from round your neck.”

“A bauble, is it? This crystal?” She said tauntingly, as she leaned close and waved the amulet in his face.

"I suppose, yes, that blue crystal from round your neck," he responded, as she backed away and turned.

"Then Chamberlaine is not the one behind this," she whispered aside to Mary Lu. "He may have orchestrated the details to get my head for his wicked daughter, but Zinrahwi is the real culprit. He has a fascination with my mother's necklace. It's what he is ultimately after."

"The one with the..."

"Precisely."

"I'm no assassin, you know," Perseus volunteered. "I can't even kill the chicken for dinner. My wife has to do it. I could never murder anyone... least of all a woman."

"Least of all a Crown Princess," Maagy muttered sarcastically, as she whirled and approached him again. "How did you expect to get my head? Did you think I'd cut it off and give it to you myself?"

"I... I... really hadn't planned that far in advance. I figured the other fellow would do it."

"Outrageous!" Mary spit through gritted teeth. "And who is your partner in crime?"

"I don't know him. He came to my quarters only tonight and said it was time. He didn't even tell me his name. I followed him. I supposed he knew what to do... and would do it. Oh god, I'm in real trouble, aren't I?"

"Finally," Maagy exclaimed, "a glimmer of awareness! To whom where you to deliver your spoils?"

"He was to carry the head, not me!"

"My head."

"Yes, your... yes. I told him I couldn't. He was to take it to the Premier. I was to deliver the necklace to the emperor... Zinrahwi."

"Oh! So, it *is* Chamberlaine who wants my head. The emperor only wants my jewelry," she sneered, as she gave Mary an I-told-you-so look. "You should have just asked for it."

"Really? You would have given it to me?"

"No, you fool! I knew it. How much are you to be paid for my head?"

"Seventy-five crowns to be split between us."

"What? It's only worth seventy-five? How dare he? I'd pay at least a hundred for his! And for the necklace?"

"Included."

"Garn!" She exclaimed in exasperation but with a tinge of humor.

Mary Lu could no longer keep up the ruse of fierceness in the face of such folly. She burst into laughter. The man was befuddled. He was willing to do almost anything to be spared Maagy's wrath.

"What can I do to save myself... and most of all, my family?"

"You can start by telling me everything you know about this plan. If you are truthful and the information you give me is accurate and yields results, I might have mercy on your sorry soul. Now talk, and do not leave out even one detail."

"All I know is the first blokes botched it up."

"The first? The ones who stole my father... the king? You know about that?"

"The king is your father? You really are Princess Maagy?"

"You really are daft. Who did you think I was?"

"I only ever saw you when you came to the stables to watch the birthing. You weren't dressed as royalty."

"What do you mean they botched it?"

"They were supposed to get both of you, but they couldn't find you. I didn't realize... anyway, they took him alone. Apparently, the emperor was furious."

"So sorry to disappoint. How do you know all this? Were you in on the first attempt, too?"

"No. No, I swear it! I wasn't anywhere near. This is the only time I've been involved. Word gets round, gossip. Information spreads throughout. I've never done anything like this. There are others."

"Others? Other infiltrators are here in the palace?"

"I suppose you could call them that."

"Yes, I suppose I could," she bellowed. "Who are they? How many? *Where* are they?"

"That I don't know."

"I'll kill you if you're lying!" Mary promised.

"No! I swear it on my mother's life! It's all kept very secretive. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing."

"How do you pass information?"

"The delivery wagons up the back road, that's one way."

"The only vulnerable access... Daddy always said so."

"How many? Do you know who any of them are?" Mary growled, her anger building. "You had better tell the truth or your six children will grow up in the dungeon."

"All right, all right! I swear to you, I know only a few. Davenport is one... his son, also."

"What? Peter Davenport?" Maagy questioned. "I've known him for over three years. He's helped me on and off my horse more times than I can count. All those times he's been plotting my undoing. I'll kill him with my bare hands if my father is harmed. Who else?"

"There are two other stablemen, but that's all I know. I swear it. They keep it all hush-hush. I just know it's been going on for years... bringing people in."

Maagy was shocked at the heinous revelations. Her home was no longer her sanctuary. Everyone who had come into the household in the last decade was suspect, including Court members. She felt defiled, betrayed, sickened by the violation. She calmed her rage and turned her attention back to the most urgent task at hand, her father's welfare.

"Do you know where my father is being held?"

"Yes. They threw him in a dungeon. The emperor intends to torture the old man..."

"He is not an old man! He is His Royal Majesty King Henry. Address him properly," she insisted, her fingers around his throat.

"Whatever you say. He's a stubborn old fool."

Maagy's anger and frustration overtook her better judgment. She backhanded Whettle across the face knocking him to the floor.

"One more disrespectful reference to my father and the next swat will be my blade across your neck," she warned, as she got on her knees and put her face to his ear. "I'll get the information I need from... perhaps your wife... or your mother... or *your* father."

“No! No, please! Not my family, *please!* Do not harm my family. They know nothing of this. They are innocents.”

She grabbed him around the neck again and squeezed as she spoke. “The King is *my* family and I will do whatever I must to find him and bring him home alive. So, no more nonsense, tell me what I want to know.”

She let go and stood up abruptly. He gasped for air, as Mary helped set him upright in the chair.

“As you wish. I’ll tell you all I know. Just please... do not harm my family.”

“Then start talking.”

“This is hearsay you understand, but what I gather is the emperor intends to torture and then kill the old man. *I mean the king.*”

“What? What did you say? Kill him? Not collect ransom?”

“Rumor has it, your father killed his father, so he’s out for revenge, but he wants him to suffer first.”

“Oh, dear god,” Maagy whispered, as she became weak and turned away.

“If you are saying these things to distract Her Highness from her mission, I will kill you myself and your family without hesitation,” Mary vowed through gritted teeth, her dagger at his throat.

“No, no, I promise you. You wanted the whole truth. There it is. He... the emperor... had planned to behead you in front of him to make him suffer even more before killing him. He’d have that crystal and his revenge, but you were nowhere to be found. Zinrahwi was enraged. Word has it, he slaughtered every one of those who failed to bring you to him. So, when a message came to get your head with the necklace, we knew we must succeed... or else. That’s all I know. I swear on the lives of my children. I only did this... because... we desperately need the money. We want to return to our home.”

The magnitude of the wicked plot was more than Maagy could comprehend. She walked away and sat down trying to come to grips. Mary took over the interrogation.

“He sent you a message? How? Who brought it to you? How did he get it inside the palace?”

“The bird brought it. It flew in over the wall.”

“*Bird?* You’re saying a little birdie told you? You don’t like your head much, do you?”

“No! I mean yes, I love my head! And yes, in a manner of speaking, a bird told us. A pigeon brought the message... a homing pigeon.”

“A what kind of pigeon?”

“Homing or messenger pigeon when they carry information. They are birds bred to return to the place they were hatched and raised. The Emperor took some of our birds with him and... surreptitiously... left some of his birds here... as did the Premier. It’s a fairly common way to convey information. When one wishes to send a message, one writes it on a piece of paper, folds it to be very small, and ties it to the bird’s leg. The bird is released and goes home where it came from. The message goes with it. It works both ways.”

“That’s it. That was his plan all along,” Maagy spoke up suddenly in control, as she sprang to her feet and joined Mary. “He created that meeting in January... that fiasco... to smuggle in birds and more subversives. Did you bring birds from Senecia?”

“No, no! No! God, no! She did.”

“Who?” Mary demanded.

“His daughter. They were her pets.”

“Martha Chamberlaine brought the damned pigeons?” Maagy fumed.

“She’s the one who raises them. She has for years.”

Maagy was flabbergasted. She wondered if Rudolpho knew just how devious his dear fiancée. Could she even trust him again after hearing this? She couldn’t go off on that tangent. She couldn’t allow for such distraction. She had to stay focused on the tasks at hand of finding her father. He was her first priority. Determining the scope of infiltration into Avington Palace was of secondary importance at the moment. She would set Lord Farnsworth upon that task.

“In January, how did the Emperor know the exact time of my arrival?”

“I... I... don’t know... what...”

“Stop! I see the look on your face. I hear the hesitation in your voice. You are concocting a lie. A very poor choice!”

“A bird, it was a bird brought the message you were coming. They had a lookout to notify him of your arrival.”

“Do you know who sent the message and from whence it came?” Mary inquired.

“It came from the west... far off I heard... someone said that military post near the Aradinian border.”

“Crittenton military post?”

“Sounds right.”

“Who released the bird? Do you know?”

“No, only he was some muckety-muck’s son.”

Maagy took Mary by the arm. They walked away and spoke in whispers.

“Mary, my head is spinning. How can I trust Rudolpho to help me find Father when he could have been complicit in this whole thing!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Some muckety-muck’s son?”

“*Rudolpho?* Have you lost your mind, Maagy?”

“Mary, he was there just a week before that meeting. Perhaps he was in league with someone there. Suppose he brought in the bird?”

“Rudolpho had nothing to do with this. I’m sure of it. He’d kill that plague-sore<sup>2</sup> if he knew she helped that evil bastard Zinrahwi!”

“Then who is it? How can you be sure? He’s betrothed to her. How could he *not* know? Oh god! This just gets worse and worse!”

“I know because I’ve watched him. He’s an honorable man, Maagy. He worships the ground you walk on and would never do anything to hurt you.”

“*Really?*” Maagy said glaring an ironic look.

“When are you going to stop holding that grudge?”

“When Hell freezes over! He was there at Academy in January. How can you be so certain he is not responsible?”

“How can that thought even cross your mind? You know him, Maagy! You know his heart!”

“Do I?”

“Well, consider this. He saved your life when those two cadets were planning your demise.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Shakespearian coined word; insult toward a woman of undesirable character.

“Perhaps a cover for his real intention.”

“He warned you about the Premier, did he not? Why would he do that if he were plotting with him?”

“Why would he indeed? Especially since he is betrothed to his daughter. Perhaps another deception.”

“And that... the whole betrothal business... it’s been going on supposedly for almost two years. Who have you ever known to drag out a commitment that long? If you ask me, he has no intention of marrying that trollop.”

“Then why not break it off?”

“I don’t know the answer, but when you returned to Crittenton, you told me that Cecily told you he was as cold as ice toward her. You saw it for yourself. There is definitely something amiss there. And I might add, you told me he had broached the subject of your Début, but you wouldn’t let him explain! Perhaps what he had to say would have cleared up a lot of misconception. All I know in my gut is that Prince Rudolpho is not a part of this horrendous scheme.”

“Perhaps you’re right. I’d like to trust him... at least for his father’s sake... and for Daddy’s.”

“Your emotional entanglements aside, I’m sure he is working on your behalf to bring His Majesty home.”

“I cannot think about this now. Back to the problem. Zinrahwi demanded I be present at that so-called meeting. He must have got word to someone to expect my departure. But who could have known I was even coming here, much less when I might arrive? Did you tell anyone?”

“Me? I didn’t even know you were gone until I returned to quarters before evening meal. Apparently, Wesley was concerned about your absence and asked the Commandant, since we were bound to guard you. He told me.”

“Wesley? Well, we know it wasn’t he.”

“Someone here, perhaps,” Mary began to flesh out. “Someone either eavesdropped upon your father or someone he trusted with the information that he’d sent for you was in on it.”

“Someone got word to...” Maagy added.

“Someone at Academy,” Mary completed the thought.

“Benefit of the doubt... if not Rudolpho... then a classmate?”

“It’s the only way,” Mary agreed. “Could one of your escorts have been the culprit?”

“No, none of them is a muckety muck’s son. They were all hand-picked by the Commandant. All were well scrutinized... unless... one of them was overheard saying he was going to Avington. My god, Mary, you’re right. It was someone there, and Rudy was long gone by then. Of course, he wasn’t in on it. What was I thinking?”

“Finally! The only other muckety-muck’s sons there besides Wesley were Rob and Joe.”

“But their Berensenian roots go back as far as mine,” Maagy interrupted, “and besides, Rob was smitten with me. He wouldn’t have done.”

“There was Owanu Obuku. His father is a Darhambian muckety-muck. Owanu was mysteriously expelled in February,” Mary said emphatically. “Didn’t you have some nasty run-in with him a few years ago?”

“Yes, but...”

“But nothing! He’s not a nice person and was a constant thorn in your side, despite your efforts to make peace, and his father is a close ally of Zinrahwi, is he not?”

“Appearances would say so. However, Chieftain Obuku has been walking on both sides of the fence. He is actually our ally. His son might be a different story. Keep this all to yourself, Mary. Tell no one about any of this information. We’ll figure out what to do with it later, but for now we must concentrate on finding my father.”

“Of course, whatever you say.”

Maagy was distraught at the idea of the king suffering in a dungeon while Zinrahwi played his cruel games. She was even more furious. She went back to Whettle and put her knee in his lap squarely on his family jewels. Her dagger was again at his throat, and her face close to his. She spoke slowly through gritted teeth.

“Is... my... father... *still... alive?*”

“Yes,” he squeaked, as she put more weight on her knee.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, quite sure. The emperor wants to show him your head before killing him. He’s being held in the ancient fortress southeast of here. It’s the one in the foothills of the Sagamathias. I believe they call it Woodsedge Turret.”

Maagy stood up and sheathed her weapon. Her emotions were fighting to pour out, but she maintained composure.

“Mary Lu,” she whispered in desperation, “we must get him out of there. He cannot suffer any longer for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mother died at the hands of Zinrahwi’s father, and now Daddy is in a dungeon because... because of who I am. This is not the emperor’s first attempt on me.”

“Clementine?” Mary said, immediately realizing the reference.

“I believe so. He must have thought I had the amulet back then.”

“Did you?”

“No. I told you, I got it on my sixteenth birthday. Mother had given it to Grandma Polly for safekeeping. Those men have never given any information as to who sent them or why. They are deathly afraid. They would rather languish in our dungeon than face the wrath of pure evil. He is obsessed with this crystal and now apparently revenge and will obviously stop at nothing to get both,” she stated angrily, as her thoughts began to race. “We must get Father out of there. I may have an idea.”