

Chapter 10
Tomfoolery

The summer heat was oppressive. July and August were always hot, but this year seemed worse than ever. Perhaps it was the close living and working conditions the cadets were forced to share. Perhaps Maagy perceived it to be hotter because she had never spent a summer in the flatlands in the south of Berensenia. Her last three summers were at Whitmore Estate, which was like no other place on Earth.

The first two months of training were complete. A mandatory all-day master class was scheduled for the weekend. Top students in each of the disciplines would show off their skills in blades, archery, and hand-to-hand martial arts. The Masters would supervise while the students gave the other cadets a taste of what they were going to encounter. Maagy and Mary had finished the worst part of training at the top of their company and would assist Master Fong in a demonstration. Not even cold baths at the end of a punishing day could alleviate the oppressive temperature. As soon as they put on nightgowns, from which they had also removed the sleeves, the heat sat on them like an elephant. They agreed it was necessary to open the windows to let in whatever breeze might stir in the middle of the night. They didn't expect anything else to be stirring. They had finally fallen asleep, only to be awakened by something scratching at their door.

"Mary," Maagy whispered, "do you hear that?"

"Yes. What do you suppose it is?" She replied as the scratching continued.

"A raccoon? A squirrel?"

"What should we do?"

"Well... apparently, it's not going away," Maagy grouched after several more scratches.

"Suppose it's a rat? I hate rats! I can deal with raccoons and squirrels... snakes... bugs... most any other animal. But I hate rats!"

"What? The fearless Spitfire afraid of a teensy weensy wittle wat?"

"Oh stop, Brat, you're afraid of spiders!"

"Well, I'm fairly certain it's not one of those. I suppose *I'll* have to shoo it away. Oh bother!"

Maagy didn't light the lantern, as there was enough moonlight to see her way round. She went to the door, turned the lock, and flipped the latch. As she did, the door burst open and in fell Timothy, Wesley, and Patrick. They were climbing over each other and giggling like schoolgirls.

"Quick, *shut the door!* *Shhhhhh...* we're not here," Wesley slurred and then buried his head in Tim's back to stifle a giggle."

"Wesley? Tim! Who else is that? *Patrick?* What *the hell* are you doing here?"

"Shhh... shhh... shhh... we're *not* here, *Shhhhh*, shh! We... shh... are... *not... here,*" Patrick hissed through shushes.

"Yes you are," Mary contradicted.

"No! No... no, we are *not...* here..." Tim reiterated. "Shhh! Where are we? Mary... what are you doing here? You're so pretty."

"Oh my god, you three are *inebriated*!" Maagy exclaimed.

"How dare you call us names," Patrick chimed in.

With that all three rolled on the floor laughing hysterically again.

“Hush, you bobolynes*, someone will hear you and all our arses will be in the sling,” Maagy chided.

“You’re knee-walking boryeyed*,” Mary added. “And do not even *try* getting on my good side with compliments, Timothy Mottistone. What in Heaven’s name has possessed you?”

“Pure love... and a lot of illicit* libation*,” he guffawed as he buried his face in his hands to smother the sound.

“Oh dear lord.”

“Do you realize you could be expelled immediately if you’re caught?” Maagy scolded. “And now you’ve dragged us into it!”

“That’s why... we... are *not*... I repeat... *not* here,” Patrick mumbled as he stumbled into the lavatory.

Just then there came a tap at the door. All five froze in place. There was another tap. Wesley was on the floor at Maagy’s feet. He grabbed her gown and pulled her down toward him to whisper in her ear.

“We’re not here... *please*,” he begged almost at the point of crying-drunk tears.

She yanked her gown from his hand and glared at him so hard he could see it even in moonlight.

“What would Cecily think of you at this moment?”

She went to the door and spoke through it without opening it feigning* just waking up.

“What? Who is it? Cadet Wentworth here.”

“Sorry for the bother at this hour, Mam, but we’re looking for three men who are absent without leave from their bunks...”

Before the sentry guard could say anything further, Maagy responded with righteous indignation.

“And you come *here*? You come to our door *at this hour*? What are you implying, Sir?”

“Nothing, Mam... Your Highness. No implication at all! Just wondering if...”

“Just wondering what? If they’re in *here*? How dare you? You know it is strictly forbidden. And... I am the Crown Princess!”

She had used her ace up the sleeve, the ‘*Crown Princess*’ card, even though she had sworn she would never do. She glared back at the boys and gritted her teeth.

“No... no... of course not! Sorry for the wake up, Your Highness. It won’t happen again... I promise! So sorry! Leaving now.”

“I should hope not. See to it that you do!”

Maagy listened at the door for a few painfully long seconds and then went to window and peeked out to be sure the searchers had left. The others were still frozen in place afraid to breathe. When she was sure they were safe, she whirled round to the boys.

“I cannot believe you jackasses have put us in this pickle!” She spit through gritted teeth. “Oh holy lord, please tell me I didn’t actually tell a lie. Even when I try so hard *not* to I always end up in some sort of intrigue.”

“You didn’t. You went on the offensive first. They never asked anything and you never... *really*... denied anything. So, I think you’re good. But what are we going to do with these sacks of fermented corn?” Mary wondered.

“Honey...” Tim giggled.

“Don’t *Honey*’me,” she growled.

“No... honey. Not corn... honey. The hooch... fermented honey,” he snickered finding his own humor ever so amusing.

“*Mead?* That’s what you’ve been drinking? Where on Earth did you get mead? *No! Never mind!* Don’t tell us! We don’t want to be any more complicit in this chicanery,” Maagy fumed.

The whispered banter was going on between the girls and Tim. He was sitting on the floor with his back propped against the wall grinning at Mary like a Cheshire cat. In the meantime, Wesley had flopped across Maagy’s bunk and fallen asleep. Patrick had crawled into their bathtub for a snooze. Maagy grabbed hold of Wesley’s shirt to pull him off her bed and discovered he was dripping wet.

“Wesley, Wake up! You’re ruining my bed,” she demanded ever mindful of how thin the wall between their Barracks and the men’s.

She rolled him over and he hit the floor with a thud, which woke him.

“Huh? What?”

“Why are you all wet?”

“I love you, Maagy.”

“Yes, I know, Ducky. Why the hell are you all wet?”

“No, I mean it. I *really* love *you*, Maagy.”

“I know, Duck and Maagy forever... sister and brother... forever. I love you, too, but why are your clothes wet?”

“We went fishing at the creek... the lake... and drinking mead... we were drinking... at the creek, the lake.”

“He caught one, too,” Tim said proudly.

“You don’t generally go *into* the water to fish,” Mary chided.

“You do if you’re catchin’ em’ by hand,” Wesley added smugly.

“Oh lord...” Maagy sighed as she sat on her bunk and then sprang up. “Damn it all to hell, it’s soaked!”

“Maagy, what are we going to do? Suppose the sentry comes back?”

“We need to get all three of them into the lavatory and shut the door so no one will hear them.”

“We have to get them out of here,” Mary said.

“They’re in no condition to be sent out now. They’ll surely be caught and given the boot before daybreak.”

“Then let’s pour tea down their gullets until they sober up,” Mary suggested. “I’ll get Tim. You get Wesley.”

“Wesley, you sopping wet lump, get up,” Maagy demanded. “No! Don’t! You’ll fall over.”

She straddled him and wrapped her arms round his middle and lifted with all her might.

“Good god, you’re heavy! Come on, Duck... hand forward... now knee. There you go, one in front of the other. Good boy,” she persuaded as she guided him along.

“Timothy Mottistone, if you don’t get your sorry carcass into that lavatory, I’m going to... come on. For a lanky man, you surely are heavy! Where’s Digger?”

They dragged and pushed and coaxed the barely-coherent revelers into the lavatory where they found Patrick peacefully sleeping in the tub.

“Found him,” Mary announced. “I’ll put on the kettle. You get the cups and the tea.”

They proceeded to make the boys drink various combinations of teas, some meant only for medicinal purposes like relieving menstrual cramps or constipation. The worse they tasted the better. The drunken revelers were finally able to stand on their own.

“You two are no fun at all,” Wesley grimaced as he sipped the foul-tasting brew.

The girls escorted them, one at a time, surreptitiously round the building to their own door. Somehow, miraculously they didn’t get caught. By the time all was done it was quite late, or early, depending upon the interpretation. At any rate, none of them got much sleep that night.

“Wesley *does* love you, you know?”

“I know. I love him too,” Maagy returned nonchalantly as she changed her wet sheets.

“No, I mean he really loves you, as in he is in love with you.”

“Oh don’t be silly, we are like brother and sister. He’s in love with Cecily and they are wonderful together. She worships the ground he walks on.”

“Be that as it may, I’ve seen the two of you together for the last three years. All I can say is none of my brothers looks at me the way Wesley looks at you, and thank God they don’t!”

“Nooo...”

“Everyone here thinks you are courting and just keeping it quiet.”

“*What?*” Oh for god sake, I hope Gerald doesn’t take any of that back to Cecily.”

“Has he known... all along?”

“Of course! We’ve discussed our relationship many times. He knows there is no romance about it.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“Then what? Mary, may we discuss whatever is on your mind tomorrow? I need sleep.”

“Did you tell Wesley you were planning to attend Academy and not me?”

“No! I never told anyone! Actually... that isn’t completely accurate,” she admitted realizing yet another unintended deception. “I did tell *someone*. I told John Miles. I swore him to secrecy as his Crown Princess. I forced him to train me with Cupid. Oh god...”

“John Miles? You trained with him while you were training with my father and me? That was an entire year! You swore you had not planned to come here. Now you tell me John Miles knew all along? And you didn’t trust me with it? You lied to me... *yet again!*”

“No, I didn’t lie! I mean, I didn’t *mean* to lie. I didn’t realize...”

“You didn’t *mean* to lie? How does someone *not* mean to lie? You don’t even know when you’re rolling over people. You put on your blinders and plow forward with only your own goals in mind. *Garn**, Maagy, How do you live with yourself?”

“Mary... please, I’m sorry! I’m so very... very sorry. I didn’t think of it when I said I only just decided...”

“Enough! Please... Maagy! Stop talking!”

They lay back down on their bunks. After a long moment of silence, they spoke only enough to agree they would make the boys' lives Hell the next day. At breakfast Maagy took her tray and plopped down beside Wesley. He had only black coffee and a blistering hangover. She had eggs and bacon and biscuits and oatmeal and hot tea.

"What's the matter, Wesley, no stomach for breakfast? Nice hot... *slimy* oatmeal... eggs... soft boiled?"

"Oh. Stop it, Maagy. You're cruel."

"You have no idea. Wait until master class in a few minutes. All of us will be together for the entire day. Mary and I decide the skills we work since we have top marks in our unit. Your derrière is mine, Wesley Applegate. You're going to pay for my lack of sleep and the risk I took for you and those two other blind mice."

Needless to say, combat instruction was brutal. The girls drove the hung-over boys mercilessly. While Mary and Maagy worked in concert to punish them, they did not speak more than two words to each other. By the end of the day Wesley, Patrick, and Timothy were only too willing to go to bed without dinner and before sundown.

Commandant Ballentyne sent word for Maagy to report to his office forthwith the next morning. She was terrified they had been found out. She was sure they were all being dismissed from the program. When she arrived, she was surprised to discover she was the only one called.

"Cadet Wentworth reporting as ordered, Commandant Ballentyne, Sir."

"Come in, Cadet. Close the door."

"Cadet Wentworth at your service, Sir. You wished to see me, Sir?"

"Yes, Cadet, you may stand at ease. Do you know the rules?"

"Pardon me, Sir?"

"Do you know the rules here? Do you know what you may and may not do whilst in training?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you respect those rules?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Would you blatantly and willingly seek to break those rules?"

"No, Sir."

"But you would help a friend in need, would you not?"

"I would, Sir."

"What is more important, abiding by the rules or abiding by your friendships?"

"Pardon... Sir? I'm not sure what you're asking."

"What is more important, rules or loyalty?"

"They are... of equal importance... Sir."

Maagy was beginning to become weak in the knees. She desperately hoped the Commandant would not ask her a direct question about the mead incident. She did not want to make a spur-of-the-moment decision, which might have led her to make the wrong choice and further complicate the situation. He stood and came round his desk. He walked round her menacingly, and then drew close looking her in the eye with his ever-famous steely stare.

"Good answer. You know... sometimes keeping a secret... is its own best punishment."

Maagy did not respond. She was frozen as she looked into his eyes. Tears began to well in spite of the tough exterior she had developed in the last eight weeks. However, she stood firm and fought back the urge to spin a tale of explanation, which would have probably, eventually evolved into a fib. She was proud of her resolve to keep her mouth shut.

“That is all, Cadet, as you were. You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you, Sir. Cadet Wentworth at your service, Commandant Ballentyne.”

She turned on her heels and beat a hasty retreat before he could change his mind and ask one more vague question. He smiled devilishly as she shut the door behind her. Maagy caught up with Mary on her way to the next class, and they whispered as they walked.

“Why were you called to the Commandant?”

“I’m not sure. Did you tell him I lied to you?”

“*What? No*, for god sake! Who do you think I am?”

“Then he knows, Mary... about the boys.”

“What do you mean?” She demanded as she stopped in her tracks.

“Keep walking. He asked me all sorts of ambiguous questions related to my knowledge of the rules... and my loyalty to friends... and which was more important. I’m telling you he knows.”

“Then why are all of us *not* out on our arses?”

“I’ve no idea, but he let me know *he* knows without asking me a single direct question about the incident.”

“I’m going to murder those boys!”

“I think we almost did, yesterday.”

“Why only you? Why not the rest of us?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“He’s toying with us,” Mary concluded.

Nothing more was ever mentioned about the mead incident by anyone, especially not Timothy, Wesley, or Patrick.

Unbeknownst to anyone except those involved in the decision, King Henry had presented an idea to his friend Jean-Pierre a few years ago and had introduced him to Nemtuc Yem. Knowing Doctor Yem to be a fine surgeon and scientist in the Huggermugger world, King Henry thought it time he finally come into the open as a representative for his kind. Through lengthy discussions Nemtuc and the Commandant came to the conclusion that Herbals, Wild Foods, and Field Medicine would be the best fit for his instruction. So when women were going to be present in military training, Henry reasoned the time was right to really shake things up and introduce Huggermuggers as intelligent beings, not mythical vermin. Henry also knew that Nemtuc had done all the pertinent research and thesis writing necessary and had received his honors as Knight of Letters and Science of the Commonwealth of Realms. Master Yem bravely accepted the challenge.

So far, two companies had rotated through the duel sessions of foraging and stargazing as they were jokingly referred. It was now Alpha Company’s turn. Maagy wondered how the other cadets who had met Nemtuc had reacted to meeting a Huggermugger, as most people still thought them the stuff of legend. Her father had not spoken a word of it to her, so she was as surprised as anyone by his presence. Since any sort of tale carrying or speaking disparagingly of anyone was a

direct violation of the Cadet Code of Conduct, there had been no chatter from the other cadets. Still, Maagy knew there were some very conservative fundamentalists who were probably none too pleased at being instructed by a non-human, just as they were prejudice against the presence of women in training. She suspected it was why Commandant Balentyne had not revealed Master Yem's species at the orientation. Unfortunately, Maagy had not found the time to clue Mary in on the unusual circumstances. Both girls were looking forward to this rotation, as Maagy had spent so much time at Whitmore Estate, and Mary was raised on a farm. They figured it would be an easy assignment. As they entered the classroom Mary shrieked, jumped behind Maagy, and pulled her backwards out the door.

"What on Earth is the matter, Mary? Have you lost your mind?"

"There is a *giant* rat in that room! *It's wearing clothes!* I cannot go in there!"

"Mary, keep your voice down, for heaven sake! That is not a rat. It's Master Yem, Master Nemtuc Yem."

"He looks like a rat, the *biggest one* I've ever seen."

"*Hush, Mary!* You know my friend Wwinsbo at Whitmore? I've told you about him. That is his father!"

"You... *know...* that *creature*, that rat-person... rodent... person? You never told me Wwinsbo was a... *rodent.*"

"He is *not* a rodent. Neither is his father. They are Huggermuggers," Maagy whispered trying to both calm Mary and keep the other cadets from alarm. "They simply look like rodents, but they are most certainly *not*. Have you never heard of Huggermuggers?"

"I have, but I always thought them *legend...* not reality."

"They are absolutely real and quite intelligent. Their social structure... Master Yem's anyway... is quite sophisticated. He is a brilliant scientist, and he is our instructor for the next four weeks. So, I suggest you get over your *business* about rats, which he is not, pull yourself together, and get into that room or you're going to be out on your arse!"

As the other students trickled in, the sight of the diminutive professor took them aback. They cautiously took their seats amid whispers and snickers at a terrified Mary as well as the odd-looking fellow standing atop the teaching podium. There were many questions and some awkward moments, but none as awkward as Mary sitting on the floor in the very back of the room ready to bolt out the door in an instant. Maagy decided to show solidarity and sat next to her smiling at Master Yem without acknowledging familiarity. He took it all in stride and, in fact, was more understanding than he could have been. Noticing Mary's position and demeanor, he hopped off the podium and walked slowly toward her and sat on the floor in front of her. She cringed toward Maagy, but stayed put.

"Why so fearful, Cadet Gray? No youtle nonen whotle Nemtuc Yem?"

"What? I mean... excuse me... Master... Sir?"

"He said, 'Don't you know who he is?'"

"Oh... yes... Sir. No... Sir. Now I do... Sir."

"Why so fearful?"

"Go ahead, Mary. Tell him the truth. He'll understand," she whispered reassuringly.

"When I was very small... Sir... a rat... in the barn... bit me," she managed to whisper.

The other cadets began to cut their eyes at one another and chuckle. Master Yem whirled round and gave them all a frightful scowl baring his teeth, which shut them up immediately.

“Continue, Cadet Gray,” he whispered inching closer for a more intimate conversation.

“I was trying to play with her babies. She bit my finger very hard. It caused a raging fever. They thought I would die. I’ve been terrified ever since... Sir... Master Yem... Sir. I apologize.”

“Nonen need. Good reason. Nemtuc Yem nonen rat,” he said as he addressed the entire company. “Nonen rodent. Look likem, but nonen. Nemtuc Yem Huggermugger. Many flabelies Huggermugger colony libon ubentummel.”

“Nonen means not,” Maagy leaned in and whispered. “He said he and his family are not rats or rodents and his colony is underground.”

“Oh, I see. You speak the language?”

“Yes, Winnsbo has been tutoring me. There are also tree-dwellers, forest-dwellers, and some live-in caves. As I said highly sophisticated societies.”

“Excuse me, Master Yem, Sir,” Rob said bravely raising his hand to say what no one else would. “I am at your service, Sir. We do not understand some of your words, Sir. My apologies, Sir.”

Nemtuc smiled slightly and acknowledged his concerns.

“Cadet Bradbury habe... have good point. Nemtuc be more careful. Mace youtle... you ubenstam... understand.”

“I realize I have made a mistake, Master, Sir,” Mary said ever so embarrassed. “You are not a rat.”

“Youtle sit in tshair at table. More comfort. We begin stuben... study. Nemtuc teatsh in hukan language from now on so stubeners... students learn lessons well.”

Mary did as instructed not wishing to lose ground in her classes. She finally relaxed and warmed up to Master Yem, as did the other cadets. He exuded an air of knowledge and authority, which reassured everyone under his tutelage that he was much more than his looks. In fact, Mary performed exceptionally well in the class once she concentrated on the material and not the Masters appearance.

When evening sessions began outside with Master Kringle, Maagy was like the cat-that-ate-the-mouse. She knew, however, she should not be too familiar with Grandpa Kris in the presence of the other cadets. She had put it together why he was so scarce upon occasion during summer holiday. He was here. Mary had only been to Whitmore Estate one time for Maagy’s Début. There had been so much activity and Rudolpho’s monumental *faux pas** that she had not had the opportunity to meet Grandpa Kris. She had only seen him at a distance. When she realized Master Niclaus Kringle was ‘Grandpa’ Maagy talked about, she was thunderstruck.

“Isn’t that your Grandpa, your Grandpa Kris?”

“It is,” Maagy admitted, about to burst at the seams.

“Kringle?” Mary whispered. “Really?”

“Is there a point to that look on your face?” Maagy returned with a smug grin.

“The Grandpa Kris you talk about is Master Niclaus *Kringle*?”

“Niclaus Kristopher Kringle... so?”

“And you didn’t think it pertinent to tell me?”

“You didn’t think it pertinent to tell me your father was a Master here?”

“It never came up in conversation.”

“Neither did Grandpa Kris,” Maagy sniped.

“Nor Master Yem!” Mary countered. “Grandpa Kris’s last name is Kringle?”

“Yes,” Maagy responded, maintaining an air of mystery. “So?”

“Anything... *about that...* you’d like to share?”

“No.”

“Grandpa... Kris... *Kringle?*”

“Kringle is quite a common name *in Skodinovia...* as is Kristopher,” Maagy quipped. “I think.”

“Oh, I see! Well, this is not Skodinovia.”

“But I think his ancestry might be.”

“Never mind! Just... *never mind!*” Mary said a bit louder than she had intended.

“Cadets Wentworth and Gray, is there something you’d like to share with the entire class?” Master Kringle asked pointedly.

“*No Sir, Master Kringle. Apologies, Sir!*” They both chimed in unison.

There was no more discussion of Master Kringle, *Kris Kringle* or Grandpa Kris. No other explanation was necessary. The men in the company struggled with both constellation and mushroom identification. For most of them navigation and wild foods were as foreign as Francinése. Maagy was frustrated at times as she felt she was being held back, so her attitude was not as humble as it should have been. It probably contributed to both girls being included in an annual Academy ritual in the dog days of summer.

It was now close to the end of August. Navigation sessions lasted well into night hours. There was a break after evening meal to allow the sun to go down and darkness to fall in order to see the stars clearly. The girls chose that time to take cool baths and dress in clean clothes. They did personal chores such as laundry and cleaning their lavatory. They had fashioned a clothesline outside their door in an isolated clump of trees. In summer heat it didn’t take long for everything to dry, even after dark. They had washed a few shirts, nightgowns, and undergarments and had hung them out before class. Master Kringle had been particularly enthusiastic and had carried instruction over the usual time. The girls were practically sleepwalking when they returned and went straight in, put on nightgowns, and fell into bed. The next morning, they had met Master Fong for an early run before workout. By the time they had run round the lake and back to the courtyard, dawn was breaking and the sun was creeping up.

That’s when they saw it. The giant mighty oak tree in the center of campus was decorated from top to bottom with *undergarments*. Some snow white, some not so much so. *Undergarments* of all sizes and style preferences were waving in morning breeze. Mary and Maagy had not been spared humiliation. Their pantaloons and camisoles were flying high along with their nightgowns and twenty or thirty more pairs of men’s drawers.

“Holy mother of pearl!” Maagy exclaimed as she took in the sight. “Who the hell did that? Oh, begging pardon, Master Fong, Sir.”

The three of them stood staring up at the spectacle, Master Fong in veiled disgust trying to hide his amusement, Maagy and Mary Lu in *utter* disbelief.

"I see women were not spared from the annual flag raising, as it is called," he observed.

"Flags? I'd *say* they were *flags* of a certain style," Mary reiterated with her mouth dropped open.

"Thank God they're clean," Maagy added.

"If your goal was to be accepted as '*fellows*'," Fong whispered, "I believe you have achieved it."

"This has happened before?" Mary asked.

"Every year. The summer heat tends to addle the brain round this time. Mischievous is the result," he answered quietly.

Somehow, the way he spoke made his words seem like great wisdom.

"Who should we *thank* for this attractive bit of art, Sir?" Maagy asked.

"No one ever knows. No one takes credit. But somehow the legend is passed year to year, and here we are."

"Hmm, here we are *indeed!*"

"What are you thinking, Maagy?" Mary asked knowing that look on her face. "Are you angry?"

"I've chosen to *not* get angry. I shall, however... *get even.*"

To Maagy's own surprise she was remarkably calm about her underthings on display for all to see. Most of the men... *boys*... had probably never seen their own mother's clothing hung out to dry. A lady's '*dainties*'* were never seen outside her bureau drawer by anyone except herself or her husband if she were married. And yet, here were the personal garments of the Crown Princess of the Commonwealth *flying high*. She was already planning revenge. The rest of the early morning workout group began trickling into the courtyard, all with the same initial expressions on their faces. Some burst out laughing. Some tried to hide their delight with feigned expressions of horror. Some went red-faced with embarrassment. Eventually, all snickered at the display.

"Think it's funny, do you?" Maagy snarled as she confronted several of them face-to-face. "We'll see how funny it is when I *exact** my sweet comeuppance."

Wesley had joined the morning group, as had Rob Bradbury and Joe Ferguson from Alpha Company, and Ohno Sistrunk and Gerald Reece from Beta. Those she confronted shrank away with looks of absolute fear on their faces... except Wesley... who did a poor job of hiding his smirk. Whether they feared her or her father more was of no consequence. She was thoroughly tickled with her bluff, but concealed her revelry. Mary knew her well enough to know she was pulling their legs and had to turn away to keep from laughing out loud. The two of them had come a very long way toward being accepted by their peers and toward accepting they were fodder for teasing.

"Which one of you gallant gentlemen is going to climb that tree and retrieve our undergarments?" Maagy chortled.

She looked for signs of guilt among the faces present. After all, criminals always return to the scene of the crime.

"What? No takers? None of you brave enough to climb the tree? Or is it you're not brave enough to touch a lady's pantaloons?"

Their eyes darted from one to the other, all wondering if anyone would speak up and volunteer. Master Fong interceded.

"Cadet Wentworth, Cadet Gray, are you here to work or play?"

“Work, Master Fong. At your service, Sir,” Maagy retorted.

They continued the conditioning regimen, somewhat shortened because of the distraction, and broke for breakfast leaving the flags flapping in the wind. By mid day meal every person in Crittenton including the garrison soldiers had seen the decorated oak tree. By evening Maagy had enough. She marched to the base of the tree as many cadets looked on taking wagers as to who had done it. She pulled off her boots and jumped to grab hold of a lower branch. She swung her leg over it and climbed on. The men, and even Mary for that matter, were stunned she was so agile and so bold as to actually attempt climbing the tree. Women did *not* climb trees any more than they appeared in public with bare arms.

She stood on the first branch and began carefully picking her way up until she came to the first pair of men’s drawers. She pointed to them with a disgusted grimace on her face.

“Whose are these? Anyone recognize them? Anyone want them back?”

Of course, they were all too embarrassed to speak up even if the owner were in the crowd at the bottom.

“No? Fine then! You valiant gentlemen can come up here and get your own damned drawers!”

She continued upward, as whoever created the masterpiece hung hers and Mary’s things as high as possible for all to see. She reached and picked and threw down nighties, pantaloons, and camisoles while those below gasped at each higher branch she reached. She was so focused on the task of getting the clothing she didn’t notice how high she was, that is until she reached the last piece, threw it to Mary, and looked down. It occurred to her that she had never actually climbed a tree. She had only ventured as high the lowest branch of the ancient tree at the back gate of Whitmore. The first realization of the height and precarious route she would have to follow to return to Earth gave her palpitations. She looked up quickly and held steadfast to the trunk.

“Oh, sweet mother of pearl, what have I done?” She whispered.

Her hands began shaking. She didn’t think she would ever take another breath. Her mouth went dry. Her vision blurred and things began to go black.

“Snap out of it, Cadet,” she told herself. “The last thing you want to do is fall out of this tree and look stupid in front of all those men. Pull it together.”

She took a few deep breaths and began her descent carefully reaching with one bare foot, then the other, never looking down. Finally, she was almost to the lowest branch. As she lowered herself down to it, Robert Bradbury stepped forward.

“Jump from there. I’ll catch you, Your Highness.”

She looked down to see him with his arms extended toward her and a sincere expression on his face. She looked round at the others on the ground. They were no longer snickering. It gave her renewed resolve.

“Thank you, Cadet Bradbury, but I can make it on my own from here.”

She crouched on the branch and jumped the six or so feet to the ground. She stood straight and tall, and brushed the dirt and bark off her clothes. She shook the leaves out of her hair and picked up her boots.

“I would have caught you, Your Highness. I really would.”

“I know, Rob. I’m sure you would have done. Thank you for offering, but I needed to finish the job *on my own*.”

By the time she was out of the tree most of the Masters had joined the cadets. As she joined Mary, spontaneous applause broke out with all watching seeming to admire of her spunk. She turned to face them.

“Just remember, he... or *she*... who laughs last *laughs best*.”

“Ahhh, ancient Eastern proverb,” Master Fong said delighted. “Well done, Cadet Wentworth, well done.”

“Thank you, Master Fong. I am at your service,” she said as she placed her hands together in a sign of respect and bowed to him.

She and Mary went off to star gazing leaving the men to fend for themselves and their underwear.

The next morning was one of the rare mornings when all the cadets had free time to rest, do personal chores, or practice skills. The Masters used the time to meet and discuss the progress of each candidate and assess his or her future going forward in training. It was not unheard of for those not performing well to be dismissed from the program. Breakfast was more leisurely, and Cook prepared something especially good to eat.

Maagy was sitting with Mary, Tim, Wesley, and James, when Rob and Joe joined them.

“Morning all,” Rob greeted cheerfully. “Good morning, Your Highness. You’re looking fresh as a daisy this morning.”

“Thank you, Rob, but please, I must insist, either Maagy or Cadet Wentworth,” she responded obviously embarrassed at the attention.

“So sorry, I have a hard time seeing you as an equal. You are royalty. As such I respect your position, but I shall do as you request.”

“Thank you.”

“Where is Digger,” Wesley asked.

“He and Gerald ate earlier,” James responded. “I think they and some other chaps are working on archery skills.”

“He is. I’m going to join them and give them some pointers in a bit,” Tim added quietly.

Tim was shy and unassuming, but a remarkably proficient archer. His classmates often asked him for extra instruction. Tim also fashioned his own bows and arrows. His father Roland had been a well-respected Artilliator* at Avington Palace, serving Queen Grace and Prince Winston. After their deaths, he continued for Melania and Henry before Maagy or Timothy was born. Roland Mottistone was an older man when he married Tim’s mother, so when Tim was born, they moved to Clementine. The family fell upon hard times due to Roland’s long illness and his inability to continue his trade. He had taught Tim the craft.

Maagy found out later from Mary that Tim had done most of the work keeping the business going until his father passed away when Tim was thirteen. Now it was something he did to remember his dad and to calm his own mind. His arrows were incredibly well balanced and accurate. Other cadets had got wind of that skill, as well, and asked for his help building their arrows. They always offered to pay him for his time and expertise, but he never accepted money, even though he could have used it. He told them he did it in his father’s name. Therefore, they should always use the arrows righteously so that they, too, would honor him. That’s just the kind of man Timothy was. He had never mentioned it, but Master Sir Phillip

Kieron was from Clementine and a friend of Roland Mottistone. The others only became aware of the connection when Sir Phillip inquired after Missus Mottistone.

"I'd like to go with you, Tim, if you don't mind. I could use the practice," Badger said.

"Me too," Mary added. "I can always use a few pointers."

"Who are you jesting, Mary? You're as good as anyone."

"I'd like to go... just the same," she responded as they walked toward the door together.

"As you wish," Tim said with a shy grin appreciating her real motive.

"You were very brave to climb that tree," Rob chortled. "What a cheeky thing for someone to do to you and Miss Gray."

"Oh no, actually, we took no offense. It was a right of passage, so to speak... a sign of acceptance. It's of no consequence."

"Rob, we need to curry our horses and clean the tack," Joe said a bit annoyed at Rob's palavering*.

"Right you are, Joe. Your High... I mean... Maagy, may I take your plate and fork if you're done?"

"Oh, well yes, thank you, Rob. That's very kind of you."

"My pleasure," he said as he smiled and bowed slightly. "Have a good morning, I'll see you in class this afternoon. Wesley, always a pleasure."

"See you."

He took the dishes to the kitchen. On his way out the door he looked back and gave Maagy a wave and another smile as Joe rolled his eyes in disgust.

"He's smitten with you, you know," Wesley said teasingly as he bumped her shoulder.

"Don't be silly."

"I'm serious. Don't you see how he's trying to impress you?"

"No..."

"Yes."

"Nooo..."

"Yeesss..."

"That's nonsense! He's just a nice boy... man... person."

"Who is head over heels..."

"Oh, stop it, Duck."

"I know, I know, you only have eyes for the handsome Estadorean."

"What?" Where did that come from? I haven't spoken to him in over a year."

"It doesn't mean you're not still pining for him. Though, I cannot imagine why after what he did to you."

"Precisely."

"Rob is a nice fellow. He's an earl, you know, quite a fine family, old world wealth."

"Since when does that matter?"

"Come on, Maagy, you're the Crown Princess. It matters... whether you want it to or not."

"I suppose. But that comment about Rudolpho... he's of no consequence in my life," she protested remembering how sad he had looked at Asanna's celebration.

“Really, Maagy? You can lie to yourself if you want, but this is Wesley here... the Duck. I’ve known you too long for you to lie to me.”

Maagy suddenly got a flash of realization. She turned to him and squinted her eyes and pursed her lips.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“*It was you, you scoundrel! You did it!*”

“What? Did what? What are you talking about?”

“The oak tree flag raising, *it was you!*”

“Maagy... what *are* you talking about? *Flag raising?*”

“Ooohh, don’t play innocent with me. You’re the only man on this campus with the *metal* to attempt such a thing. All the others fear my father’s wrath too much to hang my unmentionables in a tree. *But you*, you know he’s a big old pussycat! He’d never do anything to hurt you. Your parents are life-long friends, you devil!”

“Maagy, I’m appalled you’d think such a thing!”

“And you have that friend at Avington... that fellow whose father is Elite Guard Service. That’s how you knew about the tradition. Who else? Tim? Digger? Badger? I know it wasn’t Rob. He’s too faint-hearted to do something so bold. In fact, what’s he doing here? How’s he ever going to make it all the way through?”

“Don’t underestimate him. He may surprise you.”

“I see him in class every day, Ducky. He’s not impressive so far.”

“Give him time. Get to know him. Perhaps...”

“Oh, do not try to divert my thoughts, Wesley Applegate! I *shall* get you back for this, when you least expect it. I *shall exact* my sweet, sweet revenge on your sorry soul.”

“Why Maagy, I cannot believe after all these years... you could think I’d do such a thing to you... my dear... *darling*... friend... whom I *adore!*”

“Give it up, Duck,” she said standing up and leaning over him whispering menacingly. “When you least expect it... on my terms... on my time.”

Both were stifling laughter. As she glared and threatened it was all she could do to keep a straight face. She turned and left him sitting, dreading what elaborate scheme she would concoct to pay him back.

King Henry somehow got word of the chicanery with the oak tree, which was odd as what happened at the compound usually stayed at the compound. It was a sacred trust that no part of training was ever discussed outside the walls, not even the foolishness. He was both angered and worried about the emotional toll it might have taken on his daughter. He notified the Guard Service and set out for Crittenton forthwith. When he arrived, it was well past dark and lights were out all over campus. The Royal entourage was admitted by the night guards and led to Commandant’s quarters.

“Henry, What’s the matter? What are you doing here? I had no idea you were coming. Has something happened?”

“Sorry to wake you, Jean-Pierre. You tell me. I got word the flag raising included Mary and Maagy this year. I was so concerned for my daughter’s welfare I came immediately. How is she? Is she taking it badly? What about Mary?”

“Come in, please, come in. I’ll put on the kettle, and we’ll have a cup of tea whilst your quarters are being readied. Actually, Henry, she has taken it

amazingly well, she and Mary both. I think they view it as a sign of acceptance by their peers. The men haven't made it easy for them."

"I hadn't expected they would, but the flag raising? Really? Maagy, taking well the waving of her delicacies in front of the entire camp? I can't imagine. Do you know who it was this time?"

"I have my suspicions, but no proof. Nowhere near the good job we did, my friend!"

"We exceeded even our own expectations, didn't we, Jean-Pierre?" He reminisced as they both chuckled.

"I was ready for a backlash of tantrums and bad behavior. You had warned me, but no, none of it. She climbed the tree... to the top... and retrieved hers and Mary's things. She left the men's things flying high," Jean-Pierre said hardly able to speak for laughing. "She is resourceful and most clever. She has taken her lumps... and Mary, too for the most part... in stride."

"My Maagy taking her lumps in stride? Climbing a tree? I don't recall her ever climbing a tree... unless the low-hanging branches she sat on at Whitmore. She just might make it through this after all, Jean-Pierre."

"There were a few difficult moments in the beginning... with Fong."

"Oh good lord... Fong... of all people!"

"She's cut off her hair, you know."

"She cut her hair? Why on Earth would she cut her beautiful hair?"

"It came unfurled in hand-to-hand and Fong got tangled in it. He tossed her out of class. Instead of her having a breakdown and pitching a tantrum, she solved the problem. She cut her hair off as short as the men. She has grit, Henry. She's going to be a fine queen... a fine woman."

"Have there been any other incidences?"

"There was the shirtsleeve thing."

"Shirtsleeve?"

"The men had a decided advantage over the two women due to size and strength. Add to it the fact they could grab the girls' arms by their sleeves and overpower them even more easily. Maagy figured it out when hers got ripped. She did *not* react well, and again, Fong expelled her."

"Oh, good lord, Fong again, I should have expected as much. He is not easy!"

"She promptly with a few choice words for good measure removed the sleeves from all her shirts. She then coerced Mary to do the same," he related as he again began to laugh. "Then she did what the men have *always* done. *She greased her arms with lard!*"

"That's my girl!" Henry chuckled admiringly.

"I tell you, Henry, she's a pip... a force to be reckoned with. The flag raising was nothing. Have you forgot about Grecon Athletic Games*!"

"No! Please tell me..."

"Yes, they were invited to participate. Poor dears were completely unaware of what they were in for. It all happened before I knew it or I would have intervened. You'll be happy to know they did *not* participate."

"*But?*"

"They stayed! They cheered on the competitors! Sorry, perhaps that is not knowledge a father wishes to have about his daughter."

“Lord, have mercy on my soul! I’m a foolish old man. I’m afraid to let my daughter grow up. Here I’ve rushed to rescue her from herself, and she doesn’t need it. She doesn’t need me to fight her battles anymore. How will I save face in the morning when she gets word I’m here? What shall I say to keep her from being angry with me for coming... for embarrassing her?”

“Let me think on it, friend. We’ll come up with a good reason why *I asked you* to come. Oh, by the way, did I tell you she and Mary have the highest overall marks of all the cadets so far? They are neck and neck with their scores and out in front of everyone else.”

“Marvelous! I always knew she was exceptionally intelligent. I am so proud of her. On second thought, Jean-Pierre, let’s not tell her I was here at all. I’ll get a few winks and then sneak out before she gets up. I’ll take my time going home. I’m headed back to Avington for the winter anyway. It won’t take too long.”

“Are you sure you wish to leave without seeing her, Henry? I’m confident we could concoct a good story.”

“No, she’d see through it. She’d be mortified to think I’ve heard these stories. She’s quite perceptive. I do *not* wish to intrude upon her experience, since she is doing well. Thank you for the tea and the report. Again, sorry for the wake up.”

“Nonsense, it is my pleasure, Your Majesty. Godspeed on your journey home.”

Maagy never knew her father had come all the way there to give her emotional support. She never knew the selflessness of his decision to leave without seeing her, his arms aching for one hug. Instead, he allowed her the freedom to grow and become the woman she was meant to be.