

## **The Plot to Assassinate the Queen and the Difficult Decision She has to Make**

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The Healing Mother and the heroes traveled back to Henshu Monastery from the village Weletimen. Within a days' march of their destination, they saw in the distance a camp. A large bright wagon stood across from the campfire, gleaming in the light of the flames. A merchant. They could see a figure dressed in a bright flowing luxurious robe sitting on a huge log near the fire.

Suddenly, a rift opened up and attacked the merchant!

“Quick,” cried the Healing Mother. “To arms!”

The Healing Mother and the heroes brandished their swords and ran to aid the merchant. Swords clashed. The beasts screamed and the echo of it bounced off their chests. The earth shook with the weight of the huge monsters who stood 10 feet tall.

"The Lantern," The Healing Mother cried. She brought it out from her journey bag around her shoulders and held it high, the staff with the blue gem in her other hand.

“Be gone, foul beasts!”

They ran, their screams fading into the night. Their screams turned to cries of desperation as they vaporized one by one into the night.

A groan came from the merchant.

“He’s wounded!” Toka said, gesturing to the Healing Mother.

The Healing Mother looked the merchant over. “He’s fainted!”

She held the lantern over his prone body. “Toka, hold this.” Toka took the lantern and held it while Amaterien searched.

“He’s been hit in the head!” One of the heroes brought her some bandages. “Get some spirits!” She took out her water skin and poured out some on one of the cloths. She wiped the blood off the side of his head.

“The gash is not deep. It’s mainly he has head trauma.” She reached for a tiny vial around her neck, undid the topper, and dabbed a small dab of oily liquid on her finger. She touched the contusion on the merchant’s head with the anointed finger.

“Heal in the name of Suzaro,” she commanded.

His eyes fluttered and opened. He groaned.

“You’re alright,” said Amaterien softly. “You have had a blow to the head, but you will be fine.”

He blinked. “Where did those monsters go?” He tried to get up but sunk back, dizzy.

“We have defeated them and they ran off. They will not bother you or anyone else again.”

“Thank you kind lady!”

“It is what we do. Now let us break camp and continue on. More monsters may appear. I’ll have one of my men drive your wagon. You need to rest yet you dare not sleep again this night. You may have a concussion, and although I have applied all my healing skill with the blessing of Suzaro, these kinds of wounds take time to fully recover.”

“Yes, my lady—“

“Queen Amaterien. Or as I’m known here in Lanofeh, the Healing Mother.”

“Oh yes,” he said, “I have heard of you. I am Mazden. I am a merchant from the southland of Baralada.”

“Aw yes, your clothes and wagon make sense now. I know of the land you speak. Well, you better come with us to Henshu Monastery. You can recover there. And besides, my people always love new exciting trinkets to look at and buy!”

The merchant agreed and so they traveled through the night and made it back to Henshu Monastery just as the sun rose.

Upon arriving, the steward arranged for the merchant to occupy one of the guest quarters and had the horse master take charge of Mazden's horse and wagon.

The Healing Mother retired to her rooms and rested, with orders not to disturb her until the next morning. "Have my lady in waiting bring me my usual breakfast," she told her steward.

The next morning, after a long, beautiful sleep full of peaceful dreams, her lady in waiting brought her her quail eggs hard boiled and resting in a porcelain egg cup decorated with tiny blue roses. A bowl of raspberries and cream occupied another part of the breakfast tray, and a hot steaming cup of tea lay invitingly in the back.

Amaterien picked up the tea and sipped it, a small smile on her lips. "Heavenly!" She breathed softly. "Good morning, Shara. What's new around here?"

"Oh my lady, you will not like to hear, especially after your difficult journey!"

The Healing Mother took another sip and set the cup down. She picked up the pure silver spoon and started breaking the top of the egg shell in the egg cup.

"Well, please tell me. I will find out eventually."

"The former apprentice of Artonn the Giant came back to the monastery."

"Faraleda." The Queen took a bite of the egg and set her spoon down. "What in the name of my beloved DaLanvaé is she doing here?"

Once her best friend, Faraleda had been banished from the Henshu Monastery. What was that, ten years ago? She mused. Faraleda had been caught developing a new kind of magic which was a hybrid between healing and magic. Dark pixie magic. A shame because she was, as an apprentice to the giant, a healing master who had skills beyond anyone possessed in the Northern Kingdom.

What would the Healing Mother do? She had loved Faraleda like a daughter but discovering her corruption deeply hurt Amaterien. What was she doing back here? How could she ever trust her again? Yet, shouldn't she give her a second chance? People change, don't they?

From what she observed of humans, changing was indeed rare!

Over the next few months, the Healing Mother's bodyguards and spies discovered one plot after another to assassinate her. One day as she walked in the garden by the south wall, the Healing Mother anxiously waited on reports from her informants. What ill news would today bring? She chewed her fingernails and twisted her hair. She paced back and forth.

Metal on metal clanged outside the wall of the Henshu Monastery. Amaterien heard screams and shouting to the south of her, outside the wall. Swords. Fighting. Her royal guards.

Several minutes later, the captain of the guard rushed over to the queen. "Your majesty, assassins were caught trying to scale the wall. They had orders to kill you."

The Queen bit her nail again. "Thank Suzaro that you stopped them. I am pleased, Captain."

"Thank you most kindly," said the guard.

Days later, the Queen was eating in the dining room with a few of her courtiers and King Darien, her husband. She tasted the dish of mushrooms with cream over venison. She put down her fork, wiped her mouth daintily with a white napkin covered with embroidered blue roses, and smiled.

"That was delicious! Tell me, do we have a new chef now? I do not recall this type of dish in our kitchens!"

"Oh yes, darling," said the king. "You did not know? That merchant you rescued several months ago made it. It turned out that once he recovered fully, it was discovered he knows a lot about spices and cooking and managing servants. He was put in charge of the kitchen!"

"Why, I AM delighted! What a happy ending!" For a moment, she forgot her concerns. Every day some new plot to take her life was discovered. What would this day bring?

As if she made it happen, the captain of the guard approached the table where Amaterien, Darien, and her guests sat.

“Your majesty,” he said, handing her a small rolled-up scroll. “I must talk with you in private. It’s an urgent matter.”

Amaterien nodded. “Will you excuse me, my dear husband? My friends? I must attend to this business.” They all rose as she got out of her chair and walked into the counsel chamber, the guard following behind.

He closed the heavy double doors made out of birch wood and carved with doves and lions.

“Yes, Captain,” she said as he turned toward her.

“I regret to inform you that your spies have discovered a coded letter that implicates the Lady Faraleda as the mastermind behind these assassination attempts.”

The Healing Mother frowned. Her former best friend, caught in an assassination plot. She reached out for the scroll and broke the seal, pushed it open and read the letter. It certainly did not look good for Faraleda!

“I want you to have her followed. Do not let her see!”

“Yes, your majesty!” He bowed and left the room.

What was she going to do?

A week later, the Healing Mother entered the village to go to a meeting at the Conflicted Dragon Tavern. As she was leaving, her bodyguards beside her as usual, an arrow came whizzing through the air and bounced off her long velvet green gown. It was a good thing her skirts were so thick and that all her gowns had magical armor protection!

Another arrow flew by with a zing, and another and another!

The bodyguard closest to her yelled for someone to go find the archer assassin and he protected the Healing Mother with his stout muscular body as he guided her back in to the Tavern.

“The Healing Mother has been shot at!” cried the bodyguard!

The heroes who were there, lingering over a pint of ale, discussing when and where the next monster rift attack would start, jumped up and went outside, joining the search.

The Healing Mother could hear the shouts of the guards and the heroes and a loud shout of a deep guttural voice and then steel on steel.

She slumped into a seat. The proprietor brought her a cup of hot tea.

After a few moments, the Healing Mother heard another shout. This time a cry of pain. Then silence.

Moon, who had been one of the heroes in the tavern who had gone outside, came back to find the Healing Mother.

“Healing Mother,” she said in her soft voice. “The assassin has been vanquished. Are you alright?”

“Just a little in shock and a little weary, dear,” she said. Moon had been with her for many years and one of her most trusted heroes. That cheered as so many had left her. Betrayed her.

One of the heroes went back to the monastery and summoned King Darien. He and the bodyguards and the heroes accompanied her home. King Darien gently put her to bed, giving her a soft kiss and a small, wan smile. “You are safe, darling, and that is what matters.”

She nodded then went to sleep immediately. It was all so exhausting. King Darien personally stood guard over her. Nothing would harm his precious wife! She meant everything to him!

A few days later, as the Healing Mother led a meeting with her heroes in the conference chamber, the captain of the guard came in and whispered to her. He handed her a scroll.

“Heroes, the spies have found another message. They tell me that they can’t find out much about this message as it is very cryptic but they know that the Shadow

Mancer, whoever that is, intends to take over my throne, both here in Lanofeh and Kapacé. We must find out who this Shadow Mancer is!"

A messenger came in and bowed in front of the Queen, handing her a scroll.

She opened the parchment and after reading, sighed.

"This scroll communicates that more evidence is found against Faraleda! They have found secret letters of her communicating with an unknown person who is a spy. And they talk about this Shadow Mancer!"

The messenger handed her a bundle of parchment. The Queen stood up to look it over. All the heroes stood with her. She read the papers sprawled out before her and then suddenly sat down, her head in her hands.

Toka read the scrolls, a dark look of concern on his face, his lips pressed tightly together. "Healing Mother, I know that you once held Faraleda in high regard, but it is clear that she's behind these assassination attacks. She must pay the price!"

"I know, Toka. Guard, arrest Faraleda. She will go to trial."

A month passed and the trial loomed. The Healing Mother dreaded it. What would she do? She knew that the three judges who would oversee this trial were fair men, just and true and wise.

The trial came. The evidence was brought forth. It was too overwhelming against Faraleda. She sat in the defendant box, tall and straight and proud, her gray tattered cloak around her shoulders.

After the evidence was brought forth and Faraleda's barrister had rested the case, the judges conferred.

"Guilty," they said unanimously.

The Healing Mother sighed. She rose and the court rose with her.

"Faraleda," she said in a strong but sorrowful voice, "it is with great regret and sadness that I have to do my duty, as you have been found guilty of conspiring against my person. You will be beheaded at dawn tomorrow."

The courtroom gasped as if one person. Faraleda never shed a tear or even moved an inch, her face expressionless. She sat tall and proud.

The next morning at dawn, the prisoner was led out onto the raised platform in the village square where such events, as horrible as they were, took place. The Queen sat on her dais, her husband beside her.

Her eyes were drawn to Mazden, the merchant she had rescued and healed that had become the chef. Was she imagining things? He looked like he was seething with anger. Strange that he would care so much about a person he barely knew. After all, he was an outsider... but duty called.

“Faraleda, have you anything to say?”

Faraleda stood taller, if that were possible. Her red hair, beautiful and blowing slightly in the breeze, swirled around her face. She brushed it aside. She took off her cloak. The audience gasped. She wore a bright red dress! One that did not belong in a courtier’s wardrobe, that was for sure!

“Brazen!”

“Hussy!”

“For shame!”

These cries echoed in the audience, mostly by old women who had lost all their teeth, their scraggly gray hair whispering about them and tattered homespun gowns hanging loosely on their gaunt frames.

All eyes bore down on Faraleda.

“Queen Amaterien, King Darien, honored guests, citizens of Lanofeh, you will find one day that a power greater and more deserving WILL defeat you. You, Queen, will not last. The Shadow Mancer will come! You were once my friend but you betrayed me when you exiled me. Enjoy your fleeting peace, because it will NOT last long. Dear citizens of Lanofeh, embrace this new magic and embrace the monsters. They are your only salvation.”

The Healing Mother gasped. King Darien gasped. The crowd gasped all at once.

The executioner put a blindfold on Faraleda and led her to the block.

As she walked, a small white dog with curly hair popped out of her skirts and ran down the stairs into the crowd. And they gasped. The poodle (for that was what it was) yelped and ran into the countryside, never to be seen again.

Faraleda knelt down and rested her head on the stone. It was stained and worn from others who had experienced the same fate.

She closed her eyes.

Her red hair fell off! It was a wig! She was mostly bald with some short-cropped gray hair set unevenly and shaggily on her head!

The crowd gasped again.

The executioner raised his ax and swung.

Faraleda was no more.

A few days later, as there was every Sunday, a service in the chapel was held to honor and worship Suzaro. After the priest finished his homily, the Healing Mother stood.

“Let us pray,” she said. They all bowed their heads.

“We give you thanks, Suzaro, for the valiant protection given to me by my bodyguard and heroes. Indeed, they protect all of Lanofeh. I thank you that I have life and that you have blessed me with Vandarian long life.”

She presented a small vial to the priest, hanging on a leather cord. “Here contains my tears for Faraleda, at one time a friend that was close and true. She lost her way but with these tears I wept forgiveness and love and bottled them up in this little vial. May she find peace in the arms of Suzaro.”

The priest took the vial and put it on the altar.

Suddenly, a dove appeared out of the vestibule ceiling and flew to the priest’s ear. For a few seconds it paused, its wings flapping gracefully as it hovered, then took the vial away, floating back up to the ceiling and vanishing.

A collective gasp went through the congregation. The Healing Mother sighed, relief coursing through her. She had felt so burdened for so long for Faraleda. So conflicted. Like bricks were pressing on her shoulders.

But the burden, the heaviness was gone and she felt light and joyful. Free.

The Silent Dove had seen to that.

The priest turned to the congregation, one hand resting on the Healing Mother's shoulder. Suddenly lights flooded in the glass vestibule above and shone all around the Queen, bathing her in warmth and radiance.

“Queen Amaterien has been blessed by Suzaro and the Vandarian lights,” he pointed all around her at the glow that shone. “She is given a blessing that will enhance her ability to sense danger all around her at a much greater radius. That is what the dove whispered to me as he came down. So it shall be.”

The Queen knelt, tears streaming down her face. Tears of joy and healing.

In the stables, a dark figure shot out through the night.

Mazden, the merchant turned cook, galloped away on his horse, his jaw set and his brow furrowed, his eyes practically bulging from his sockets.

“She will pay, she will pay,” he grumbled as he fled.

Back in the chapel, the Healing Mother raised her head and cocked her ear to the sound of beating hooves.

Some menace, she knew, had just hurled out through the night.