

## The Royal Mullberg Cabinet

A short story by K. M. Shea

Things had changed drastically for the minsters of the Royal Mullberg Cabinet. Over the span of a few short weeks, their queen—to all appearances—went mad, and the princess had gone missing. As the country seemed to spin out of control, and with Lord Trubsinn threatening to scour the country in search of his granddaughter, things had seemed hopeless and grim.

And then Snow White had returned.

Marching on Glitzern Palace with four lords under her command—not to mention the Seven Mule-headed Idiots—Snow White drove back the darkness that had plagued Queen Faina and essentially reclaimed the country.

While the minsters were thrilled Snow White had saved them all, they quickly realized that the Snow White that had emerged from the near wreckage of their country, was not the same tongue-tied princess they had seen at the last Cabinet meeting.

“Your strategy and planning were brilliant, Your Highness,” Lord Dalberg declared.

“Indeed!” Lord Kleist chortled. “You saved the country from potential disaster, and in one swoop ripped off the mask of the Chosen and revealed their presence in Mullburg!”

Snow White smiled shakily. “I am g-glad you approve of the tactics I employed,” she said with only the slightest stutter. (Though she still looked like she might faint if they asked her to hold a speech.)

Lord Dalberg nodded sagely. “Yes, of course! You did so well, I do not believe a general could have done better himself!”

“How did you get Lord Vitkovci and the others to help you storm Glitzern?” Lord Sparneck enquired.

Snow White looked a little ill at the thought and glanced up at the forester that now shadowed her every step, Fritz. “Um,” she said.

“It is no matter,” Lord Kleist stated. “It is remarkable what you have been able to accomplish! As your minsters, we are both pleased with your direction and honored to continue serving you.” He bowed slightly with his words.

“However!” Lord Sparneck rumbled. “We are disappointed you did not seek us out when you fled. Though your strategy and plans worked, you were put in an unnecessary amount of danger.”

Snow White slid down deeper in her chair.

“Which is why we ask, Your Majesty, that next time you do something this risky, you seek counsel with us first.” Lord Dalberg added.

Though Snow White’s expression did not shift, she seemed to sit up straighter in her chair. “Is that a request, or an order?” she asked, all traces of shyness banished from her voice.

Lord Dalberg and Lord Kleist exchanged surprised glances.

“It is merely strongly worded and strongly recommend advice,” Lord Sparneck said stupidly. “Advice you should follow,” he finished with a grandfatherly smile.

The smile seemed to have no effect on Snow White, for she frowned slightly at the lords. “After all I managed to accomplish in such a short amount of time—when you have just said yourselves other leaders of the country would be hard pressed to pull off—you suggest to me that I *hide* behind you?” Her pretty blue eyes were harder than ice as she unflinchingly stared them down.

Lord Kleist was now fairly certain he knew how Snow White had won support from Vitkovci and the three other lords.

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Snow White had changed—arguably for the better, though it would take some time to get used to the cunning confidence still clothed beneath her shy smiles. But the palace had changed as well. Once, it had been a place of austerity and beauty. Though Faina and Snow White were somewhat famous for being gentle, kind, and joyful rulers. It had been a place of respect and peace.

These days, it was hard to turn a corner without running into one of the Seven Loafers raising up one matter of a ruckus or another in the palace corridors.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Sparneck said as he bowed in respect to the Queen Regent.

Faina roused herself from where she had been dosing in the sunshine, seated in an armchair placed in the palace gardens, with five of the Seven Hermits mulling around her.

“Yes?” she asked with a smile.

Lord Kleist squinted as he watched Lord Aldelbert saunter past.

“Come, Wendal!” Aldelbert bellowed. “We must hurry, so you can capture my greatness in this beautiful morning light.”

Lord Aldelbert’s attendant traipsed behind him bearing a canvas and what appeared to be a set of paints. “As you say, My Lord!” Wendal cheerfully agreed.

The lord and his attendant narrowly missing colliding with Rupert and Oswald, who were daring to bare their blades in a fight that was dangerously close to Queen Faina.

The two kept darting around like a pair of disreputable squirrels, and had managed to shave off the tops of three different hedges with their antics.

“Out of the way, Aldelbert,” Rupert growled. He kicked out at Oswald, hitting him in the kneecap so he tumbled to the ground.

Oswald rolled to his feet, and thrust a budding tulip in Rupert’s face. “Block this, Lord Fragile!”

The affect was instantaneous, and Rupert sneezed directly in Oswald’s face.

“You did that on purpose!” Oswald shouted.

“It was a lesson for you.” Rupert stabbed his wooden sword and smacked Oswald in the ribs. “Use every weapon you have to your advantage.”

“Quoting wisdom now are you?” Oswald scoffed. “I give you two more weeks here in the palace, and soon you’ll be reciting poetry with the ladies and mincing around in silks and satins!” He nearly backed into Lord Kleist, who sputtered.

“I beg your pardon!” Lord Kleist huffed.

“Sure,” Oswald said. Before they could lecture him on his manners, he threw himself into a cartwheel and tackled Rupert.

Lord Kleist scowled as he brushed off his doublet and puffed breeches.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Dalberg said with a charming smile. “You are looking well rested.”

“Thank you. Would you like to tell me what has brought you to my peaceful garden?” Queen Faina asked—seemingly with all seriousness even as Lord Aldelbert laughed when the still wrestling Rupert and Oswald nearly knocked his attendant’s canvas over.

Lord Dalberg’s smile crystalized. “Well...”

“It has been over three weeks since you were saved and the castle was cleared,” Lord Kleist said.

“Indeed,” Faina agreed with a tip of her head.

“Don’t you think...that is to say...” Lord Kleist hesitated as he tried to find the right words.

Lord Sparneck apparently had not learned his lesson, for he rather stupidly blurted out, “Isn’t it about time we send the Seven Hermits away?”

When Faina raised a slanted eyebrow, he gulped.

“That is, I meant to say, the Seven Warriors,” Lord Sparneck lamely amended.

“I’m afraid, Lord Sparneck, that I disagree with you,” Faina said.

“Oh?” Lord Sparneck weakly asked.

“Indeed.” Faina stood and elegantly twitched her skirts into place. “The warriors supported Snow White when she rescued me, and based on the reports Snow White has accumulated, they have protected Mullberg for months as they hunted down the evil creatures and monsters my own troops could not find. I owe them a great debt of gratitude, and as such I will host them here in Glitzern as long as they would like.”

She smiled serenely at ministers who had assembled.

The ministers balefully looked past her, where the warriors tumbled.

Rupert coughed when Oswald nailed him in the stomach, knocking the air out of him and making the pale lord stagger a few steps.

“If you two knock into me, I’ll flay both of you,” Wendal warned as he mixed paint colors.

“Their renewed vitality can only be due to my glory stretches,” Lord Aldelbert declared.

“Hah!” Oswald snorted when he ducked a punch from Rupert and skirted backwards. He, unfortunately, wasn’t watching where he was going and as a result the backs of his legs hit a stone bench, making him fall backwards onto the dozing merchant heir, Gregori.

Gregori awoke with a snarl that would not be out of place in a bear den, and it was quite some time before any semblance of peace returned to the gardens.

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Besides the changes to the princess and the palace, the ministers of the Royal Mullberg Cabinet were discovering that their vision of the future had drastically changed as well.

They realized this—with a small amount of shock—in the middle of magnificent banquet thrown by Queen Faina.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lord Sparneck said as he twirled his cutlery between his fingers.

Lord Dalberg—who had been watching Princess Snow White greet a noble lady with her ever present Fritz-shadow—turned to look at his fellow minister. “Of what?”

Lord Sparneck set his knife down and tapped the table. “Is this an engagement dinner?”

Lord Kleist choked his wine. He set his cup down with a clack and thumped his chest until he managed to get out, “Gaping Gads, man, *what* are you speaking of?”

Lord Sparneck nodded to Snow White and Fritz. “Surely I am not the only one who has noticed the signals between those two. They clearly care for each other—which means if *we* can see it, our shy princess has already spoken to Quenn Faina about the matter.”

Lord Dalberg scratched his chin. “Queen Faina has been taking great pains to introduce him to many of the respected and famous members of nobility this night...”

“And on the rare occasion Fritz is not standing behind Snow White—or shadowing his ruffian-companions—I have seen him with Lord Trubsinn,” Lord Sparneck continued.

Lord Kleist, shocked by this revelation, wildly shook his head. “But, but they haven’t announced anything yet!”

“No, but it likely means they are easing him in,” Lord Sparneck said. “Our Princess is bright. She knows it wouldn’t be wise to announce an engagement to a stranger so close on the heels of Faina’s...episode.”

“A forester, eh?” Lord Dalberg cocked his head as he watched the princess and her beau slide away from the blue-blooded lady they had been speaking with and make for the shadows. “At least we know he is heroic.”

“I always pictured a charming young noble for our princess,” Lord Sparneck started. “But after working with her for these past few weeks, I am forced to admit she likely does *not* require a husband with a social backing to strengthen her power.” He ended with a bit of a shudder.

“The boy does have a good head on his shoulders,” Lord Kleist said finally. “Though he can be as frightening as a phantom as he ghosts around behind her.”

“That might work to her benefit,” Lord Dalberg said. “He’s so intimidating, I don’t imagine any rogue with half a brain would willingly try to harm her in his presence.”

Lord Sparneck snorted. “I think a *black mage* would think twice before crossing paths with him. The man has the battle instincts of a seasoned knight.”

“Agreed,” the lords chorused.

“And it could be worse,” Lord Kleist said. “She could have fallen for Lord Aldelbert.”

The ministers shivered in fear as they glanced in the direction of the blond-haired lord.

Aldelbert stood at the far side of the room and appeared to be reenacting some kind of fight for three giggling ladies judging by the way he brandished a serving tray at an empty suit of armor.

“Yes,” Lord Sparneck said. “It could be *far* worse.”

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Things had changed drastically for the Mullberg Royal Cabinet, and it would take time to adjust.

But the more they witnessed the changes in their future queen, and the more they learned about the actions of the Chosen and the state of the continent, they suspected that *perhaps* this new future was better than what they had expected.

...Even if the Seven Warriors still loitered around the palace.

The End