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The Disaster

Johan was thirty three when Prince Steven was killed. The tragedy happened when the Prince and his escort were flying in to the Capital on the Prince's private jet.

"Ground, Royal One, on landing approach now," the Prince's pilot informed Ground.

"Royal One, Ground, one kilometre to go, looking good. Wait! Abort descent! Aircraft in your airspace!"

Too late. The Prince's jet struck a smaller private aircraft just as the Prince's jet was landing, ripping off a wing and plummeting to the ground a few hundred metres short of the runway. All aboard the jet were killed as were the occupants of the private aircraft.

"Prince Killed in Horror Accident," screamed the banner headlines. The main article gave the details, including the names of those killed. It also ran through the possible scenarios that might have caused the accident.

The headline in a sidebar read "Who Will Succeed to the Throne?" and in part it read as follows.

"The tragic death of Prince Steven results in a constitutional crisis. Although they had been married for six years, Prince Steven and Princess Teresa have no children, and Prince Steven has no brothers or sisters. This leaves the current King Gregory without apparent heirs, and the current line of Kings appears to be at an end."

"Sources in the Palace tell us that an announcement will be made sometime in the next day or two to address this matter, so all we can do at this stage is guess what will happen. This situation has not arisen for centuries and we have only legends to guide us."

"According to one prominent legend suggests that, first the current King will pass over as normal, and that the country will be without a King for thirty years or so. Then someone will start to experience symptoms of the King's condition. This person might be male or female, and may come from anywhere in the country. He or she will ascend the throne, but of course will 'pass over' within a few months. His or her first born child will then become King or Queen."

Johan turned to his wife, Isobel.

"Would you like to be Queen, Bel?"

"Hmm, it would be nice to have no money worries, and to have people to do things for me. But there's a lot of fuss that goes with being Queen, visiting places and shaking hands and all that. I'm not sure if I would or not."

"I'd be a Princess," said their daughter Diane, who was five. "I'd tell the boys off and they would have to do what I say!"

"But they would be Princes, so you couldn't," Johan pointed out. "Where are they, by the way? At friends?"

His wife nodded.

“Of course, if you were King, you’d have the King’s condition, and eventually you would pass over, wouldn’t you? That wouldn’t be nice,” pointed out his wife.

“That’s true. Although there have been Queens of the Royal line, too.”

She shuddered. “That’s true too.”

She thought a bit. “Though it’s the ones left behind, the Queens or Consorts and any children that they have, who have to cope with the loss afterwards. I feel sorry for them.”

Johan put his arm around his wife as they sat on the sofa. His wife was always thoughtful, always sympathetic.

“Yes, that’s true. If you were a Queen, Bel, then you would have to watch me pass over, and you would know that our eldest son would eventually pass over. Would you be able to stand it, do you think?”

“That’s what I meant. I think that I would have to accept that it was my fate. I would have to be strong. Did you know that many of the Queens have had breakdowns? Some have just sort of faded away after their husbands passed over. The Queens or Consorts are not of the Royal line, you know. They are ordinary people who have been fated to become special.”

“Well, the passing over changes don’t start until the monarch is sixty or so, anyway. The King is almost at that age, but any future monarch would be, well, about our age. So it will be many years before he or she can be found.”

Little did he know, but he was completely wrong.

The Royal Council

The King and the Queen met with the Royal Council the next morning. This small group of advisors and assistants met informally but frequently to manage the running of the enterprise that was the Crown. Before he was killed the Prince was often in attendance in preparation for the time when his father would pass over.

They were all shocked. They all knew and liked the Prince and had enjoyed working with him. As they came in, one by one they told the King and Queen how shocked and sorry they were.

“Well,” said the King. “You all know why we are here. Our tragedy is going to cause all sorts of problems for us, and I may have only a couple of months left to sort it out. Thank you all for your condolences which we appreciate very much.”

“I’d like to make some points. Firstly, my wife is going to take a break from public life for an indefinite period.” He patted her arm.

“Secondly, as Princess Teresa and the Prince had no children, there is no one to take the Crown once I pass over. That is my biggest concern at the moment.”

“Thirdly, we need to plan a funeral. Oscar, my Personal Private Secretary, will assemble a group to plan that, based on my brother’s funeral which was, as you remember, five years ago.”

“Fourthly and finally, Princess Theresa will also be taking a break from public life for a while.

He looked around.

“Is that OK with everyone?”

They all nodded. The King’s doctor raised her hand.

“Yes, Michelle?”

“On your second point, sir, your successor. Legend has it that if there is no successor of the Royal line, as is the case here, then some other citizen will come down with your condition, and will be given the Crown. Is there any actual evidence of this happening?”

The King looked at one of his oldest advisors, who was Prince Steven’s Private Secretary and a historian of the Royal line.

“Roger? Any real evidence?”

Roger shook his head.

“No, no real evidence. There’s some tales from centuries ago, in the Times of Wars, but all the documents from that era are open to doubt, as the various winners of the Wars tended to rewrite history to suit themselves. The hints are strong, though.”

The doctor raised her hand again.

“Doctor?”

“Yes, well, assuming that the legends are true, then we have a chance to find the new King before he develops symptoms of your condition, sir.”

A stir went around the table.

“We have tests,” the doctor continued, “which will, we believe, detect the condition in someone of around twenty five to thirty years of age. The first test will, we believe, give a positive result for around five hundred thousand people. The second test would eliminate all except about fifty of the five hundred thousand, but is much more complicated.”

“And the third test?”

“Only you, sir, and your son have ever given a positive result. We aren’t sure of the figures that I quoted, because we haven’t sampled many people, but the third test does appear to be accurate, and there are reasons for thinking that it works. I would caution that we don’t know why it works, as we don’t completely understand the condition that affects your family.”

“That puts us in a difficult position, Michelle. We can’t demand that everyone takes the tests. I presume that they are blood tests? And we are basing this all on an ancient legend. Hmm.”

“Well, sire, we already have the results of the blood tests that are done on all babies when they are born. The heel prick. The combination of two of those tests is the same as the first test that I mentioned. That data is private though.”

The King thought about it. “Here’s what we do. We get the media to print a jokey sort of story. Actually, it should be semi-serious not jokey. ‘Could you be Royal?’ or something like that. We’ll touch on the legend, and mention tests one and two, and the fact that I and my son tested positive. We will emphasise that these tests are experimental and any results that they may produce are questionable. Then when that has sunk in we will write to all those who are between twenty five and thirty five and get their permission to access the data. Or, better still, we’ll tell them that we will assume that they have no objection to our accessing the data, but to let us know if they do. We’ll also publicize what we are doing as widely as possible. Depending on what results we get, we’ll take it from there.”

“What if that fails, sire?”

“We wait thirty years. Or rather, you wait thirty years. I won’t be around.”

A Funeral

Johan and Bel were watching the Prince's state funeral on the television. A gun carriage pulled by four black horses carried the Prince's coffin, covered in the national flag flanked by an escort was made up of Navy personnel as the Prince had spent some time in the Navy. The parade left from the Palace and wound its way slowly to the Mausoleum where the Royal Family were buried. The sides of the roads were packed with thousands dressed in dark clothes, many of whom were crying. Children with small flags waved them sadly as the parade passed.

Behind the coffin ranks of men and women from the three armed forces followed in a slow march, preceded by the standards of the various sections of the forces. The standards were dipped of course. In front of the contingents of the three forces their respective bands marched with silent instruments. Only the drummers kept a slow funereal beat.

Behind the forces contingents came the Royal limousine, flying the personal standards of the King and the Queen. The Royal couple could be seen sitting quietly in the back of car, but what the public could not see was that the King was tenderly holding the Queen's hand. The Queen's face was obscured by a dark veil, but the King knew that in the few days since their son's death that she descended into a sadness that worried the King.

Princess Theresa was also in the car. The King was worried about the young Princess' mental state, because she seemed so calm. When the disaster happened, she had collapsed and had been sedated for two days, and had only recently emerged from isolation. Her doctors had briefed the King, and their opinion was that she was in a fragile state.

Bel said "I feel really sorry for the King. It was bad enough losing your brother to a heart attack, but it must be even worse to lose your heir. The Prince seemed to be a nice person, and the King would have been pleased that the country was going to be left in good hands."

"But it's his mother, I think, who will be taking it worse," Bel continued. "There's a special bond between a mother and her children."

Johan laughed. "That's true, but you can't write off the fathers."

Bel patted his hand. "I don't, I don't. That's another sort of special bond."

The parade turned into the Crematorium adjacent to the Mausoleum, and six men from the escort carried it up the ramp into the building. The Royal car pulled in behind the gun carriage and were helped out of their car by uniformed aides. The Prince's mother and his wife each took one of his arms and the three mounted the steps to the Crematorium and disappeared inside.

The television view switched to the interior of the Crematorium, and the voice over listed all the dignitaries gathered within as the camera passed over them. Although the Prince was notably

agnostic, one or two representatives of the major religion, the Mystics were present. Some of the rest of the gathering were services personnel in their dress uniforms but more than half were civilians, dressed in dark suits or dresses.

The Queen and King were directed to two special seats, almost thrones, on one side, with the Princess in a smaller seat next to them. The Master of Ceremonies stood up. In the background the cameras briefly showed the Queen crying into a handkerchief, then switched away.

“We are gathered here to commemorate the passing Prince Steven, in an air accident, in his thirty second year, and also remember his companions on that fateful trip.”

The MC listed all those in the Prince’s aircraft, and since this was an accident, those who were in the other aircraft.

“Our condolences go out to all those who had relations or friends killed in this tragic event.”

The MC read a short biography of the Prince and called on the most senior Navy officer to say a few words. The Admiral was followed by two officers from the Army and from the Air Force. The Air Chief Marshall expressed her shock, horror and regret that the Prince had been killed while flying in an Air Force aircraft, even though it was an accident. The Field Marshall added his condolences when she had finished.

The MC called on a few others to say a few words. A few friends, though he didn’t have many, even some of the senior advisors of the Royal family. Finally he called on the King to speak.

“I lost my son the other day, and it was the saddest day of my life, and the saddest day for my wife, and the saddest day for our darling Teresa. It was a sad day for the nation, for all Steven’s friends and for all those who worked with his on a daily basis. It was a sad day for the Royal line as there is no Royal heir.”

He gestured to the coffin, covered with a flag, carrying several large wreaths.

“My son lies here. No, let me call a spade a spade. My son’s body lies here. He was not a Mystic. He didn’t believe in a God or an afterlife. He is gone.”

Princess Teresa gave a gasping sob. The Queen leant across and rubbed his shoulder.

The King continued. “Those of my line who have preceded me and my son, have passed over and any remains that they have left behind are held in The Castle. My son’s remains will never be held there, but will be held in the Mausoleum with others of our family who did not pass over. The younger brothers and sisters, the aunts and uncles and especially the spouses. The spouses.”

He briefly looked at the Queen and the Princess. “But there will be no more of my line. Our line.”

He turned and viciously punched the red button, and the conveyor belt started up and the coffin nudged the curtains aside. He watched as the draped coffin disappeared from sight.

The MC rapidly brought the proceedings to a halt, and the television coverage ended. Bel had tears in her eyes, as did many across the nation. The King was joined by the Queen and the Princess and the attendees filed past and all expressed their sorrow to the Royal trio. Finally they were all gone and only the personal staff remained and the Crematorium staff.

“Let’s go,” said the King and the trio returned to the Palace.

King, Queen and Princess

The King, Queen and Princess shared a sombre meal in the Royal apartments.

“How are you my dear?” the Queen asked the Princess.

“Oh, I’m OK,” said the Princess. “Oh, actually, I’m not. I burst into tears at the drop of a hat, if I see a sight that reminds me of him. If I smell a smell that reminds me of him. If I feel something that reminds me of him. If I see one of his friends. Or for no reason at all. There’s a great heavy lump inside me that won’t go away. I can’t sleep, and nothing tastes of anything.”

The Queen nodded. “Me too. And my husband walks around our apartments in the middle of the night. People say it gets manageable over time, but strangely, in some ways I don’t want it to get better. I fear that my son will fade away in my memory and I don’t want that!”

“By the way, my dears,” said the King, “my doctors tell me that my condition is in remission. You know that I was only experiencing the first signs of the condition, but I know that I’ve been feeling more energetic since the disaster. I’ve a feeling that this is for a reason, and I’ve a feeling that it is only temporary. It’s very strange, and I don’t usually have ‘feelings’ about things.”

“I’ve a feeling too, that I have something to do. I’ve no idea what. I thought that it was a symptom of my grief, but I wonder now,” said the Princess.

“Well, I’ve no intuitions. Except the one that I’ve had since I met you, my darling, which is that we will be together until I die, or you pass over,” said the Queen, trying to lift the mood a little.

“I’ve arranged that you two step back from the spotlight for a while, but I’m going to have to take the heat. Thank goodness for the remission,” said the King.

“Thank you, my dear. Are you really going to start a search for the next King?”

“What’s this? The next King? How could there be one?” asked the Princess, shocked.

“You know the legend. If there is no heir, one will suddenly appear,” said the Queen. “But it’s all just stories, isn’t it?”

“Well, it may be legends, but often there is a grain of truth to legends. Who knows? My doctors think that they can narrow down the search for an heir. I’ve told them to try. The worst that can happen is that they won’t find anything.”

“Oh, do let them!” said the Princess. “My poor Steven is gone. If we do find a new heir, Steven won’t have just died in an accident. He would have handed on the crown to the next person. Oh, to

be clear, I don't want to be crown Princess with a different Prince. He wouldn't be my husband, my Steven. I hope that the new King has already met his life partner."

The three of them were silent, each in their bubble of grief. But somehow, the grief was shared and the pain a little lessened. The Princess resolved to do all she could to help the search for a new King.

The Search Begins

The King's low key article was printed by the media and the response was beyond anything that the King could have hoped for. Speculation was rife. Could my neighbour be the next King? Could I be the next King? Strangely there was not much speculation as to whether or not the next heir could in fact be an heiress. Of course, the odds were against it, as only about one in ten of the Royal line were women.

The Princess did her best to keep speculation alive. She was interviewed for television several times.

Interviewer: "So, Your Highness, would you like to find the next heir? Do you feel sad that the next heir will not be your husband?"

Princess: "Yes, I would like to find the next heir. Anyway, the next heir might be an heiress. And yes, I'm very sad that Steven died, he was the other half of me. But the disaster happened and Steven will never be King."

She shed a few tears and the interviewer gave her a little time.

Interviewer: "Can you tell me how people can be tested? I understand that some of the tests involve babies? Can people ask for their babies to be tested?"

Princess : "Well, there is a series of tests. The first one has been performed on most people already. It's the one that involves babies. When a baby is born, a drop of blood is taken from the baby's heel and tested for some known conditions. Two of those test taken together form the first test for the King's condition."

Interviewer : "So, everyone has been tested. Why can't they just analyse the tests and find out who will be the next King?"

Princess : "Well, firstly the doctors think that the tests will allow us to check if a person will be the next King, but this is by no means certain. They admit that they could be totally wrong."

Princess : "Secondly, the heel prick tests are only the first in a series of tests. The first test will eliminate a huge number of possible candidates, but that will still leave hundreds of thousands. It's not as easy as simply analysing the heel prick tests."

Princess : "Thirdly, the heel prick tests are private. The state cannot use the data without asking the owners, the grown up babies or the parents of babies and children."

Interviewer : "So, how do people ask for their heel tests and their babies heel tests to be tested?"

Princess : "If the legends are correct, the new heir or heiress will be aged between twenty five and thirty five, or much the same age as my Steven. There will be no sense in testing babies or children or older people."

Princess : "Also, people will not have to ask for their heel prick tests to be checked, if a law currently under consideration is passed. The law, which specifically refers to heel prick tests taken for people aged between twenty five and thirty five, will assume that, by default, people have given permission for their tests to be checked for this specific purpose, unless they specifically say so."

Princess : "This is, of course, going to be controversial. It means that the state will be able to look at the heel prick data, which is currently private. If there is public opposition to the measure then of course the law will not be passed."

Interviewer : "But it is only for people of a certain age, and only for a specific purpose? Who could object to that?"

Princess : "That's true, but any such measure could be considered to be the thin end of a wedge. If this case is allowed, then a precedent is established. The state has to be sure that people want the tests to be checked."

The Law is Passed and the Results Go Out

The Princess' hard work paid off, and the public were overwhelming in favour of making the data available. The law was passed, and dissenters had six months to opt out.

“Do you want to opt out, Bel?” Johan asked. They were sitting on the sofa watching the news on the television. Johan had his arm around her and she half leaned against him with her feet tucked up on the sofa.

“Mmm, what for? I’d rather know than not know. The chances are that we will be ruled out anyway.” She waved the issue away.

“It would be interesting to know, that’s for sure. Hey, what happens to those who test positive?”

“The news says they get invited for more tests. They don’t say what. Anyway, they are going to mail everyone in our age group when they find out.”

Nine months later the first results were mailed out. Johan and Bel got theirs about a month later. Johan opened his first. His hands shook as he read it.

“Positive,” he breathed. “Oh no!”

Bel read hers. She put her hand to her mouth.

“Positive,” she said. “What do we do?”

She came to Johan and hid her face on his chest.

“What do we do?” she repeated.

He led her to the room where her sons were sleeping. He didn’t say a word.

“Oh, yes, you are right. We have to do it for them,” she said.

Johan re-read the letter.

“Well, it says that we will be contacted, to see if we want to continue with the tests. They will pay us to go to the nearest testing centre for the first part of the test, and will pay our expenses too. We’d probably have to go to Sappento. Apparently the first part of the test will eliminate most people. Then later we will be called back for the second part if we test positive.”

“Hopefully not. Sappento is nice. Good shops, too.”

Johan groaned.

“Do you think that shopping will count as expenses?”

His wife dug him in the ribs.

Two weeks later Johan and Bel got a second letter.

“Oh, so the kids come with us! ‘Children and spouses!’ That’s great! It will be like a short holiday,” said Bel.

“Hmm, some holiday. I wonder what the tests will be? OK, let’s fill out the acceptance forms and send them off.”

Testing Begins

Soon the testing began, and Johan realised that it was going to take some time. Around half a million people had tested positive in the first test, that meant that around five thousand were expected to be tested at each testing centre.

Bel and Johan received their timeslot allocations for the test. They were two weeks apart.

“I’ll phone them,” Johan said.

After being passed from person to person for a while, he finally managed to reach someone in authority.

“Hi, I’m Michael. How can I help you, sir?”

“I’m Johan, and I’d like to arrange for my appointment and my wife’s appointment to be moved together.”

“Well, sir, we only test the person who proved positive in the ‘heel prick test’ as people are calling it. We don’t need to test the person’s spouse.”

“Yes, I know. Both myself and my wife tested positive in the ‘heel prick test’.”

“Really? That is most unusual. I don’t know of another case where both spouses tested positive. What are your reference numbers? They will be on the letters.”

Johan gave Michael both their reference numbers. Michael asked him to hold, and Johan could hear him in the background explaining the problem to someone. Michael came back on.

“My supervisor says that we will reissue your appointments so that they are one after the other. Do you have someone to look after your children? We assumed that the spouse would do that job. If you are both being tested that will be hard. You could leave them with a relative, perhaps. Inviting the spouse and children along was Princess Teresa’s idea, to make it a day out for the families.”

“OK. My sister, Laura, lives in Sappento, and they could go to her.”

“That’s great. Don’t forget to claim for taxis and things. By the way, we will be reporting this to Princess Teresa, as it is so unusual. I hope that you don’t mind. We are under orders to report anything unusual. I’m sorry. We’ll mail you your new appointments shortly.”

Johan was thoughtful when he got off the phone.

“It looks like we are special, Bel. They don’t know of any other couples who both tested positive.”

She slipped an arm around his waist.

“Of course we are special. Everyone is. I hope that we aren’t too special, but I need to know. For our son’s sake.”

His kissed the top of her head.

“Yes, I agree.”

Two weeks later Johan and his family flew to Sappento, and met his sister at the airport.

“Don’t worry about the kids. We’ll look after them. We’re going to the Wildlife Centre, and we’ll see some buzzards! See you tonight!”

Laura whizzed the kids off to the car and they were gone. Bel sighed. They wandered through the airport looking for their pickup.

“Look, there it is,” said Bel.

The stand had a banner that read “Project Teresa” and behind it stood members of each of the Armed Forces. Bel and Johan stepped up to the Navy guy.

“Hullo, we are here for the test.”

“Who is the positive one, please? Can you present your letters?”

“We both are,” said Bel.

The Navy guy started to say something, but Bel and Johan had presented their letters. He looked at one, then the other, then back to the first.

“But...”

“Can you let us know what to do, please?” asked Johan.

The Navy guy pulled himself together. He located their reference numbers in his lists and ticked them off. He checked several times. Finally he looked at them.

“Erm, please take your letters and proceed to the bus through the automatic doors. It will take you to the barracks where your tests will be performed. Thank you.”

Johan and Bel walked through the doors to the bus. Johan glanced back and the Navy guy was talking to the Army girl next to him and looking after them. The Army girl was looking sceptical.

Johan smiled. They presented their letters to the Army guy at the bus and were ushered on board. The bus was half full already.

“Hullo,” said the guy sitting on the other side of the aisle. “You were on the same flight as us, I think. You had some kids with you?”

“Yes,” said Johan. “We’ve sent them off with my sister for the day. Did you bring your kids with you?”

“No, we left our son at home with his Gran. Which of you is the positive, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We both are.”

“Both of you? Really?” The other guy stared at him.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. It looks like we will need to get used to this reaction.”

“Oh, sorry. What are the odds of that? Pretty high I’d think.”

“Well, the letter we got said couples would be pretty rare. They hadn’t finished the first rounds of testing, but they expected more to turn up. But from the letter, we were the first.”

“Wow! That’s amazing. I’m the positive one. My wife isn’t. Any idea what the tests are?”

“No, they’ve been pretty secretive about that. Maybe knowing in advance would bias the tests.”

“I’d sooner not pass them, myself, but I need to know. I think a lot of people feel like that.”

“Yes, we are much the same. We need to know because of our son.”

“Your son?”

“Yes, if one of us should turn out to be the heir, then he would be the next heir. We should know so that we can prepare him for it.”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of that.”

The man and his wife talked quietly for a while and then fell silent.

Eventually the bus turned into the barracks and the passengers disembarked. The barracks was not as grim as the name would suggest, with flower beds scattered among the buildings and a vegetable plot visible between two larger buildings. The passengers were ushered into a building that turned out to be a gymnasium that had been fitted out with rows of chairs. A coffee bar ran along the back

and a number of people were using it. People were sitting in the chairs chatting, walking about, and being ushered into and out of various doors. An Army man with a swagger stick under his arm surveyed the chaotic scene from the stage.

“Please register here,” said an usher in a Navy uniform, indicating a row of tables down the side. Johan and Bel presented their letters to a Navy girl at the desk. Instead of looking surprised, she smiled at them.

“Hullo,” she said, “We’ve been expecting you. Can you please follow me?”

The rating led them through one of the side doors which led into a long corridor.

“I’m sorry, the Princess’ office quite a distance from here.”

Johan and his wife looked at each other. The Princess! The rating led them to another building and up the stairs to a set of doors. She knocked and opened it enough to stick her head in, and asked and answered some questions, Johan couldn’t hear the conversation. Then she opened the door fully and ushered them in.

“Hullo, I’m Teresa,” said the Princess. “Please come in and sit down. Coffee? Tea?”

When she had seated them in comfortable chair round a coffee table, and provided them with drinks, the Princess took a seat opposite them.

“You’re special, she said.

“Thank you, ma’am. We don’t feel special, but people keep acting surprised when they find that we both had positive results from the ‘heel prick test’”

“Just call me ‘Teresa’, please. Is there anything you would like to ask me?”

“How many of us are there, erm, Teresa?” asked Johan.

“Couples like you? Well, you were the first that we found. But we have since found two other couples. There might be one more, maybe not, by the time we finish the ‘heel prick test’ checking.”

“Does it mean anything? The fact that we both test positive?”

“We don’t know. We don’t think so. My mathematicians say it may be pure chance, but they dress it up in fancy language. It’s very unlikely. I’ve had other mathematicians check them, and they also say ‘It could be’.”

“What happens now, Teresa?

“Well, I wanted to meet you, but you will both be tested today. You need to do it separately, I’m afraid. There are several verbal tests, and personality tests, aptitude tests as well as physical tests. Oh, and we will want to take your blood and do an ECG.”

She leaned forward.

“It’s no secret that not all of the tests are relevant. Some indicate tendencies only, which may involve other tests. You may not both do the same tests, but that’s no indication of the result one way or the other. We’ve deliberately made the whole thing confusing, to avoid anyone trying to bias the tests. Cheat, in other words. We may ask you to return or get other tests done later.”

“Does everyone get this explanation, Teresa?” asked Bel.

“Yes, Isobel, or one like it. Anything else?”

“Please call me Bel. Everyone does. Can I ask about… before the accident?”

“Sure, Bel. I’m used to people asking about it. That doesn’t bother me any more, though other things do.”

“Well, if you are sure… What was it like before, when you knew that your husband was going to eventually come down with the condition and pass over? Can I ask?”

“Wow, Bel. That’s hard for me to answer.” She swallowed. “Give me a minute.”

She closed her eyes. “You are thinking, I guess, what if Johan is the next heir. He will one day go through the pass over process and you will lose him. And your oldest son. And his oldest child. Is that right?”

“Well,” she continued, “It’s hard. Really hard. But the bond between an heir or heiress and their spouse is something special. It is electric and not to be denied. When they meet, it’s instant. Something happens. All the spouses say that. I say that. It’s hard, but you live with it. The bond does not give you an option.”

“It’s hard, but not as hard as being told that your partner is dead, and that half your soul is gone in an instant.”

She wept. “Give me a minute, please.”

“I’m sorry,” Bel said. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, no,” said Teresa. “You need to know what you might be getting into. That struck deep, but I’m glad you asked. You reminded me that there is always a vein of sorrow in a Royal spouse’s life, but it is balanced by the joy of the bond between the spouse and the Prince or Princess.”

“Now, I’d better get you back into the system.”

She called the Naval rating to take them back. As she walked them to the door, Bel impulsively hugged the Princess. Although they were much the same age, the Princess looked a lot older.

“Thank you, Bel,” the Princess said. “Good luck.”

She watched them go. “There’s something about those two,” she mused to herself.

Going Through with It

Johan thought that they would go back to the gymnasium, but instead the Naval rating took them to a waiting area.

“Please wait here until you are called. They will come and fetch you one at a time.”

“Thank you,” said Johan. They settled down to wait. However it wasn’t long before someone in a white coat came to collect Bel.

“See you on the other side,” joked Johan. He immediately realised how inappropriate his joke was. Still, his wife smiled and kissed him and followed the man in the white coat.

Johan wasn’t called next and he had time to look around. There were about ten couples waiting and now and then one of them was collected by a person in a white coat, or another couple were brought in. Their spouses went with them when they were called. Johan realised that he was probably the only one by himself.

He’d just drifted into a sort of doze when he was called. He followed the doctor or whatever he was and was ushered into a small room.

“Hello, I’m George. I’ll take you through the testing that we are doing today. I won’t be doing it by myself, but I’ll escort you through the process. First though, we need some personal information.”

Johan gave his name, age, date of birth, place of birth and so on. All the details that people need to identify themselves in this day and age. He told George about his kids, his extended family, and his wife.

“She’s being tested right now. She went into the process before me.”

He wondered what reaction he would get from George, but it seemed that the news had spread. George merely said “Oh yes, you’re our celebrity, aren’t you?”

Johan just snorted.

“Are you a doctor, George?” he asked.

“Yes, most of us are, but there are one or two students. Can I please take your blood pressure?”

George ran him through the usual things that doctors do when they see a patient for the first time. He took Johan’s blood pressure, listened to his heart, palpated his abdomen, examined his joints and his eyes, looked in his ears. He weighed him and measured his height.

Then he questioned Johan about his family, about their health and ages. This went on for some time and Johan had to admit several times that he didn't know the answers to the questions.

"Right, can you stand on one leg for me, please. Great, now the left leg. Count backwards from ten. Forward in threes. What was the first test I did? How many people in your family are left handed?"

Johan wondered about these questions. He understood that many of the questions would be irrelevant but he asked anyway.

"Is that important? Can I ask?"

"Well, you can ask, but I can't tell you. I really don't know. I'm just following the script. Anyway, the next step is to get you X-rayed."

George took him down the hallway to the X-ray room, where they sat waiting for a while. There were several people in white coats waiting with their couples for the X-rays.

"I was wondering if I was going to see my wife," said Johan.

"Oh, she'll be further along in the process. You'll probably see her during the lunch break, though, if she's not too far ahead."

Johan was X-rayed, scanned, drank some liquid, was X-rayed again. He had an ECG and an EEG, and some other tests he didn't recognise and had to provide a urine sample. Finally George told him that the morning tests were over, and delivered him to the mess.

"Goodbye Johan. It's been nice to meet you. They won't let you leave the mess and someone will be along to take you through the afternoon tests. They're not medical ones. It's back to school for you! Psychological tests, personality tests, that sort of thing."

"Thanks George. You've been very kind. Have you finished for the day?"

"No, we get those who did the psych tests first this afternoon. Tomorrow we get the last lot of this batch. Then in a week, it's the final batch."

"Well thanks again." Johan shook his hand, then wandered into the mess.

He spotted Bel, talking to a woman with long blond hair. Looking around, he saw that there was only a sprinkling of women in the place.

"Hi Bel," he said. He nodded to the blond woman.

"Hi dear," Bel said. "This is Maisie. She's all by herself poor thing. Her husband couldn't get away."

“He’s working on the Oil rigs,” said Maisie. “So, I’m with celebrities I understand.”

“Hardly,” said Johan. “But there’s few enough women that you are a celebrity of sorts, Maisie. I suppose you two got as thoroughly tested as I did?”

“I expect so. At least this afternoon there will be no needles.”

Just then the shutters rolled up at the end of the mess and people started queueing for food.

“I wonder if this is part of the test,” said Johan jokingly. “If you take the fish, you pass, and if you take the roast beef you don’t.”

“Oh, do you think so?” said Maisie. “I don’t want to be found to be positive, but I’d hate for them to get it wrong.”

Bel sighed. “Ignore my husband’s weird sense of humour. I’m sure it’s not a test.”

When they sat down with their trays Bel said “I was telling Maisie about meeting the Princess.”

“Oh, that would have been great,” said Maisie. “But the poor thing. She’s not long lost her husband and they get her involved in this testing.”

“I think that she wanted to do it. I think she thinks of it as her duty and a memorial of sorts to Prince Steven. She’s very sad though.”

The mess filled up as people emerged from the testing process. They chatted with Maisie about their family and hers. She had just one boy, he looked a lively lad. She had photos of him in a tree and playing cricket. Bel showed her the one photo that she had, of all three of the kids, the two boys squinting and laughing into the camera, and Diane making a silly face.

Eventually a man in a white coat tapped a spoon against a glass.

“Can I have your attention, please? The second phase of the test will begin shortly. We will take ten at a time for the first part. You will be given a small answer book and will be asked to answer the questions in it. Yes, it is just like an exam, but don’t worry, there’s no pass or fail. We just want honest answers. Some of it is multiple choice. Some of the question you will be asked to rate from one to ten. The usual stuff. There is no time limit, but we will not permit any cribbing or copying.”

“In the second part you will talk to someone about your tastes, preferences, beliefs, that sort of thing. What you do when you are angry. What makes you angry. All that sort of thing. I’ve been through it and it is draining. I’m sorry about that, but it is necessary.”

“Any questions?”

“Is there a party afterwards?” Everyone laughed.

“No, but you are welcome to stay for coffee and eats. The other group, the ones who did this part this morning will be here, too, and you can compare notes. Oh, by the way, if the media ask you for comments, after this event, you are free to tell them anything that you have seen here. Anything at all.

“One last thing. There are one hundred testing stations, but we estimate that only about fifty people will pass this test, so the chances are about even that someone here will pass.”

The Second Stage

Bel and Maisie were called in the first group and Johan waved them off. He settled back and dozed for a while. Several other groups were called and the room began to empty. Someone came and sat next to him.

“Hi, Pete,” said the guy offering his hand.

“Hullo, Johan.”

Johan looked him. “How did you...”

“Well you and Bel are famous in this group. Do you know if there are any other couples? Rumour has it you had an interview with Princess Teresa. By the way, I’m a reporter. Just so you know.”

“Well, they said we can say anything. Yes, we met her, and yes, there are other couples, at least two, anyway. But not in this group.”

“Hmm, we had a mathematician work out the odds, and he said that if it was pure chance, there would be no couples at all. Well, it would be a one in three thousand chance or something. Also there should be many more women, by pure chance! But it’s more like one in fifty. I counted.”

“Well, Bel and I are here. Of course we are in two minds about this. We’d much rather we hadn’t passed the first test, but we need to know, for our kids, mainly.”

Pete nodded. “Do you mind me using this? I don’t think that you can avoid being famous, at least for a while.”

Johan looked at him. “I’ve been naive. Of course it will leak out. Of course you can use it. I think that everyone here feels the same.”

Pete sighed. “Don’t take this wrong, but this is the biggest break I’ve ever had. Are you willing to talk to us after the test is over? I work for the daily news program.”

“Well, it’s OK by me. But we’ll have to discuss it with Bel. I’m assuming that the authorities will let us know if they have issues with that, as I’m sure they are watching.”

“Oh, true, and the authorities have already briefed me. We’ll chat afterwards. I just heard my call.”

“Good luck. Whatever that means in the circumstances.”

Johan was called in the next group. The ten of his group were led to what looked exactly like an examination room. The whole group started to chuckle.

“Please take a seat,” they were instructed.

“Right, this is not an exam. There is no time limit, though if you take too long, someone will be along to help you. Please try to answer honestly. If you need any help hold up your hand. It’s not an exam. If you need to take a break, tell someone. Coffee or tea is available. The only rule is that you shouldn’t talk to one another, please. Start whenever you want.”

Johan started on his booklet. It wasn’t hard, a series of multiple choice questions about all sorts of topics. He suspected that they were just a lead in, and maybe didn’t matter. But he answered them honestly anyway.

Time passed. Johan saw several people hand in their papers and leave. He didn’t rush. Eventually he reached the end and held up his hand and someone took his paper. He was directed through a door where he was picked up by one of the many people in white coats.

“Hi Johan. I’m Neville. I’m going to conduct the last part of the test. Let’s use this office.”

“OK, doc. Let’s go.”

“I’m not a doctor. The white coat is camouflage. I’m a psychiatry student. I hope that’s OK?”

“Sure,” said Johan. “If I were cynical, I’d say that I only have your word for it.”

Neville laughed. “It’s all smoke and mirrors today, isn’t it? Anyway, let’s get on with it, OK?”

Johan and Neville started a question and answer session that Johan found very hard. He tried to answer honestly, and found himself questioning some of his beliefs. Whoever had designed the questions was very clever. Neville didn’t give anything away, and Johan found himself admiring the man.

Finally Neville announced that they had finished.

Johan drew a deep breath. “Are you really a student? If so, you are good. You’ll pass, no question.”

Neville laughed and said “I’m not going to answer that. Thanks, though.”

Neville took him back to the gymnasium, where Bel ran up and kissed him.

“How did it go?” she asked?

“Phew. Like I stripped my soul naked. It was tough.”

“Me too. That was amazing, but tough. You’re right.”

Bel took him back to where she had been sitting with Maisie and Pete.

“Hi Johan, how did it go,” Pete asked. He seemed a lot less upbeat than he was before.

“OK. And you?”

“Tough. Really tough. A look into my soul, if you like.”

Bel said “I told Pete that we would talk to him about this. Is that OK with you, Johan?”

“Yep, no problem. Pete, we would like it if you would talk to us about this. We need a media friend I think.”

“Sure guys. I’m just a bit shaken by that interview. It was intense. It made me question my involvement in the media. I think I’m OK with it.”

“How did you go, Maisie?”

“Oh, OK. He said I was empathetic. That’s good I think. I enjoyed it. I just rabbited on. He didn’t seem to mind.”

“Oh, Maisie! I don’t think you are a Queen, but everyone loves you,” said Bel.

“Oh, thanks Bel. I hope so.”

Bel looked at Johan. They seemed to have survived the interviews better than the other two. She looked around. Half of those who had taken the test were staring at their coffees, while the other half were chatting to others around them. The process was going to take its toll on some of them.

The shutters at the end of the mess rolled up and people started to queue for food. Johan grabbed a beer to go with his curry, and Bel picked an apple cider with her meal. She chose an Eastern cuisine. Pete had chosen fish and chips, while Maisie went for a burger.

After they had eaten, they sat chatting. Then someone announced that a shuttle would be running to town and back, and Maisie and Pete went off to catch it. Bel and Johan talked to one of the helpers and she got them a taxi to Johan’s sister’s place.

“How did it go,” Johan’s sister whispered.

“Fine, we won’t know the results for a day or two. How are the kids?”

“Asleep. Finally.”

“Thank you for looking after them.”

“No problem”

Johan and Bel snuggled together before going to sleep.

“What do you think?” asked Bel?

“I’ve the most beautiful wife. Ooof!” She’d punched him gently in the ribs.

“OK. OK. That was interesting. The medical part was a bit, well, necessary, I guess, but not that interesting. The other bit? I came out of that glad that I’d got you. I’d not expected it to tell me that, as I knew it already. Weird.”

“Yeah,” she said drowsily, “That about sums it up. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Maisie's Story

"It's funny you know, but both Maisie and Pete said that the interviewers were interested in how they met their spouses. I got that impression too," said Bel the next day.

They were relaxing at Johan's sister's place. She'd taken the kids to the park and Johan and Bel were relaxing. They still felt tired from the previous day.

"Yes, they did come in on that, didn't they?"

"Maisie and Pete both told me their stories. Maisie's sweet."

"Yes, maybe not the sharpest tool in the toolbox, but I liked her."

"She told me about her husband and how she had met him."

"Good story?"

"Judge for yourself."

Maisie was working at the fast food place when she first saw him. She'd just left school and didn't know what to do with her life. She wasn't particularly worried. Finally her despairing career advisor got her a job at the fast food place.

"She said it was until something better came along," Maisie told Bel. "But I didn't mind. If things are too complicated I get confused. The job was pretty easy and I liked fixing people up with their orders. The boss seemed happy with my work."

Maisie had noticed the red headed boy hanging around. He was tall and good looking and powerfully built. Maisie guessed that he worked out. She cheerfully waved at him and he turned red and looked away. Normally Maisie wouldn't have let it go at that, but she couldn't leave her post.

She served a couple more people and discovered that the boy had joined the queue. She fixed up his order, took his money and handed him his change.

There was no one else waiting to be served so she said to him "Are you new around here? I don't think I've seen you before."

He gulped and said "No, we just moved here. I'm looking for a job."

Then he shot off, and Maisie looked after him perplexed. She decided that he must be shy or something. People didn't usually run away from her like that, so she kept a lookout for him over the next couple of days.

Sure enough he came in and ordered his meal. Again there was no one queued behind him so she tried to draw him out.

“I’ve seen you in here a lot. I’m Maisie. What’s your name?” she asked as she handed him his change.

“I’m Doug,” he said. “Gotta go.” Again he rushed off.

Maisie wasn’t having that. She might not be that bright, but she wasn’t totally dumb. She had a plan. She saw the boss and booked a day off for the next day and put her plan into action. She knew Doug’s route to the fast food place as she had watched him through the window and turned up outside a little before Doug was expected.

Sure enough Doug slouched along his usual route to the fast food place.

“Hullo Doug,” she said.

Doug started. He looked around as if seeking an escape route.

“Hullo Maisie. Why aren’t you inside? Where’s your uniform?”

“I’m not working, silly! Want to buy me lunch?”

Doug’s brain swung into gear. He was quite a bright lad, but hadn’t had much to do with young ladies because of his crippling shyness. He’d admired Maisie from afar for some time, but hadn’t dared to talk to her.

“OK, but not here. The pub?”

“Sounds good,” said Maisie, inwardly triumphant.

Chatting to Maisie became easier, and Doug relaxed. He told Maisie that he was an engineering student on his work placement. Maisie was impressed.

“Wow! So you build skyscrapers and ships and stuff!” Maisie said.

“Well, not yet. I’m still a student, and I don’t know what I’ll do when I qualify.”

Maisie waved away his protestations.

“Wow. I’m impressed.”

“We were both seeing other people at the time,” Maisie said to Bel. Then she thought a bit. “But maybe Doug wasn’t, actually, although he said so. He’s so shy.”

The others dropped away and Maisie was seeing only Doug. She realised it was serious when she introduced him to her Mum and Dad. She’d told them about her boyfriends of course, and they’d met some of them, but she had never formally introduced them.

She wondered if he was going to propose some time. She considered “arranging things” so that he had the opportunity, but he would guess. They’d come to know each other well, and he’d know.

One day he said “Maisie?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve been expecting something, haven’t you?”

Her mind raced. She knew.

“Maisie, will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she shrieked. “Yes, yes, yes, of course, you lovely man!”

“Sorry? I didn’t hear that,” said Doug. Then he produced a small box with a ring.

“How long were you going out before you were sure?” Bel asked Maisie.

“Oh, it wasn’t long, about two years, I think. It sort of became obvious. He’s a lovely man.”

“So that was Maisie’s story. What do you think?” Bel asked Johan.

Johan nodded. “Yes, that is a good story.

Bel snuggled up to him. “You know what else she told me? She’s pregnant!”

“What? That’s great! Wait a minute! You’re not thinking of...”

“No silly. Three is enough. But cuddle me and I’ll tell you Pete’s story.”

“Phew! OK, cuddle coming up. Mwah! And a bonus kiss too.”

Pete's Story

Bel said "Pete listened to Maisie's story and laughed ironically. 'I wish it had been as easy as that for me and Leen. When we first met we didn't like each other much. But now, I'd find it hard to live without her and I know she feels the same.'"

"Do they have kids?" asked Johan.

"Yes, a boy and a girl. Pete said that Leen had wanted three, but she'd had medical problems and it was out of the question. But it wasn't a big problem."

When the editor had told Pete that they were going to get a second intern, Pete was shocked. He thought that he was doing a good job, such as it was. Pete was working at the paper during the gap year in his media course at university, and had been enjoying the work.

He was doing the media course because he loved writing. He'd considered novel writing but decided that it was an uncertain business and he didn't know if he had the talent. The media work could give him an income, and he could pursue other avenues in his spare time. As it turned out, his work left him little spare time to follow his passion.

The editor called him in. "Pete, we're going to get another intern. You are doing a good job, but we still have some slack, and you will be going back to your course at the end of the year. We want you to train her up. She's a year behind you at university."

So he met Eileen. Leen for short. At first he liked her. She was a warm friendly person, and everyone got on well with her, and Pete enjoyed teaching her the ropes.

Eventually though, he became irritated by her ability to talk her way past the security guards and other obstacles to their search for news. She would flutter her eyes at the security man and he would let them through. Sometimes she would be the only one allowed through.

Then there was the incident that changed everything. He and Leen were trying to report on a pop star's wedding or something, and the security guards wouldn't let them through. Leen did her routine and was allowed through, but while one of the guards showed her through the other one stopped Pete.

Suddenly Leen shrieked. Pete didn't even think about it. He evaded the first guard and found the second guard manhandling Leen. He grabbed her hand and at the same time shoved the guard, which broke his grip. He and Leen tried to make their escape but the first guard blocked them. Leen kicked him in the groin and he fell to the ground. They made their escape.

Leen was shaking so he took her to the nearest pub and bought her a drink.

“Thanks Pete,” she said. “I shouldn’t have tried to smooze my way in. They warn us against that on the course.”

Pete remembered that but of course he hadn’t taken much note at the time.

“Don’t worry. I’m just glad you are OK.”

“I’ve stopped shaking anyway.” She held his hand to show him. Then she somehow forgot to take it back.

“I like the way you dealt with the second guy. Remind me never to annoy you!”

She laughed. “That was just instinct, and the self defence course my mum made me take.”

She turned to him and kissed him on the lips.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “That barman gave us a filthy look. It looks like he doesn’t like kissing in his bar.”

They walked along the lake front hand in hand. It was a mild night, and they bought an ice cream from a cart and sat down with them on a lake front seat. They kissed again.

“About this self defence course your mum made you take...”

“Oh goodness. I don’t know why I said that. Maybe it’s because I didn’t want to sound too tough. My dad, who was a Marine taught me some self defence, and I belong to a martial arts group.”

Pete nodded and licked his ice cream.

“Were you really scared back there? Because it looked to me like you were about to flatten that guy with a round hip throw.”

“Ah, yes. I was genuinely scared. It’s a lot different when it’s for real. But you are right. I was going to try to throw him.”

She laughed. “The second guy just instinct, but it was a move my dad taught me. Afterwards I realised that they were just goons.”

“Yes, no skills at all. But still dangerous.”

She shuddered. “Yes, definitely.”

She turned to him. “You’ve done some martial arts?”

“Yeah. Since I was a kid. My mum made me take a self defence course, and I went on from there.”

She looked worriedly at him. “Your mum... Oh, I’m sorry. I was trying to impress you when I said that. It was stupid. Anyway, I’m done with fluttering my eyes at people. I was just doing that to impress you.”

“Impress me? Why?”

“Oh you seemed so serious and professional. I wanted to show you that I could get us into places, that we could dig out the stories together. I did a pretty stink job of impressing you, didn’t I?”

He laughed. “I’d only been doing it a few months myself.”

He suddenly had a thought. “Are you teasing me?”

“A little bit. But you did seem a bit snooty. What did you think of me?”

“Honestly? Well, I liked you at first, then you started to irritate me when you smoozed your way into things. I don’t know why you thought that would impress me! I like you better when you are honest with me.”

“Oh no, I’ve messed things up.” She started to cry.

He wrapped up in his arms and kissed her. “No, you haven’t. This little incident has shown me that I really like you. Really like you.”

“I’m sorry. It’s a bad habit of mine. Fibbing. Lying.”

“Oh, I know when you are fibbing. You open your eyes wide, like this. And you smile, like this.”

He demonstrated.

“Oh, you are mean,” she said, laughing. “Do I really?”

“Say, do you want to beat me up? I need to get back into training. When does your group meet?”

“Wednesdays. It will be interesting! How good are you? I’m a black belt.”

“Me too.”

Shortly after this Pete went back to university and Leen carried on as intern as the paper. Pete joined her martial arts group, and they both enjoyed it. Pete rapidly got up to speed again, and while they didn’t always manage it, they tried to fit in a bout with each other during the evening. So they

bounced each other onto the mat, and while it started out in serious mode, it usually degenerated into a laughing match at the end. Leen was fast and agile, while he was stronger and more strategic. They were surprisingly well matched.

“Who usually won,” asked Bel, fascinated.

“We don’t know. We’d end up giggling so much that we couldn’t concentrate.”

He mused a bit. “I’d say her, but she’d probably say me.”

“How long was it before you knew that you wanted to get married?”

“Well, things didn’t go well at first. She would do something that annoyed me, or the other way round, and we’d split up for a day or two. One day we had an enormous bust up. I think I wanted to go to a concert, and she wanted to study or something. She was back at university by then. We split up for, oh a month or so, then one day we bumped into each other at the group. The instructor put us together and we started to fight. We were really letting out our aggression. Then I didn’t see an elbow coming and she knocked me out.”

Pete came round lying on the floor. Leen was bending over him, tears running down her face and some paramedics were fussing around.

He said “Leen, will you marry me?”

She said “What?”

Then they loaded him into an ambulance. Leen went to the hospital in the ambulance with him, but she seemed fidgety and uneasy. Finally she leant over him, and rubbed his hand.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Like someone just elbowed me in the noggin. Bit of a headache. Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Do you remember anything?”

“I didn’t spot your elbow coming if that’s what you mean.”

“After.”

“Well, I was coming round and I saw your face. You were crying, and I proposed to you.”

“Ah, you do remember. Did you mean it? Or were you just mixed up by the blow.”

“Of course I meant it. You’re wonderful, and beautiful, and annoying, and fun to be with, and amazing, and irritating, and I don’t want to be with anyone else.”

“Me too. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

She hugged him.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry! I really thought that you’d duck that shot. Sensei gave me heaps for not pulling out of it.”

“He’s wrong. I should have seen it coming. I know how you fight. Maybe I wanted to get hit in a funny sort of way.”

She snorted. “‘Funny sort of way’. Anyway, this marriage thing. I think we can make it work, don’t you?”

“Yep, so long as I let you beat me up sometimes.”

She kissed him.

“Careful!”

“Sorry.”

Johan was intrigued. “Interesting. So how long were they going out before they decided to get married?”

“About a year and a half, Pete told me. They’ve been married ten years now, I think he said. He said that they still like to train at the martial arts group, but they hardly ever have arguments any more. He said that when you try to kick someone in the head, but you know that you really don’t want to hurt them, the irritations fade away.”

“Funny. They may be onto something there. Did you tell them about us?”

“Yes. Maisie thought our story was romantic. But actually some parts of it were pretty rough, weren’t they?”

Bel's Story – The Meeting

Johan was walking down the main road heading for the supermarket, planning to pick up some essentials for his evening meal, when he saw the couple at the bus stop. The boy was pressing himself against the girl and she was saying “Stop. Stop. Please stop!”

For a second he considered just walking past, but then he stopped.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

The boy stopped harassing the girl and turned towards him. He was big but fat and pasty.

“What’s it to you?” he sneered.

The girl pushed him and he stumbled back. She quickly moved over to Johan’s side of the bus shelter. Johan didn’t want to fight, but the boy lunged at him and Johan hit him in the stomach. His fat took the force of the blow, but the boy still went “Ooof!” and stopped.

Johan grabbed the girl’s hand and shouted “Run!” and they ran back towards Johan’s flat. They quickly outdistanced the fat boy who followed them for a bit, and then gave up and walked off.

“Do you want to come back to my flat for a while? My flatmates will be there. They’re girls,” he told her to reassure her.

The girl was shaking. “Yes, please, I’d like that.”

Johan opened the door and called “Mike? Are you there, Mike?”

Mike came out of her room. She was putting her hair up. At the same time Claire came out of her room.

“What’s up, Johan?” She saw the girl and let her hair fall free. “Oh, no, what happened?”

She took the girl and sat her down on the couch and the girl burst into tears.

“A fat guy was harassing her at the bus stop. I helped her out.”

“Claire, can you do her a coffee, please?” said Mike. “Yeah, I know that fat guy. He hangs about a lot. I’ll report him tomorrow. He approached Claire yesterday, but fortunately I happened to arrive at the bus stop. We hopped on the bus and left him there. I’m Michelle, by the way, but people usually call me Mike.”

“Hi Mike, I’m Isobel. People usually call me Bel. I’m not usually this helpless, but I’ve only been in the city a short time. I’m a student at the University.

“So are we! Claire and I are doing Commerce, while Johan is doing ‘Fine Arts’.”

“Oh, do you paint or something, Johan? Or do you study music or drama?

Johan smiled. “I paint, when I get the time. Wait there a minute.”

He went to his room and brought back a pencil and a pad and started sketching. Bel drank her coffee and chatted with the girls. It turned out she was studying computer science and lived down in the South East provinces. She was staying with her “Auntie”, really a more distant relative, in the Capital while she studied.

Johan finished his sketch and passed it to Bel. “Here, look at this.”

As she took it their hands brushed and they looked at each other. Something passed between them and Bel sucked in a breath. She almost dropped the pad, and then she had trouble focussing on it. She saw a drawing of a beautiful girl, a coffee cup held on her knee, smiling off to the side.

“That’s, that’s me? No, I don’t look like that!”

Mike took a look. “Yes, you do. What happened to your Cubist style, Johan. That one is so much more realistic than your usual stuff. That’s amazing.”

Johan flipped a page in his pad. “Here’s a Cubist one.”

He sketched quickly and showed Bel.

She laughed. “Oh that’s good. But it’s Mike, not me, isn’t it. You have her knee, and her hip, and her hair down over her shoulder as it is now. Am I right?”

Mike looked at it. “It beats me. Could be I guess. I can see it is a person, and pick out some features, but I couldn’t guess who. Johan?”

“Bel’s right. You have a good eye, Bel.

“Thanks. Well, I’d better get going. Hopefully that creep is gone by now.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mike, and tossed Johan her car keys. “Take her home, Johan. We’re not going out tonight.”

“Oh. Is that OK, Bel?”

“Sure. Thanks Mike. Thanks Johan. Thanks Claire.”

When they had gone Mike and Claire settled down together on the couch. Johan knew they were a couple, but he was a traditionalist and would have preferred that they were married before they moved in together. Mike and Claire kept it low key to respect Johan’s views, but he didn’t mind too much if he found them cuddling on the couch or sharing a kiss. The three of them had been happy flatmates for nearly two years.

“Well, what do you think of that then, my girl?” said Mike.

“That was strange. Something happened. I don’t know what. I foresee trouble ahead for them.”

“Really? I see joy and laughter for them, oh gloomy one.”

They kissed.

“TV?” asked Mike. Claire nodded so they switched on the television and watched a game show. By answering a few questions the contestants won enough money to keep a student flat going for six months.

So Ends Term One

They chatted like old friends all the way to Bel's Auntie's house. When they arrived Bel didn't want to get out of the car. They arranged to meet the next day, and she hurried in.

"Who was that?" asked Auntie, who missed nothing.

"Just a boy who gave me a lift," said Bel. She didn't mention the bus stop incident.

Auntie sniffed.

Johan and Bel spent as much time together as they could. Neither of them let it affect their studies as they were both conscientious. They discovered an interest in the theatre and the cinema that was more about being together than any play or film.

"Well, it's end of term in a week," said Mike one day. "What are you two going to do?"

Johan and Bel were sitting together on the couch, which had good-naturedly been conceded to them by Mike and Claire. They looked at each other in horror.

"You'd not even considered it had you," laughed Claire. "Oh, dear."

Bel was supposed to return south for the vacation and suddenly she was worried. Her father was hoping for good things from her, and wouldn't think much of her having a boyfriend. Of course her studies were going well, as she reported to them every time she called. She told them about her visits to the cinema and art galleries and so on with "friends". She didn't mention that "friends" should mostly have been singular.

Bel suspected that Auntie knew something was going on. She kept giving her warnings about how "boys today can't be trusted" and so on. She hoped Auntie hadn't passed on her suspicions.

Johan had a job for the vacation, drawing logos and banner heads and other images for corporate use. It was not challenging for him, and it used computer tools which he found restrictive and cumbersome. On the other hand he'd met people who were easily as good in their field as he was in his, and that opened his eyes. And it was all ephemeral. Corporates changed their logos and banners frequently and the old ones disappear.

"It's only three weeks. Three long weeks. We'll survive," said Johan without much conviction. Survive they did. Johan went home, which wasn't too far as his parents lived on the other side of the city.

He was a little quiet and his mother cornered him one morning.

“What’s wrong, Joh? You’ve been quiet since you came home. That’s not like you. Don’t give me any rubbish about being tired or busy. I won’t believe you.”

Johan considered his options. He didn’t have any. “Mum, I’ve met the girl that I want to marry. I haven’t asked her yet though.”

“What? Are you serious? OK, then why are you so sad. There’s a problem isn’t there?”

“Her family come from the Southern Provinces, and they are very traditional. They wouldn’t arrange a marriage for her, but they will certainly want to approve any potential husbands for her. They wouldn’t consider an artist to be suitable. Bel, that’s short for Isobel, is afraid that they wouldn’t approve of me, and it would be hard for her to go against their wishes.”

“I see. Well, let’s see how it goes. Bring her here, next term. We have to approve of her of course.”

“What? Oh, Mum, don’t joke.”

“Oh, you ARE serious, aren’t you? I’m semi serious though. We don’t want you to marry the wrong woman, do we? Does your sister know? Oh, you have secretive, haven’t you?”

“I wasn’t being secretive. I’ve just been busy.” He realised what he had said and blushed. “We’ve so wrapped up in each other that I haven’t had time to talk to Mindy.” That seemed no better. He gave up.

“She was wondering why she hadn’t heard from you.”

Bel Tells Her Mum

Bel's Dad picked her up from the airport and they chatted all the way home about University and how she had found it. He didn't seem concerned so Bel figured that Auntie hadn't said anything.

"It's been great. The labs have hundreds of computers, and we have access to the mainframe if we need it. We got to set up our own servers too."

Bel didn't need to pretend to be excited about it. She'd enjoyed the courses that she had done and if she hadn't met Johan she would probably have spent all her spare time in the labs, learning all she could. As it was she had done very well in the course work and the term exams.

Dad was production manager in a local factory. He knew about computers only as tools on the shop floor and in accounts and so on. Bel knew that he'd love to have someone in the family who knew about computers, and she knew that she was good with them. She'd been pleased to go away and study computers and would have loved to have worked with her Dad, but all that changed when she met Johan.

Dad seemed OK, but when she reached home Mum gave her a severe look as she hugged her. Oh. Auntie must have talked after all. Her brother came out carrying one of his endless comic magazines.

"Hi Sis. Can you look at my computer? It won't boot up." Bill had no talent for computers.

"Sure, Bill. Just let me get settled in, OK!"

"Bill, take your sister's bags up please," said Mum.

Bill complained but did so.

"So how have you been? What have you been up to? You've been doing well in your course, anyway." Mum was definitely probing, but Dad didn't seem to notice.

"Fine. Saw a few plays. Watched a few films. The usual stuff."

"With your friends?"

"Yes, with my friends." She mentioned a few names of people in her classes, and threw in Mike and Claire for good measure. She and Johan had often gone with friends, so she wasn't exactly lying. She didn't mention Johan. She particularly didn't mention Johan.

Bill clattered down the stairs.

“I think I’ll get changed,” said Bel. Oh, no! Mum was following her. Mum sat on her bed.

“Auntie says that someone in a red car has been picking you up and dropping you off.”

“That’s Mike’s car. Mike is short for Michelle, by the way.” Absolutely true! So far as it went.

“So, who was the boy who was driving Mike’s car?” Oh rats!

“Erm, that was probably Johan. It was Johan.”

“Tell me about Johan. You seem to have missed him out of your list of friends.” Oh rats, rats!!

Bell sat on the bed too.

“In my first week he saved me from a thug.” Slight exaggeration, but acceptable, she thought. “And he took me to his flat because I was shaken up and I met Mike, the one whose real name is Michelle, and Claire. His flatmates. Mike lent him her car to drive me home.”

“And?”

“And, maybe we’ve been going round together a bit.”

“Going around together a bit’?”

“Yes.”

“Auntie says quite a lot.”

Bel burst into tears, and her mother held her.

“Dad’s not going to be happy. But don’t worry about that too much. I’ll handle him. I think I’m going to have to visit Auntie some time next term though. Now tell me about him.”

So Bel did. It was a relief to open up to her mother about him. In the end her mother stopped her.

“Look, darling, this isn’t going to be easy for your father. We are putting you through university and we were hoping that you could help Dad out at work. Yes, yes, I know you are grateful for it. He was worried that something like this would happen. He still thinks you are his little girl, but I know that you will have to make your own way, one way or another. He wants to protect you.”

“I know,” sobbed Bel, “And that makes it worse.”

Her Mum became thoughtful. “Did you feel anything when you first met?”

“Like what?” Bel was surprised by the question. “When he pulled me away from the lout I was shaking like mad. When we got to his flat Claire and Mike were so nice and gave me a coffee. Then he drew a sketch of me, in pencil, and showed me. Our hands brushed and I looked into his eyes. I nearly dropped the pad. Something happened, I don’t know what, and we’ve been going everywhere together ever since. Except when we have classes of course. And we’d study together in the library.” She decided not to mention studying at Johan’s flat. And the kisses and cuddles on the couch there. And the hand holding at the cinema.

“Wash your tears away, dear, and sort yourself out. I won’t mention this to Dad until later in the holiday. No sense in ruining it, is there?”

Mum got up and went out, shutting the door behind her. “Something happened,” Mum thought. She’d been afraid of that. Now to subtly work on Dad.

Two weeks of the three week break had passed and Bel was missing Johan. They had agreed not to contact one another during the vacation, otherwise questions would no doubt be asked. Bel felt as though she ached inside. She’d met up with old friends and enjoyed it, but it wasn’t like it was before.

“Is anything wrong, Izzy? You’re awfully quiet these days. You haven’t shouted at me once!” Bill only called her “Izzy” if he was trying to provoke her.

“Nothing’s wrong, little brother. I’m just more mature these days. It comes from living away from home.” Calling him “little brother” was her way to provoke him. She demonstrated her newfound maturity by sticking her tongue out at him.

He ignored her. “Nah, there’s something different about you. I don’t know what it is.”

She was helping him fix his computer, a regular occurrence. He seemed incapable of keeping viruses and worms out of it. She noticed that he had some hand drawn cartoons on his desk.

“Why don’t you draw those on the computer,” she asked. “A friend of mine draws stuff like that for a living.”

Bill looked at her. Something in her tone triggered the sibling radar.

“‘A friend of yours’? A boyfriend of yours? Hey! Bel’s got a boyfriend!”

“Shut up!” she said, pummelling him as if they were both ten years younger. “Don’t say anything to Dad or I will kill you!”

He didn’t seem too worried by the threat. “Mum knows? Yes, Mum knows, I can tell. Wow! Secrets.”

Bel told Mum that Bill knew.

“Hmm,” Mum said, “Dad needs to know before you go back. I’ll tell him when he comes home tonight.”

“Oh, no, do we have to? Can’t you tell him after I go back? Pleeeease!”

Mum wouldn’t budge. Bel spent the rest of the afternoon in her room, fretting and worrying. She ran all sorts of scenarios through her mind up to and including her being thrown out of the family home. She knew she was being silly but she couldn’t help it.

When Dad came home she could hear him talking to Mum. Then voices were raised. She crept down the stairs and went into the living room. She saw Bill listening from the kitchen as she went down.

Dad looked at her in disbelief. “Is this true? You have a boyfriend? We didn’t send you to university so that you could get a boyfriend! What is this going to do to your studies?”

“Ari, she’s still getting good grades. She’s not an air-headed girl. She’s sensible.”

“Sensible! She’s not going back, that’s for sure.”

“Ari, be reasonable! Her fees are already paid for the year. What a waste of money!”

“Well, she’s banned from seeing this boy! I’ll not have it.”

“Ari.” Mum laid a hand on Dad’s arm. “That’s silly. Think about it? How are you going to prevent them meeting?”

He looked at her. “Oh. You’re right aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m right. It will be OK. She’s not a silly girl.”

“Oh.” He turned to his daughter. “Give me a hug.”

She ran across and hugged him. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her head on his chest.

“Just look after yourself, my dear.”

“I will.”

“You can come out now, Bill” called his mother.

Term Two Starts

Johan was waiting at the airport for Bel to arrive. He could see her hurrying through the throng, occasionally bumping into people and apologising. She almost ran the last few metres and they met and kissed for a long time.

Johan picked up her bags and they made their way out of the airport.

“I told my mother and father about you,” he told her. “I told them that I had found the girl that I wanted to marry.”

“What?”

He dropped the bags. “Oh, rats. I didn’t mean to do it like this, but will you marry me, Bel? I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Yes! Yes, of course. Oh, my. What a way to get proposed to!” She laughed and hugged him.

“Sorry, that was a mess up, wasn’t it? Anyway, I have a surprise for you, someone for you to meet.”

He ushered her to a large station wagon. “Get in and I’ll put your bags in.”

She opened the door to climb in. There was a woman in the driving seat, about the same age as her.

“Hi Bel, I’m Mindy, Johan’s sister. Nice to meet you. Johan didn’t warn you? Naughty little brother!”

She’d seen Bel’s surprise.

“Hullo, Mindy. Nice to meet you. What a surprise! Johan’s mentioned you, but we didn’t talk over the break.”

“It’s only a brief meeting this time. We’ll drop you at your Auntie’s, then I’ll drop Joh at his flat. You’re expected at our parents’ place for the weekend. Is that OK?”

Bel nodded. Johan finished loading Bel’s bags and shut the hatch. He climbed into the back seat and they set off.

“My folks know about us,” Bel told Johan. “They seem OK with it for now. Mum’s coming up to stay with Auntie in a week or two. Mindy says that I’m invited over to your parents’ place for the weekend. I’ll have to tell Auntie.”

When they got to Auntie's Mindy drove straight into the driveway, and Bel gave a squeek of surprise. Auntie opened the door and came out. She looked suspiciously at them. Mindy hopped out and shook Auntie's hand.

"Hi, you must be Bel's Auntie. This is Johan who's been picking Bel up recently. I'm his sister, Mindy."

Johan was getting Bel's bags out of the back of the car. He dumped them on the doorstep and offered his hand. Auntie shook it.

"Hullo," he said.

Auntie cleared her throat, "Ahem, hullo."

"See you later, Bel. Come on Johan, I'll drop you at your flat."

Auntie watched them disappear down the road.

"Well!" she said.

"Oh, Auntie, let's get in and I'll tell you everything!" said Bel. She'd leave out the proposal bit for now, she decided.

Bel invited Johan for tea a couple of days later.

"Bring your sketch pad," she said to Johan.

Johan was nervous when he arrived, driving Mike's car.

Auntie was pleased to meet Johan. She'd known that something was going on, and was glad it was all out in the open. She loved her niece but Bel's mother and father had obviously asked her to let them know how Bel was getting, and she felt obliged to keep them updated.

"Oh, I'm so glad to meet you, Johan. Bel's Dad can be very protective of Bel, sometimes, but there was no need to hide from me!"

She looked thoughtful. "When I was going out with my husband to be, we thought we were so clever. He used to walk me to the corner, then watch me walk the short distance to our front door. I thought that my parents didn't know but one day my mother said to me 'Why doesn't that boy of yours walk you up to the door?' I was shocked! 'Bring him home sometime. I'd love to meet him.' We felt so silly."

"How much did you know, Auntie?" asked Bel.

“Oh, not a lot, dear. I was a bit worried at first, but your Mum said she trusted you, so I didn’t interfere. What are you doing there, dear?” she asked Johan.

Johan showed her his sketch. He had drawn Bel and her Auntie in deep conversation.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” said Auntie. “Can I please have it?”

“Of course,” smiled Johan, and carefully removed it from the pad. “Er, my parents have invited Bel over for the weekend. Would that be OK?”

“Yes, dear, that’s fine. Just get your mother to call me.”

Bel and Auntie stood on the step and watch Johan drive away.

“Nice boy,” said Auntie. “Why didn’t you bring him along earlier?”

“Oh, Auntie,” laughed Bell, linking arms with her.

The first week of a university term is fairly easy, but busy. It’s mostly about finding lecture rooms, arranging tutors and tutorials, buying text books, and getting reading material. There’s not much actual work done, for which Johan and Bel were glad. It meant little evening study and the weekend would be free for Bel’s visit to Johan’s parents. They took advantage of the calm before the storm, when they could, by walking together, arm in arm, through the parks and along the lake shore, and drinking coffee at the little Capital cafes.

Bel Meets Johan's Family

"I'm nervous," said Bel to Mindy, as they drove to Johan's parent's place. Mindy had picked her up from Auntie's house.

"No need," said Mindy. "He's been boring us silly telling us how wonderful you are."

"That doesn't help! Not one bit!" They both laughed.

When they got there Mindy hopped out of the car and grabbed her bags.

"I've got her bags. Do the introductions, little brother."

"Bel, this is my Mum and Dad, Mum and Dad this is Bel." He wondered what else to say.

"Hullo, Bel, But where is her halo? Where are her wings," said his Dad. Johan cringed.

"Don't be silly," said his Mum sharply. "Here, let's go through to the garden. We're eating there since it's such a nice evening."

Johan's family lived in a suburban house in a quiet street. Many of the houses were similar in style. Bel thought that it was a nice house in a nice area. The only thing that made it stand out was the large wooden building that took up a large part of the garden.

"Johan, why don't you show Bel the studio, while we set up."

"I'd like that," said Bel. The big shed had to be the studio.

Johan unlocked the door with a key on his keyring, and ushered her in.

"Oh, wow," said Bel. The shed was deceptive. It was one big open space and big clerestory windows lit up the whole building. At one end was a potter's wheel and a kiln, racks full of plates and jugs and other pottery items. There were pots and tubs for glazing and decorating pottery.

"That's Mindy's stuff. She's the potter. Mostly these days, though, she works downtown. Her tutor has a studio, and she has a place there. She's sold a lot of her stuff down there."

"I'd like to see that," said Bel. "Is that possible? Would she mind?"

"Mind? Mindy would love it if we dropped by. But anyway, it's open to the public. They do demonstrations and sell their stuff to visitors."

He gestured to the other end of the room, where lumps of marble and other stone stood on a robust table. Large chunks of wood were piled along the walls, and small wooden and plaster models stood scattered around. Piles of tools cover any available space and paper drawings were held down by stones and other bits and pieces.

“My mother’s not very tidy,” he said.

Many of the pieces were covered in tarpaulins, and Johan went to one of them and gently pulled the cover off. It was a life size lion.

“Mum’s stuff is usually pretty realistic, though she’s dabbled in more abstract stuff. I did the drawings for her for this. It’s lovely, isn’t it? It’s a commission, so it’s going out soon.”

“That’s my stuff, over there,” he said.

A paint stained boiler suit hung on a hook. Dozens of canvases were stack reasonably tidily against the wall. Hundreds of brushes poked out of pots, and tins and tubes of paint layered the shelves. In the middle of the organised chaos was a huge easel holding a large canvas, covered with a drop down sheet.

“What’s on the big easel? Can I see?”

“It’s my final piece for my course,” said Johan, sweeping back the cover.

“Oh!” said Bel. “It’s me!”

It was her, sitting in a wooden chair, dressed in the clothes of a century or so ago. She smiled out of the painting, while in the background was a rural scene of cornfields and haystacks, with a steam train just crossing a bridge in the background.

“It’s exquisite,” she said. “Did you do it all last term? Surely not. Oh my!”

Johan came and stood beside her. “No, it’s taken me about a year. The funny thing is, I’d done most of it last year and I couldn’t get the posture and the face right. Of course, I hadn’t met you then. When I met you, I came out here to work on it, and your face, the way you sit, it flowed out of me onto the canvas in an hour or two. It was so easy, and it had been so hard. Most of the rest of the time was just refinements, and tidying things up. It’s complete now, and I’ll hand it in when the paint is dry.”

He covered the painting again. She held him round the waist and said “Kiss me.” And he did.

“What does your Dad do? Is he an artist?”

“No, he’s a historian. You haven’t seen the house yet, but it’s mostly book cases, and most of the book cases are full of his books.”

Johan locked the door as they went out and they joined his family at the garden table.

“Johan’s painting is amazing, isn’t it?” said Bel.

They looked at one another.

“He’s not shown it to us, yet,” said his Mum.

“Sorry,” said Johan. “I was having trouble with it and didn’t want to show anyone. It’s finished now, so please, have a look. Sorry.”

He was embarrassed for Bel. He’d not meant to drop her in it like that. He looked at her, and she took his hand and patted and smiled at him. She didn’t mind.

“Well, let’s all sit down and eat,” said Johan’s Dad.

They started filling plates, passing dishes around, and settled down to the meal.

“You’re at University, studying Computer Science, aren’t you Bel? How’s that going?” asked Mindy.

“Oh, pretty good. I’ve got all As so far. I passed the term tests as well, at the end of the term.”

“So has Johan. But he’s been sailing through his course for the last two years. That painting is his final project. He’s started it, what, five or six times.” She looked at Johan who nodded. “I’m glad he’s finished it.”

“We’ve both been pretty busy, but we study together at the library when we can. We’ve still managed plenty of time to....” She suddenly realised where this was heading.

“..to be together,” finished Mindy, laughing. Bel turned pink.

“Stop teasing the poor girl, Mindy,” said her mother gently.

When they’d finished the meal, everyone lent a hand tidying up.

“I’m going to look at the masterpiece, now that we are allowed,” said Mindy. “Coming, Bel?”

Mindy unlocked the door to the studio and turned on the light. She and Bel went over to the easel and Mindy threw back the drop cloth. She studied the picture in silence for a minute. Johan came up behind Bel and encircled her waist with his arms. She leaned back a bit.

“Mum, Dad, come and look at this,” called Mindy. Her parents appeared in the doorway and made their way to the group by the easel.

“Oh, my goodness, Johan. That’s amazing. So realistic. So beautiful. What happened to your abstract style? You were intending it to be an abstract, weren’t you?”

“Well, I tried a couple of times, as you know, but abstract didn’t seem to work. I’d call this romantic rather than realistic, by the way, Mum, if you are talking about style. My tutor suggested I switch styles when I told him I was having trouble even getting started. Then we touched on the romantic painters in class, and the idea popped into my head, and I started right away.”

“I got the background and much of the foreground straight away, but the seated figure wouldn’t go right. I thought that it might be another dead end. This was before I met Bel. After I met her I came back here, and finished the main parts of the painting in a few hours.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you little bother. That’s a powerful painting.”

“Why do you call him ‘little brother’?” asked Bel. “You are twins aren’t you?”

“Oh, he at least told you that!” laughed Mindy. “Yes, we are twins, and in fact he is older than me by about 15 minutes. But when we were born, he was about three hundred grams lighter than me. Therefore, my little brother.”

They all went into the house and Bel was given a tour. There were bookcases everywhere and Johan’s Dad had sections for everything. Mostly, though, the topic of the books was history. Bel hadn’t taken much of an interest in history at school, but Johan’s Dad made it interesting. He was most proud of his collection of texts from the dawn of the current civilisation.

“In those days, people didn’t distinguish between magic and science. The mages and scientists travelled the world, performing services for people for a living, but forever moving on because people didn’t understand their powers. The texts reflect that world view.”

He drew out a slim volume and opened it. The text was a commentary on a folk tale for the early years of the current cycle. Images of the original text were shown and Bel found that she was unable to read it. Some words she recognised like “the” and “a” though the script was different and “a” was shown as “ya”.

Johan promised to show her Mindy’s studio down town the next day. She and Johan stepped out into the garden for “a breath of air”, but really for a bit of privacy.

“I like them. Mindy is fun. Your Mum is lovely and your Dad is great. I love those old texts. I’ve had a brilliant evening.”

She kissed him. He kissed her back.

“Mmm. Mindy, the eternally optimistic. She’s OK. We’re not identical twins, obviously, but we are very close. She likes you, I can tell. Mum and Dad like you too.”

He thought a bit. “When you took that sketch from me and we looked into each other’s eyes, you felt it. I could tell. Something changed. Mum asked me how we met. I told her the story and that ‘something changed’. She looked startled, and then said ‘Yes, that’s a good way of putting it’. When I asked her what she meant she said she and Dad said that it was ‘like an earthquake or an electric shock’. She said that she and Dad knew that they were destined to be together, minutes after they met. She said that most other people took months or years before they knew.”

“I think my Mum and Dad were the same. I’ll ask when I see them.”

Bel shelved that idea for later and kissed him. He kissed her back. Johan loved the feel of her in his arms. He felt that he could hold her forever, but finally he said to her “We ought,” kiss “to go in,” kiss “oughtn’t we?”

She put her hands on his chest, then leaned in and kissed him. “Yes. We should.”

“Mindy, dear, can you show Bel where she is sleeping?” said Johan’s mother.

Mindy took her upstairs and showed her the room. “This is my room, but I’m moving to the room over the garage, for the weekend. Don’t worry! It’s great over there.”

“I’m glad you’ve hooked up with Joh. I was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to find a girlfriend. Oh, he’s had plenty of girls wanting to be his girlfriend, but he just sort of looked through them. Didn’t really notice them. That sort of puts a girl off. Not that he was rude to them or anything.”

“Have you got a boyfriend, Mindy? I hope that you don’t mind me asking?”

Mindy laughed. “There’s a couple of boys that I’ve been out with recently. One’s a bit more special than the others, but I don’t know how he feels about me. But I’m not sure I want to settle on anyone yet.”

Bel spent a wonderful weekend at Johan’s parent’s place. She liked them all, especially Johan’s Dad who was the calm centre of a household that was sometimes chaotic. Johan took her to Mindy’s tutor’s studio and Mindy showed them round.

The small furnace was rumbling. Not the pottery kiln because nothing was being fired that day. Mindy’s tutor was going to demonstrate some glass blowing techniques to some visitors. He drew the glass blob out of the furnace and blew the glass into a bubble. Mindy, togged out in leather boots and apron and protective headgear helped him shape it. He cut the item from the long tube,

opened the neck a little and pulled down one edge for the spout, and attached a curved rod to the other side, and presented the small jug for the spectators to see.

“How was that?” said Mindy, after removing her protective gear. “Pretty awesome isn’t it. I’ve been learning how to do that, but mine have all come out warped to one side so far. I can tell Phil’s not happy with that one, though, so it will probably be melted down again.”

After the weekend Johan and Bel returned to their studies. Johan, as he was in his third year, had mostly finished his course already. He only had a few small pieces to finish, but still had to study for his final exams, though they were at the end of the next term. Bel, in her first year, was kept quite busy. Still, they managed to balance their work with time together pretty well, and things settled into a routine.

Bel's Mum Visits the Capital

After three weeks of the term, Bel's Mum announced that she was going to visit Auntie and Bel and Johan borrowed Mike's car to pick her up from the airport. As they waited for her flight to land Johan couldn't keep still. Bel held his arm and that calmed him down a little, but he was still tense.

"I hope she likes me," he muttered, not realising that he was speaking aloud.

"Of course she will," Bel said. "There she is!"

Bel's Mum strolled up from the gate with a small wheeled case. She spotted Bel who ran forward and hugged her. Johan nervously followed behind.

"Mum, this is Johan. Johan, Mum."

"Pleased to meet you," said Johan and held out his hand but Bel's Mum ignored it and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"My, you did pick a handsome one," Bel's Mum said. Johan felt himself blushing. He'd not done that in years!

"Mum, stop teasing him, please," implored Bel.

"I discussed things with Auntie, and she suggested we have lunch in town before we go to her place. So that I can get to know you Johan," said Bel's Mum.

They started walking to the car.

"Auntie said that the restaurant at the top of the cable car on Moose Mountain is good. Can we go there perhaps?" asked Bel's Mum.

So they went there. Bel was relegated to the back seat and Bel's Mum travelled up front with Johan. Johan was relaxing a bit now, and chatted with Bel's Mum about the course and his paintings, especially the one that Bel had inspired.

"You not missing any lectures for your course, are you, Bel? I could have got a taxi."

"No Mum, just a lab and I'm ahead on those. And a tutorial this afternoon, but the tutor said it was OK."

"And I've almost finished my course," said Johan. "I hung my major project piece today. That's my painting of Bel. Well, not of Bel, exactly. We can go and see it if you have time while you are here."

They rode up in the cable car and Bel's Mum said "It's as beautiful as I remember."

"I didn't know you had been up in the cable car, Mum," said Bel.

"Oh, yes. I came up here with your Dad when we were at University. The cars were not as smart as this in those days, and there was no restaurant at the top, but we carried a picnic up with us and watched the sun go down. We caught the last car down."

"We like it up here," said Johan. "People still bring picnics up here sometimes. Look! There's an aircraft taking off from the Air Force base!"

A large cargo carrying aircraft took off majestically and banked away to the south. The rumble of the engine belatedly reached the three of them on the top of the hill.

"Let's walk around here," suggested Bel's Mum. Winding paths led everywhere through tall pine trees and open lawns. Bel's Mum led them to a little dell.

"This was our favourite place," she said. She sat down on park bench.

"There were seats here, but not these ones. Ah well," she sighed.

"But you can't see the view from here, can you?" asked Bel, puzzled.

"Yes my dear. But it's a quiet place. Private."

She smiled to herself.

"Private?" said Bel. Then she caught on. "Oh Mum!"

"Yes, we shared a few kisses and cuddles up here. You're embarrassed aren't you!" She laughed.

They strolled back to the top of the cable car and ate at the restaurant.

"It's nice up here, but we ought to get back to Auntie. She'll be expecting us."

They travelled down in the cable car and as they did Johan did a sketch of Bel and her mother. Bel's Mum was pleased.

"That's lovely, dear. I'd love to see it framed."

"I can do that," Johan said. "I've got all sorts of frames for pictures back at home. I'll see if I can do that before you go back."

“Mum,” said Bel tentatively, “Johan sort of proposed to me and I sort of said yes. We’ve kept it quiet so far, but we’re going to tell Johan’s family tomorrow.”

“I see. And you ‘sort of’ want me to tell Dad, I would guess?” She mused a minute.

She continued “I’ll tell him when I go back. I don’t know how he will take it.”

“But he was OK when we said that we were going out together! He seemed to understand.”

“Bel, he’s very protective of you. You don’t know how difficult it was for him to let you come up here to study. But don’t worry, I’ll work on him over the rest of the term.”

Bel was a bit downcast. She loved her parents and didn’t like them to be upset, especially on her account. Auntie welcomed them all in and she and Bel’s Mum started chatting about people “back home” and all the various branches of the family tree. Johan and Bel rapidly got lost in a maze of cousins and uncle and aunties, and grandparents and grand aunties and uncles.

In the end Bel’s Mum took pity on them. “Come on Auntie. We’re boring them to tears. Did they tell you that they are engaged?”

“Engaged? What does Ari think of that?”

“He doesn’t know yet,” said Bel’s Mum.

“Oh.” Auntie glanced at Bel and Johan. “That could be a problem. Ari’s always been very protective.”

“People keep saying that!” wailed Bel.

“Don’t scare the girl,” said Bel’s Mum. “I’ve talked to Bel, and I’m as sure as she is that they are destined to be together. Ari will have to agree sooner or later.”

Johan drove home pondering Bel’s concern about her father. He could tell that she was upset about it, and that worried him. It was a dark cloud over their happiness.

The next day Johan picked up Bel and her mother from Auntie’s house so that Bel’s Mum could meet his parents. Johan was trying to find the right time to tell his parents about his proposal, but didn’t know how to introduce it into the conversation.

Bell’s Mum noticed that Johan was fidgeting and realised the reason.

“You have some news for your parents don’t you, Johan, dear?” she said.

Johan jumped. "Oh, yes, Mum and Dad, I asked Bel to marry me and she said 'Yes'," he blurted, completely forgetting his prepared speech.

"Oh, that's wonderful," said Johan's Mum. "Tell me about it, Bel. Did he go down on one knee or anything romantic?"

"Well, we were rushing through the airport when he said that he'd told you that he'd met the girl he was going to marry. Then he realised what he'd said and stopped and asked me to marry him and I said yes. I think Johan said it was a bit of a mess up!"

Johan's Mum laughed. "Yes, that sounds like Johan. Well, congratulations. Do we have any champagne, dear?" she asked her husband.

"Only the bottle we were keeping for Johan's graduation," he replied.

"Go and get it, dear. We can always get another one."

Everyone was given a glass, but before they could toast Johan and Bel, Mindy came in.

"Oooh! Champers! I bet I can guess! Well done you two."

They all raised their glasses to Johan and Bel, and Mindy asked "Where's the ring?"

"Oh, we forgot all about that! Oh, dear."

"Well, Bel, I know someone who is making jewellery as her project for her course. She's good, and her Dad is a proper jeweller. I think we can arrange something. Oh, sorry! Is that OK with you, Johan."

"Of course, Min. That's a lovely idea. We'll arrange something after Bel's Mum goes back."

Johan reflected. He'd almost finished his course and his prime project picture had turned out much better than he had hoped. But that was almost irrelevant compared to the fact that he'd found his life partner. The only fly in the ointment was Bel's Dad. He only hoped that her Mum would be able to talk him round. He put his arm around Bel, and felt hers go around him.

"Kiss her then," said Mindy, so he did.

Later, after some good food and some good wine for everyone but Johan who was driving, Johan took Bel and her Mum back to Auntie's house.

"You've got a lovely family, Johan. Auntie would love to meet them," said Bel's Mum.

"Yes, we had planned to take her over there sometime," said Johan.

“She was so funny about you, Johan, before she met you. She knew about you almost from the start and told me about you. I said I trusted Bel, so she didn’t interfere, but she was dying to meet you. She called you ‘the mystery boy’ as a sort of joke.”

Memories

Bel's Mum spent a week in the Capital, but Bel was deep into the second semester of her course and was busy. Johan had finished the major parts of his course, so he had more time to drive Bel's Mum and Auntie around the Capital. He found it more entertaining than he expected. Bel's Mum and Auntie had endless anecdotes of their times as students.

"Do you remember that party up on Princes Street, over the hairdresser's shop?" asked Bel's Mum.

"Of course I do. That's where you met Ari. Johan, can we go up there?" said Auntie.

"Sure. Which end?"

"Hmm, I think it was up in the nineties. Ninety four? It was a long time ago, dear."

Johan drove up the street. The two ladies pointed out all the changes to each other, and finally they came to the houses and shops numbered in the nineties. Right where they thought that the party had happened was a modern block of apartments.

"Well! There go the memories," said Auntie.

"Never mind," said Bel's Mum. "The place may have changed, but the memories haven't gone. Do you remember what happened that day?"

"Yes, of course I do. That was the day you abandoned me for Ari. We arrived at the party and you tripped on the carpet and knocked someone's drink out of his hand. He got angry, but Ari stepped in and calmed him down. Ari smiled at you and shook your hand, and something happened, and that was it. You stopped going around with me, and I had to make new friends." Auntie sighed dramatically.

"You didn't have much trouble in that respect, as I remember, Jean. You went out with a few boys before you settled on your husband."

Auntie nodded agreeably.

"When I met Bel 'something happened' when we touched. I knew I belonged with her." said Johan.

Bel's Mum nodded. "That's why I'm sure you were right for her. Until she said that 'something happened' you were just a boyfriend, so far as I was concerned."

"Do you want to go to the University? I can show you my painting if you like."

“That’s a good idea, Johan. I’ve not been there for ages. Have you, Auntie?”

Johan drove them to the University, the two ladies remarking on landmarks which still existed, or were gone, or looked different. Although she lived in the Capital Auntie had not visited parts of it for a long time. Some of the older buildings on the campus they recognised, but the newer buildings brought forth “oohs” and “ahhs” from the ladies.

Johan parked as close to the Arts building as he could, and they strolled through the campus to the building. Johan gave them a quick tour then took them to the student gallery. One end was blocked off by moveable partitions, but he led them past.

“This is where the student art projects are displayed.” It looked a bit bare, apart from a few pictures on the wall and a few carving and sculptures, potter and glass pieces on the table.

“It will fill up as people complete their projects. This is mine.”

“Wow!” said Auntie.

Bel’s Mum looked at the picture and a tear formed in her eye. “That’s my Bel. Oh my goodness. That’s amazing, Johan. That’s my girl, but she looks like a queen from a bye gone age. Johan, that’s a masterpiece. I wish Ari could see it, then I’m sure he wouldn’t have any objections.”

When Bel’s Mum went home Bel was a bit withdrawn and anxious. She longed for her Dad to accept Johan, and was disappointed that he didn’t.

Auntie tried to cheer her up. “No news is good news,” she said. “Stella will be working on him.”

“But will she bring him round, Auntie? That’s the question.”

Term Two Draws to a Close

Johan was worried about her as the term went on. She continued to work hard on her course and was still achieving As, but was looking tired and drawn. He tried to distract her, but it didn't work.

“Look, Bel, my love. You are wasting away in front my eyes. What is the worst that could happen?”

“My Dad would throw me out!” she wailed.

“OK. And then?”

“And then? And then what?”

“Would I abandon you? Poor homeless girl? Would I abandon you to the gutter?”

“What? No, no you wouldn’t, would you?”

He kissed her. “What do you think?”

She relaxed against him. “You’re right. What’s the worst that could happen? Oh, I’d never see my Dad again!”

She started sobbing again. “Rats! Every time I think I’m coming to terms with it, it hits me again. Smack!”

“Well, how long have we got before it comes to a head?”

“The end of term. Two miserable weeks!”

“So nothing will happen for at least two weeks.”

“Yes, you’re right. Can I stay up in the Capital with you?”

Johan would have loved to have her stay with him in the Capital, looked at her.

“No, my dear, we have to sort this out, one way or another. We have to do it right. But I can come down with you.”

“Oh yes! When Dad sees how much I love you and you love me, he’s sure to change his mind.”

“It won’t be that easy, Bel. It won’t be that easy.”

“That’s true. That’s true. But there’s more of a chance, isn’t there?”

Johan couldn’t deny it. He was unjustifiably optimistic that things would turn out right, but he couldn’t say why. His intuition versus Bel’s logic. It would all be decided in a week or two. In the meantime, Bel cheered up a little. He’d be busy next term, but this term he spent as much time as he could supporting her. He took her for walks, when she could come. He took her to his parents when she had time. He sat with her on Auntie’s sofa, massaging her feet as she revised for her exams.

They booked their seats on the flight to Bel’s home. When they did it, he thought that she would become more tense, but she lightened up immediately.

“‘The die is cast’,” she said, quoting an ancient ruler. “One week and three exams and we go to sort this thing out!”

He kissed her. “My little hero.”

She swatted him away. “Come on, I need another foot massage. Three more exams, remember.”

Then she turned and kissed him. “Oh, I’m sorry, you’ve been great the last couple of weeks. I’ve been such a grouch. You’re amazing. I’m so sorry.”

He kissed her. “You are worth it.”

After her last exam they went out to an upmarket restaurant to celebrate the end of term. Bel was as happy as she could be.

“I think I’ve done well in the exams,” she said. “All my course work is fine. I’m happy with this term, all things considered.”

“You’ve been amazing, considering the pressure you’ve been under.”

He held her hand. “Everything is going to be all right, I feel it. Let yourself feel it too, if you can. We were meant to be together. We will be together.”

Bel sighed. “I do feel it. But the world keeps getting in the way. My Dad...”

“You love him. I know. And he is opposed to our engagement at the moment. But he can’t stop us getting married. If he did try, it would be sad. But I don’t think he will. I believe that he will come around.”

Bel covered his hand with hers. “Oh, I hope so. Johan, my love, you give me hope.”

“But for now,” she said, “I’m going to have the chocolate mud pie.”

The Trip Down South

Johan had never been down south, but he'd flown before. They sat together holding hands for the whole flight. Bel was quite quiet and Johan let her be. She had let her mother know that Johan was coming down, and her Mum said that she would "prepare Dad".

When they arrived Bel's Dad curtly shook his hand and they all walked to the car. Bel's Dad took her bags and Bel linked arms with him. Bel's Mum linked arms with Johan as he carried his bag.

"It's OK, don't worry," she said quietly to him. "We'll sort this out. How long are you staying?"

"I've got a return ticket for three days time," he said.

Bell's Dad continued to be cool to Johan, but her brother Bill welcomed him with open arms. He had ideas about creating a cartoon book, featuring super heroes and super villains.

"Oh, I know it's been done, but really, I like the drawing and the story telling. I like developing the characters," said Bill.

He showed Johan.

"I like these," said Johan, "but you could probably simplify it."

He copied one of Bill's drawing onto his pad. He removed much of the detail and shading. He couldn't do colours with just his pencil, of course. Bill was amazed.

"Hey, that's brilliant!"

He turned to his computer and fired up a program.

"I've been starting to use this to draw stuff, but, I think you are right. I was trying to add too much detail."

He brought up an image of one of his cartoons. With a sweep of his stylus on a pad connected to the computer, he removed all the shading. It took him a bit longer to remove all the detail. He changed the perspective of the background, and simplified the outline of a car and the building in the background. The hair of the two main characters became a single block of colour.

"There. What do you think?" he asked.

Johan was amazed. "That really works! You've gone a lot further than I was thinking. It's very bold and in your face, and I like it."

Johan quickly drew a more abstract version of the cartoon.

“I don’t suggest that you take it this far, but you could incorporate some of the abstract ideas like this.”

Bill studied Johan’s sketch. He nodded.

“Yeah, I like that. I might be able to use some of that. Can I keep this?”

Johan carefully tore the sheet out of his pad, and Bill attached it to the wall over his computer.

Johan went downstairs to the kitchen where Bel was helping her Mum prepare some vegetables. Bel’s Dad was carefully washing some more vegetables in the sink.

“Bill’s a good cartoonist, Bel. He’s got a good eye for it. He’s easily as good at computer art as the guys where I worked between terms.”

“There’s no money in that, though,” said Bel’s Dad.

Johan told him what some of the salaries were, and Bel’s Dad was impressed.

“But they’d have degrees in art or computers, wouldn’t they?”

Johan told him that only one of them had a degree and that most of them had come through the Art Institute.

“One just walked off the street and showed the boss his work. He had no qualifications at all.”

“There, I told you so, Ari,” said Bel’s Mum. “Bill’s not that keen on school. Maybe he could find something in that line of work.”

“His work is a bit raw at the moment. Is there a local Art Institute? It might suit him, perhaps?”

“I heard that,” said Bill, coming in. “I think you are right, Johan. My teachers have been saying that, but I thought that they were just washing their hands of me. What do you think, Dad? Should I try it?”

“Bill, you know that I’ve been worrying about you. Of course, you should. It would be a great weight off my mind, our minds, if you found something that you could do and could earn a living at.”

Bel’s Dad had cheered up immensely.

“Have you got a job yet, Johan?” he asked.

“I’ve not really been looking. I’ve got another term to go, but that will mostly be revision and the exams. I have to do a landscape project, and I’m not that good at landscapes. I’m much better at people, but I’ll pass at the very worst, but I think I’ll do better. Maybe a pass with distinction. I’ve done my ‘masterpiece’, that’s the major piece that makes up twenty percent of the credits for the course, already.”

“It’s lovely, Ari. You should see it,” said Bel’s Mum.

“I could go back to the place that I’ve been working. They’ll definitely take me on, but I want to do my own stuff, eventually, but making a living as an artist will be hard.”

“I could support him at first,” said Bel. “While he is building up his career, that is.”

It was the wrong thing to say. While this sort of thing was happening more and more, Bel’s Dad was a traditionalist, and the idea of his daughter working to support her husband, ran contrary to his beliefs.

“Oh no. I’m not going to allow that,” he said angrily. “In fact the whole idea of an engagement and a wedding is absurd. I won’t agree to it! And you Johan, had better leave. In addition, Bel will not be going back to University in the Capital. She can finish her course down here, instead!”

“No, Dad, no! Don’t throw Johan out. I love him and he loves me! I’ll be miserable for the rest of my life!”

“You’ll get over it! Now, Johan, please leave.”

Johan turned and went upstairs to pack. Bel flew after him. As he went up the stairs he could hear Bel’s Mum and Dad arguing below.

“Don’t go, Johan! Please don’t go,” Bel cried.

“I have to, my love, for now. But I’m not giving up!”

He hugged her. “Be brave, my wonderful Bel. I’m sure your Mum is on our side and I think that it is just a matter of time.”

Bel’s Mum came up the stairs and into the room.

“Here, Johan. This is my brother Tim’s address. He only lives a couple of streets away. I warned him that you might need a bed for the night. I know my Ari! Don’t worry too much, you two. We will fix this.”

Johan packed up his bags and carried them down the stairs. While Bel's Dad pointedly continued to deal with the vegetables, Johan gave Bel a hug and a kiss, and hesitantly gave Bel's Mum a hug too. Then he made his way to Bel's uncle's house.

The next day, while Bel's uncle and aunty were at work, and the kids at school, the phone rang. It was Bel's Mum.

“Johan, can you get round here? We are having a family meeting. You should be here.”

Johan hurried round to Bel's house and Bel let him in and kissed him as if he'd been away for a week. Bel's Mum made him sit on the sofa with Bel. He held her hand. Bel's Dad watched all this, but made no comment.

“Stella and Bel, and for that matter, Bill, have been on at me since you left, Johan. They all think that the idea of you marrying Bel is a good idea, for some reason. I, on the other hand, disagree. You are both too young to make a commitment like that. Bel's just turned eighteen, and you are twenty? In addition, you are an artist, and artists don't tend make a lot of money. I'd hate to see Bel slaving away to support you while you try and make a name for yourself, and what if she should have children? No doubt you'd struggle by, but you'd both be miserable, I'd guess. So, my answer is no. I won't give my blessing to you and Bel.”

“Oh, you are being silly, Ari!” said Bel's mother. “We were both eighteen when we met, remember? At that party. You Dad was against us getting married too, and so was mine. That didn't stop us! Remember, we eloped! Neither of us had jobs at first, but remember, I was the first to get one, and I paid the rent and bought the food for the first few months. Your Dad came around and was helping us until we got on our feet. My Dad didn't budge until Bel was born. Oh we struggled, you know we struggled, but we weren't miserable! It was one of the happiest times of my life.”

Johan said “I can't guarantee that we won't struggle, but I don't think that Bel will ever need to support us both on her own. I wouldn't like that. As I said, I could go back to where I worked before, drawing logo and banner heads for businesses. But I've already sold pieces of my work, in the studios where my sister works and my mother works. There are other studios that have hung and sold my work. Yes, I do want to make a name for myself, but I'm already doing that. Of course what I would like is to have my own studio, but I'm prepared to work for that over time.”

“Ari, do you remember what you felt at that party? The first time we met?” asked Bel's Mum.

“Yes, Stella. How could I forget? When I saw you, our hands touched and something happened. I knew that we were destined to be together.”

He sighed. “But that's something that every couple feels, isn't it? It doesn't mean anything, does it?”

His wife took his hand and looked at him. “Do you really think so, Ari? Do you, in your heart of hearts, think so?”

He sighed again. “No, something happened. Something special.”

Johan said “When we met, Bel and I, after we got back to the flat, I passed her a sketch I done, and our hands touched and we knew, both of us. There was no question. We knew.”

He took Bel’s hand and looked into her eyes, and once again, they knew. Something happened. This time though, Ari and Stella also knew.

There was a few moments of silence, then Bel’s Dad sighed. “Oh well. I can’t argue with that, now can I? I’m sorry I’ve been so silly. I should have used my eyes and seen that Bel was so sure. So sure. Of course I approve of your engagement. I have no choice, do I? Stella, do we have any champagne?”

“Only that bottle we bought for Bel’s graduation. I’ll get it. We can always get another.”

Just then Bill came in. “Oh wow! I guess congratulations are in order. Do I get a glass?”

Bel and Johan laughed.

“That’s what happened when we told Johan’s parents,” said Bel.

With that, Bel ran across and hugged her father.

Teresa Meets with Bel and Johan

Bel and Johan left left the Capital and returned home with their kids. For the next few days they tried to return to their usual routine, but it seemed that a Damocles' sword hung over their future. On the third day after the test they were invited to a meeting at a local hotel, and of course they accepted.

They were surprised to find that the were meeting with Princess Teresa. She was looking very tired and Bel immediately went to her and gave her a hug. Teresa smiled at her.

“Thanks, Bel. It’s been a strain, this testing. But you must be feeling it too?”

“Yes, Teresa, we have, though we know the odds are against either of us being positive are low.”

Teresa looked at them. “That’s why I am here. It’s true that the odds against one of you being positive are very low. But the odds against both of you being positive are as close to zero as can be imagined.”

Johan gasped. “You mean...”

Teresa nodded. “Yes. You are both positive. Fifty one others are also positive, it is true, but you are the only couple who both test positive. The probability of that happening, by pure chance, is microscopic, but my mathematicians all emphasise that, while very unlikely, such a probability is not zero. So the fact that you both test positive could not mean anything at all. Nevertheless we, the King and Queen and I, can’t help wondering.”

“Of course we haven’t done the final tests, yet,” she continued. “and they may prove that your positive tests so far are a fantastic fluke, but you should prepare yourselves for the possibility that one of you is the next heir.”

Johan and Bel sat there stunned, and Teresa let them take it in.

“Oh, my poor Alex,” Bel said, referring to their eldest son.

Teresa nodded. “Yes, indeed, but what of yourselves?”

Johan looked at her. “Well, it’s almost like being diagnosed with a fatal disease, but it has been at the back of our minds, of course. If I prove to be the one, then we will have about thirty more years before I pass over, and I hope that I can come to terms with it, but Bel... Bel will have to watch me go through it all, and she will lose me. That is going to be hard for her, and then she will know that her son will also go through it, though she is unlikely to see that happen. If it is the other way around, well, I don’t know how I would cope, but I would have to try.”

Bel said, "Forgive me, Teresa, but you and Steven had no children, but you must have thought about what would inevitably have happened to your first born?"

"Yes, we thought about it. And we delayed having children because of it. Oh, we pretended that we were too busy, and made other excuses, but the King and Queen had been mentioning that we had not yet had children more often. It made us uncomfortable, as if all we were there for was to provide the next heir, but when Steven died..."

She broke off, and Bel took her hand and held it.

"Thank you, Bel. When Steven died, I realised that we should have had children earlier. It didn't just affect us, after all. Our delaying has resulted in the predicament that we are in now. Damn it! We didn't have any choice about falling in love, but we had a choice about having kids, and we chose the wrong course of action. I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! We were so selfish!"

She broke down and sobbed. Bel held her hand until she had calmed down a bit.

"But enough about me," said Teresa, wiping the tears away. "Goodness, you two should be psychiatrists or something. You really get to the heart of things, Bel. Anyway, we are going to have a 'conference' for the fifty three of you where we will talk to you about the third test. We'll invite the media to the first session, and give them potted bios of all of you, and I'm afraid that you are going to be celebrities."

"In spite of all this," said Bel, "I'd much rather know. We discussed opting out, but we need to know for our son's sake. If we had opted out, and one of us turned out to be the next heir, he would have a terrific shock when he reached around thirty years old as one of us passes over. He would lose a parent and learn that he was going to experience the same thing when he reached the age of around sixty. As it is, he can grow up knowing about it, and I think, I hope, that it will be easier for him."

"That's what my Steven said. He said that he didn't remember a time when he didn't know what his fate was going to be. Well, as it turned out, he didn't know his fate, after all," Teresa said bitterly.

"But anyway, you two, because you are a couple, will attract a lot of attention. So we've arranged for a couple of trusted special agents to keep an eye on your house and your kids. They're called Smith and Jones, but that's just a nickname, really, passed on from the original pair of agents. There will be other agents helping them out, from time to time, but you shouldn't notice them."

Bel hesitantly said "We have a friend in the Media. Pete. We met him at the second test."

Teresa nodded. "Yes, he passed the 'heel prick' test but was negative in the second one. You want him to do an interview before the ruckus starts? That's an excellent idea, because he knows what you have been going through. We'll get that arranged." She made a note on her computer.

“We don’t know what is going on. We don’t know if it is significant that you are a couple. All we know is that we believe we can identify the next heir. But the life of whoever it is will change completely, and we can’t help that. If either of you turn out to be the new heir, you will have to come and live in the Capital and you will be required to take the place that Stephen and I would have occupied had the disaster not happened. You will be required to make public appearances, make the occasional speech even.”

“I wasn’t born to it, although Steven was. He supported me through the transition from ordinary person to a Royal, and I will do my best to support the new heir, in the same way, whoever they may be.”

“I was a nurse when I met Steven. He shook hands with us when he visited our hospital, and the next day he invited us to a small tea party at the barracks. He chatted to all of us, but he really only wanted to talk to me, and I was happy to talk to him. I didn’t realise at that time how my life had changed. After that time, nothing was ever the same.”

Johan was interested. “When did you know that something had happened?”

Teresa looked at him. “When I shook his hand and looked into his eyes.”

“The new heir, whoever they may be, should also do their best to support you, Teresa,” said Bel. “I’ve a feeling that when these tests are completed, even if they don’t find the new heir, that you will go back to being a desolated wife, won’t you?”

Teresa sighed. “Yes, you are right. This search is a distraction from my loss, though I think it is helping. You’re so sweet to say that, Bel. In the meantime, I’ll let you get away. We’ll be in touch about the ‘conference’ through the usual channels. Oh, and get in touch with your media friend, Pete. If he agrees to run it past us, he is welcome to interview you.”

Pete and Leen's Visit

A few days later Pete and Leen walked down Bel and Johan's street. Some of the houses were unnumbered, but there was an old lady weeding the garden in front of one house.

"Excuse me, ma'am, do you know which house is number 24?" asked Pete.

"Hmm, 24? Bel and Johan? Why, they're right next door!" She pointed to the next house.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Pete.

They drove off and up into the next driveway.

"Nice polite boy," said the old lady. She picked up a small communicator.

"Jones here. They're in, Smith," she said. The communicator muttered.

"How am I supposed to know how long they will be?" The communicator muttered again.

"Yeah, we can shop on the way home, when the night shift arrives. Over and out."

She returned to weeding the garden. And watching the road in front of the house.

Inside the house, Pete and Leen were just settling down after the introductions.

"So, you didn't get through, Pete. How do you feel about that? Disappointed?" asked Johan.

"Well, yeah, disappointed and relieved at the same time. It's weird."

"What about you, Leen? What do you think about this circus we've been involved in?"

"Oh much the same. I'm not sure I'd like to be a Princess, and what happens at the end, well, I don't know how I would handle that."

She held her husband's hand.

"We feel pretty much the same," said Johan. "Pete, do you want to get it over with and interview us? Then we can relax. The boys are at their Auntie Mindy's place. They're probably up to their elbows in potter's clay by now."

Pete and Leen looked at each other.

“Well, actually, Johan, I’ve given up the media business. I’m writing my novel. After that gruelling test, I felt that my life was going in the wrong direction. I talked it over with Leen, and she supports me. We’re giving it a go. But Leen can interview you, if that’s OK. She’s still in the business.“

Pete and Leen looked at each other again and grinned. They were obviously excited about the future.

“Sure,” said Johan. “You know you have to run it past Princess Teresa, don’t you?”

“Yeah, we weren’t too happy about that, freedom of the press and all that, but we had a meeting with her about it. All she wants to do is see it in advance. She promised that she wouldn’t try to change anything. Anyway she suggested we lodge our original raw footage with a lawyer.”

So the four settled down to conduct the interview. Bel and Johan replied frankly to all Leen’s questions, while Pete recorded the whole thing. Occasionally he would suggest a question which Leen would then ask, and sometimes Leen would ask a question another way, if she didn’t think that the answer was clear enough.

Finally Leen leaned back in her chair and said “Enough! I think we are done.”

Pete shut down the recorder and Leen pulled out a sheaf of notes and checked through them.

“I don’t like to work from notes,” she said, “so I memorise them. Yeah, I got everything important. We’ll edit out the duplicate questions and tidy it up. Thanks, guys!”

“No, thank you!” replied Johan. “That clarified some of my thinking for me. Right, let’s eat. It’s given me an appetite.”

They didn’t discuss the search for the next heir, but Johan and Bel told Leen and Pete about their worries for Princess Teresa.

“She looks so tired and worn,” said Bel. “She going to have a hard time of it when the search is over, though no doubt she will work hard helping the next heir to fit into the role. She’s not got the time to grieve properly.”

“Yes, we thought that when we saw her the other day. She looks like she hasn’t slept in weeks. Poor girl! She’s much the same age as us.”

Finally Pete and Leen had to leave, and Johan and Bel saw them off. They didn’t make plans to meet again, but promised to keep in touch. Leen impulsively hugged them both before getting into the car and driving off. Pete waved from the passenger seat.

“What do you think, Leen?” Pete asked.

“I’m very much afraid that one of them is the new heir,” she said.

“Me too. Poor things!”

Jones was just watering the garden in the gathering dusk. She pulled a communicator from her gardening apron.

“Jones here. They’ve just left. All quite round here. How about your side?”

The communicator muttered something to her.

“Yeah, well, you wanted to be at the back. Anyway, the night shift will be here soon.”

The communicator muttered again.

“Yeah, Smith, we’ll pick up some milk on the way home. Don’t nag. Over and out.”

A Short Royal Meeting

The Queen and King met with Princess Teresa in the Palace.

“How are you doing, my dear?” the King asked the Princess.

“Oh, I’m OK, I think. Tired. I’ve been all over the country several times in this search. Our team has been marvellous, but I’ve talked to what seemed like thousands of people. We are down to fifty three people for the third test.”

“I meant, how are you coping with Steven’s death? I know that you’ve thrown yourself into this search, but don’t forget why we are doing it. Don’t push it all down underneath somewhere, where it will erupt some time in future, perhaps.”

“Oh, I have good days and bad days. I’m definitely not trying to suppress it. You know this couple who have both tested positive in the second test? Bel and Johan. Bel seems to be able to touch me in that area, for some reason. I usually end up blubbing, but I always feel better after talking to her.”

“Ah yes, our celebrities. Do you think that there is anything in it? Is it pure chance? Or is there something deeper happening there?”

“When I ask my scientists about that, they mumble and look away, or bluster on about ‘non zero probabilities’ or ‘dominant and recessive genes’.” And I look at them and say ‘You don’t know, do you?’ and they look at each other and hum and ha, and eventually nod. But my feeling is that it is something deeper.”

“So one of them could be the one. We’ll have to keep a close watch on them to protect them. Have you sent Smith and Jones?”

“Yes,” said the Princess. “Of course. But how are you?” she asked the Queen.

The Queen looked tired. “I’m also ‘OK’, she said. “It’s funny. I loved my son, and I’m missing him oh so much, but I don’t feel it deeply yet. I think that I’ve been practising losing someone for so long, that it is muted.”

She stroked her husband’s arm, and he patted her hand.

“I think that maybe I will be OK until my love, my husband, passes over. I don’t know what will happen then.”

“I miss our boy too,” said the King. “I feel it somewhere deep in the depths of me. I was expecting that he would be there when I am no longer around. I’d hoped that he would have supported you both through my passing over, but that is not to be.”

“So, fifty three. You’re going to bring them all to the Capital, aren’t you. Will we meet them all? Will we meet this Bel and Johan?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. We will have a banquet and a gathering afterwards as soon as they are all here. Probably a month or so from now.”

Smith and Jones Sort Out a Problem

Johan and Bel got their invitations to the third test, and once again they discussed whether or not to go forward with the tests. It seemed a lot more serious now that they had passed the second test, but they felt that they had to know. They talked with Bel's parents and they agreed to take the kids for the week. The grandparents happily started making plans.

Later that day Jones appeared on your doorstep.

"Have you got a moment, my dears?" she asked.

Bel and Johan were used to seeing Smith and Jones around now and then, and the two of them had dropped by for a cup of tea a few times. Smith and Jones always seemed to know what was going on, and were happy to share their news.

"Sure, would you like a cup of tea? Is Smith joining us?"

"Yes, dear, I'd love one. Yes, Smith should be at your back door right now."

Sure enough, when Johan opened the door, Smith was there.

"Come in, please," said Johan.

Smith was an older man, with a touch of grey in his hair. Johan thought that he was about the same age as his father. Smith and Jones appeared an unlikely pair to act as security guards, but an incident early on had changed his opinion of them.

A couple of rowdy teenagers had come down the street one night and smashed a headlight on a parked car, and Johan and Bel had looked out to see what was happening. Jones had suddenly appeared next to the two boys asked them politely to stop. One of them had tried to push her and the next thing he knew he was face down in the gutter with her heel on his neck. She had his arm twisted up behind his back so that he couldn't move. His friend had moved to help him, but Smith's arm went round his neck and his arm was also twisted up behind his back.

"What's your name, son," Smith had asked him.

The boy had gulped out his name.

"I'm going to let you go, and you're going to give me some ID, OK?" Smith had told him.

The boy had nodded and did so. Smith had noted it down in a notebook.

“Let him up, Jones. Right, your ID please. Thank you. Now, you two are lucky. We are not the police so we don’t have to turn you in. However, we are registered national security.”

He flashed his card and so did Jones. Suddenly they didn’t look like an ordinary old couple. They looked like a menacing old couple.

“Now I have your details, and if the owner of that car who lives at number 20 tells me that you’ve apologised for causing the damage to his car and paid for the repair, then we will forget all this happened. Do you understand? Good. Now scram.”

“Still got it,” Smith had said, as they watched the boys scurry off.

“Still got it, Jones. Oh well back to our posts.”

They had nodded to Bel and Johan who were still watching and faded into the night. After that incident Johan felt much more secure.

Smith said, “Well, you’ll be off to the Capital shortly, we heard. Don’t worry about your loved ones. We will look after them, and someone will continue to look after your house while you are away, just in case. If you wouldn’t mind leaving us some keys, that would help.”

Johan jokingly said, “I didn’t think that you would need keys.”

Smith looked at Jones and both smiled. “Well, to be honest, we could, if we needed to, get in without them, but it’s more polite I feel, if you loan us some keys.”

“It’s only in case a pipe bursts or something like that. I don’t think we’ll need to use them,” said Jones.

Staying at the Palace

So Johan and Bel packed their kids off to the grandparents and flew off to the Capital. They were met at the airport by a security man, a real ‘man in black’ who grabbed all their luggage and packed them off into a black car, which passed through the airport gates without stopping.

“Wow!” said Johan. “I wonder if everyone gets this treatment?”

The agent in the front seat turned around and said “Oh, yes. We’ve been told to take good care of all fifty three of you. And spouses. Did you know that you are being put up at the Palace?”

“No, the letter said that accommodation would be arranged. But the Palace! Wow!” replied Johan.

“Yes, and even for the Palace, it’s a pretty tight fit for the hundred or so of you. “Some are in the stable block, which is mostly accommodation these days, and some are in the Annex. I’ve not been told exactly where you are going to be.”

It turned out to be the main Palace. They were shown to their rooms by a bewigged gentleman who told them to treat it like a hotel room.

“You’ll have privacy in here. These are your rooms for the duration, and these are your ID tags. Please wear them at all times. They will get you into rooms that you are authorised to have access to. Please use the phone if you want anything. You can leave the room if you wish, of course, but there will be a footman outside. Just stay with him while you are in the Palace. Most people ask their footman to give them a tour when they’ve settled in. Oh, there’s a schedule on the desk. You’ll see that most mornings are booked out from nine, and the afternoon are usually free. You can leave the Palace, but you will have to take security with you. Don’t worry, they’ll be casually dressed and we have ordinary day to day cars too.”

Johan and Bel just looked stunned.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be as bad as all that. Can I get someone to get you some tea? Oh, there’s an informal meal tonight with the King, Queen and Princess. No need to dress up for it. Seven thirty.”

“Yes, tea would be lovely, thank you,” said Bel.

Bel and Johan unpacked their bags and a maid brought them some tea. They took it out onto the balcony that adjoined their rooms.

“It’s nice, isn’t it,” said Bel.

Johan nodded. “At least we can say that we have stayed at the Palace.”

Bel and Johan asked the page outside their room for a tour. His name was Victor.

He took them round the wing that they were in first, and told them all about the Palace.

“Do you know anything about these gorgeous paintings,” said Johan. “I think that I recognise some of them. Are they the originals?”

Victor confessed that he wasn’t sure. “I expect so, but those that aren’t will be good copies. Each one has a number and there’s a catalogue of them in the library.”

Victor took them through the grounds which were meticulously kept, with gardeners continually tending them.

“There’s a gym and a small swimming pool in that building if you are into keeping fit. There’s also an unofficial circuit around the grounds if running your style”.

Just then, they met Princess Teresa coming the other way.

“Oh good, I see you’ve settled in. Hullo Bel, Johan. Hi Victor. I can check you off my list. I’m trying to get round everyone! See Victor if you have any problems.”

She swept off, leaving the three of them in her wake.

“It’s good to see her so animated,” commented Victor. “She’s been very down recently. Everyone’s been worried.”

“I hope that the new heir looks after her, poor thing,” said Bel.

Victor looked at her. “We all will,” he said.

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry.”

Victor smiled. “No worries. I can see that you are concerned. That’s nice.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “I’d better get you back to your rooms. You’ll want to get ready for the evening meal. It’s informal and they mean informal. T-shirt and jeans, sneakers, that sort of thing. Someone always dresses up and looks out of place, and believe me they stand out like a sore thumb.”

An Informal Dinner

Victor showed Bel and Johan to what he called the “small Banquet room” at just before seven thirty. Quite few people had already arrived and there was a conversational hum. Princess Teresa was chatting to people as they arrived and so were an older couple.

“That’s the King and Queen,” said Bel in surprise. Teresa spotted them and came over.

“Hi you two, come and meet my mother in law and father in law.”

“Hi Bel and Johan. I’m pleased to meet you. I don’t need to tell you that you are special!” said the King.

“No sir. Everyone keeps saying that were special. It makes us pretty uncomfortable, actually.”

The King just nodded. “I understand. My wife and I feel like that all the time, of course. I was born to it, but my wife, well, sometimes it gets to her. Then we go away up north and stay in a cottage and cook each other breakfast. It’s relaxing.”

“Even if he does burn the toast!” said the Queen.

They moved on and Johan and Bel moved on into the room. It seemed that most people knew of their special status and wanted to talk to them, which made them slightly uncomfortable. After a while an attendant in a wig hit a small gong.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, can you please be seated? There are place cards with your names on them on the tables.”

A scramble ensued as people looked for their names and after a few minutes they were all seated. Bel and Johan were on a table with four others.

“Hi, I’m Mikey,” said a guy in a bright shirt, “and this is Dougal, my husband.” They all shook hands, and Bel and Johan introduced themselves to the other four. The remaining couple introduced themselves as Liam and Hazel. It turned out that they didn’t come from far away from where Bel was from so Bel chatted to them about that.”

The gong sounded again, and Teresa stood up to speak.

“Good evening everyone, and welcome to the Palace. You all know why we are here so I’ll just mention that actual testing won’t take long, so please enjoy the Palace. If you want to escape for a while, we can arrange that, and if, say, a group wanted to visit the Zoo, well, we can arrange that too. Tomorrow morning we will open the ‘conference’ and the media will be here. Tomorrow

afternoon we start the testing. We expect the first negative result within one hour after the start of the test.”

“It’s a strange situation that we find ourselves in. It’s a lottery that most people will not want to win, but my experts tell me that when people are told that they test negative, it could be a disappointment. You may find that hard to believe right now, but our people will be following up with those who test negative to help them through any issues. Are there any questions?”

Mikey put his hand up.

“Yes, Mikey?”

“If this is a lottery, what’s the second prize,” asked Mikey.

Everyone laughed.

“Our eternal gratitude, Mikey. Our eternal gratitude. Ladies and gentlemen, Mikey has been a long time friend of my poor husband and myself. He is also a very distant relative of the Royal family, through a younger son. So far as we know this doesn’t make him any more likely to be the new heir. But we don’t understand the processes very well, if at all.”

“Some people have asked us about the testing process. Well, I can tell you some more about it, but some things I will have to keep back, for various reasons. I’m sorry about that.”

“The first test, first. That simply tested for two factors that all recent monarchs have in their blood. We can’t test too far back, for obvious reasons, but there are theoretical reasons for believing that lack of the two factors show that a person cannot be the heir. Or a monarch. This gave us a smaller group of people to test. I must stress that the first test could give a wrong result – in other words, if all we had was the first test, the next heir might still be out there.

Her audience muttered a little.

“The second test gives us a bit more certainty. Part of it has to do with what happened when you met your partner. Every one of you told us that when you met your partner ‘something happened’, or ‘something changed’, or even ‘it was like an electric shock’. This happened within minutes of you meeting, but not necessarily immediately. Some of you didn’t immediately link up, but eventually you did.”

She paused. “I remember when I met my poor Steven. It was immediate. Anyway, there were also a couple of other things that we looked for in the interviews and the paper quizzes that were relevant, but not particularly indicative.”

“The medical part was the core of the test. We re-did the first test with your blood samples as a check. We found some people who were using fictitious identities! Since they were effectively volunteers we told them quietly that we had detected the ‘error’ and left it to them to sort it out.”

Secondly we x-rayed and scanned you and looked for anomalies in the pineal gland. Again, we haven’t been able to test many monarchs but all monarchs and a number of others have an anomaly of the gland, which has been dubbed the ‘draconid process’ or ‘draconid extension’. All fifty three of you have this ‘draconid process’.”

A stir went around the room.

“So where are we? A certain number of people opted out of the first test. A smaller number opted out of the second test, but nobody who proved positive in the second test opted out of the third. Statistically, the odds are still very high that the next heir is in this room.”

“The third test is simple. We inject you with a substance that I’m not allowed to describe. This substance stimulates the draconid process which produces, well, let’s call it a hormone. Most people will produce something called ‘draconin A’ within three or four days. Some people will produce it within hours. If you produce draconin A, you are not the heir. We will give the option of saying goodbye to any friends you may have made here, or if you wish you can just be taken home.”

“That will reduce the number of possible candidates to two or three. After three days the remaining candidates, if there are any, will be injected with another substance. It is possible that one of the candidates will then produce a different hormone called ‘draconin B’ within twenty four hours. That person will be the new heir, with a very high probability.”

“The second substance will have no effect if the first substance has not been in the blood for three days. There is a chance that someone here might react to one or other of the substances, but the reactions in the past have been minor, such as sleepiness or itching. We will be monitoring you closely during this test.”

“Any questions? Yes, Mikey. I might have known that you’d have one.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Have you taken these tests, Teresa?”

“Well, that’s a good question, actually. I was positive in the first test, and negative in the second. I don’t have the draconid process, so I’ve never taken the third test. But I’ve seen Steven and the current King take the test, as well as several others, and there’s not a lot to it.”

“One last thing before we eat. I know that you know that Bel and Johan are our only couple. Mikey is, we believe, the most closely related to the current King. We have five women here out of fifty three candidates, including Bel, about the same ratio as Queens to Kings in the past list of

monarchs. But all of you are special. Fifty three out of the whole population. When you leave here you will be famous for a week or two and a target for the media, some of you longer, and we will help you with that.”

“I will be available to all of you, this week, and when you leave here. Anyway, let’s eat.”

Servers started to bring out food, and a hum of convivial conversation sprung up.

“I sure relate to Teresa’s comments about ‘something happening’ when I met Dougal.” said Mikey.
“Boy, was that ever a shock!”

“You’d never think to look at him, but Mikey was a quiet little mouse when I met him,” said Dougal.

“Yes, that’s because I didn’t know who I was or what I was at the time. I was really mixed up, so I sort of hid from the world. It started when I was at school.”

Mikey's Story

Mikey's family were rich, so he went to a private school, where he boarded during the term times. By and large he was OK with this as home was a pretty depressing place. His mother left when he was a baby, and was unfortunately killed in a car accident shortly afterwards. He thought that his father was unhappy because of what had happened to his mother.

The boys in Mikey's school roughly divided themselves into two camps. There was the sporty crowd who played rugby, tennis and cricket or other sports and there was the studious crowd, who spent their spare time in the library, or preparing for some theatrical production. There were a few like Mikey, who didn't really fit into either camp.

Mikey was aware that some of the boys went round in pairs, mainly the studious crowd. He didn't think much of it. He just thought that it was what boys did in school. He was a sexual innocent, and didn't think of his coupled friends as gay.

One boy, nicknamed Fatty George in typical cruel schoolboy fashion, made approaches to Mikey. Mikey didn't much like him as he was sweaty and smelled. He also ate with his mouth open.

“Hey, Mikey, what're you doing?”

Mikey was leaning against the wall watching some boys playing an informal game of cricket. The wicket was a chalk mark on the wall, and the ball was a tennis ball.

“Watching the cricket. Why?”

“Want to go round the back of the Gym with me?” Fatty George was sweating more than usual. He put his arm round Mikey, but Mikey shrugged it off.

“Why?”

This stumped Fatty George. “See what's there?” he tried.

“Not really,” said Mikey.

Fatty George tried to put his arm around Mikey again. “Come on,” he pleaded.

“NO!” said Mikey squirming away. “Leave me alone!”

He ran away, unsure what had just happened. He knew that boys sometimes disappeared behind the Gym, but he didn't really know why. It was pretty bleak round there, hidden from the sun so that nothing grew, the dumping ground for broken sports equipment and piles of decaying grass clippings.

As he grew older he picked up a fact here and a fact there, misinformation here and misinformation there, like all boys of his age. He, like any other child who is not told about sex, formed a picture which was reasonably accurate.

He was interesting in same sex couples, and mentioned it to his father. His father who was very old fashioned exploded.

“Never mention those people again! We’ll have none of that sort of thing in this family! We’ll have to get you married off as soon as possible.” his father said, disregarding the fact that Mikey was not even suggesting that he was “one of those people”.

Mikey thought about this a lot. Could he be one of those people? To be sure, he wasn’t attracted to the opposite sex, but then he didn’t seem to be particularly attracted to his own either. He loved the curve of a cheek, the line of a leg or an arm. A smile, or a laugh. It didn’t matter much to him whether curve belonged to a male or a female.

When he was nineteen he was introduced to Emily. She was the daughter of another rich family, and Mikey thought she was a nice girl. Her face was beautiful, and she had a friendly laugh. He enjoyed being with her. Somehow it came to be understood that they were going to be married, but Mikey never actually proposed as such.

He thought that the sexual attraction would come with the marriage, but it didn’t. Seeing Em’s body was a shock. It wasn’t disgust, indeed he could intellectually appreciate the beauty of it. It just didn’t arouse him sexually, though he tried and Em tried too.

After a particularly dismal attempt at sex, Em turned over on her side and looked at him.

“Mikey, it’s not going to happen, is it? But, boy, you’ve tried. You’ve really tried, I have to give you that. I appreciate it, believe it or not.”

“I’m so sorry, Em. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

She snorted. “It’s obvious to me that you are just like your father. If I were a boy, I think that there would be no problems.”

“Like my father?” Mikey was confused. Suddenly a light dawned. “You mean, my father...”

“Oh, Mikey, you are so naive sometimes. Think about the times he has gone off for a weekend with one of his ‘pals’. Why do you think your mother left him? Everyone knows. Well, I’m not going to walk out on you. I like you a lot.”

Mikey whole life became unravelled, then knitted itself together again in a different pattern.

“You think I’m... Oh, Em, I’m so sorry. What have I got you into?”

“Shush, Mikey, it’s not so bad. You’re a nice guy, and I could do a lot worse. Of course, we’ll need some help to get you an heir, but a good doctor could help out there.”

She was referring to the fact that Mikey wouldn’t inherit from his father unless he produced an heir.

So it was arranged. Mikey and Em visited a doctor who arranged for Em to become pregnant with Mikey’s baby. Mikey’s father was pleased, and Em and Mikey were ecstatic.

And so little Di was born. Her grandfather was a little annoyed that she wasn’t a boy, but she was Em and Mikey’s legal heir, and he could do nothing about that. Em and Mikey struggled with what they called their “problem”, but in spite of that they were not unhappy. Then Mikey met Dougal.

Em and Mikey were at a charity party for children in need. They were both keen supporters of the charity, and they enjoyed being out together. Dougal was one of the organisers of the party, but wasn’t not connected to the charity himself. He introduced himself to them, and shook hands with Em. Then he shook hands with Mikey, and something changed.

Em sucked in a breath, and Mikey and Dougal looked confused. Em took control.

“Let’s go get a coffee,” she said brightly.

The trio went to the coffee table and ordered their coffees then Em found them a quiet table.

“What the hell happened there?” she hissed.

“I don’t know,” said Mikey, miserably. Dougal nodded in agreement.

“So, how would you like to come down and stay with us at the weekend,” Em asked Dougal.

Dougal visited at the weekend and he and Mikey took long walks together. Em watched from afar. Mikey touched Dougal’s arm to direct him, and somehow didn’t take it back.

At the end of weekend Em called a conference of the three of them.

“Right guys. I think I see what is going on here. Mikey, I want you to be happy. Dougal, I don’t know you, but it seems that you are the one for him. But we have a problem here. Mikey is already married, to me, and I’m not going to divorce him, for little Di’s sake. Do you agree with me on this?”

“Yes, Em, I totally agree with you,” said Dougal. “Mikey hinted at the issues that you face, both of you, and I agree. Nothing should be done that hurts you or your daughter.”

He touched her hand, and she held it. She reached out to Mikey and he held her hand. Mikey and Dougal also held hands.

“Three way agreement, then. We keep this secret, for now. But, Mikey, dear, you have my permission to get to know Dougal. Just make sure no one knows.”

A Press Conference

After Mikey told his story, Bel said “Our daughter is called Diane too! What happened next? You’re not being secret about it now, are you? You’re married, aren’t you?”

“No, we three kept our secret for several years. We were petrified that my father would find out and disinherit Em and me and our daughter. But my father died of a heart attack at barely sixty. The poor tortured hypocritical old soul. I loved my father in spite of everything. So everything came to me.”

“We had another council. Em as usual took the lead. ‘Guys’, she said, ‘I love you both like brothers. I especially love Mikey, who has tried his hardest to make this marriage work. But from the moment he met you, Dougal, it was all over. Guys, I propose that Mikey divorces me and marries you, Dougal. I propose that Mikey provides for me and Di, through the divorce.’ I agreed and we split the estate fifty-fifty. Di will still inherit the titles when she is old enough. She is still my heir and Em’s heir.”

Dougal said “Em is the most amazing woman. She’s so loving and adorable. Di is an amazing kid. I don’t feel like I’ve split them up, not that I could have helped it. I feel more like I’ve helped something develop. I’m sure that Em will find someone of her own sometime, but I hope that we can keep in touch.”

At the end of the dinner, Princess Teresa stood up and called for attention.

“Tomorrow we start the test, but in the morning we have to greet the media. They’ll be most interested in Bel and Johan, and maybe in Mikey, but all fifty three of you will be of interest. We’ve given them potted biographies of you all, but if any of you have skeletons in your cupboards that we don’t know about, they are likely to find them out. Be prepared to answer any questions they may throw at you. Please be here at nine tomorrow.”

The media session went as Princess Teresa had outlined. Many of the questions were directed at Bel and Johan, and some were directed at Mikey. Bel grasped Johan’s hand and Mikey’s hand, and after a second or two, Mikey and Johan grasped the hands of those next to them, and the hand clasps passed down the line until all fifty three were joined together.

Mostly the questions were about the future and “how will this change your life?”

Johan summed it up. “Someone said that this was a lottery that no one wants to win. The reason, we, all fifty three of us, have put up our names for testing is because we want to know, for us and for our children, particularly our oldest child. If one of us turns out to be the heir, then he or she will have thirty years to prepare themselves for the inevitable end. He or she will have thirty years to prepare his or her own heir.”

“The heir, if he or she is found, will be ‘adopted’ into the Royal family. The heir and spouse will not be able to return to normal life. They will never be able to slip out to the supermarket, and you guys, the media, will follow them everywhere. They will have to smile and shake hands, smile and cut ribbons, smile and declare things open. Their lives will become public, and that sucks, frankly.”

“I said that we want to know, but that’s not entirely true. We need to know, whatever it costs. We need to know.”

At the end of the media session, the media were allowed to mingle with the fifty three and that didn’t go too well at first as everyone wanted to meet with Johan and Bel. Security stopped them from being overwhelmed, directing the media people away. Suddenly Bel spotted Leen.

“Let her through please! She’s a friend of ours,” said Bel. “Oh, and yes, let her cameraman through too.”

“Hi, guys, how are you doing,” said Leen. “What a scrum!”

“Yeah, it’s a bit crazy isn’t it. How have you and Pete doing? Did your interview go out?” asked Bel.

“My lovely Pete is getting on with his book. He loves taking the kids to school and then working for a few hours at home. He’s got a contract for his book and it isn’t finished yet! One of my Dad’s friends is a publisher’s agent, and he got a contract out of a publisher for Pete. Look out for his book soon! Oh, that interview goes out tonight as part of the coverage of this event. It’ll look as if we interviewed you today, and it will be mashed into the coverage.”

“Do you want to interview us today?” asked Johan. “We can ask if it is OK.”

Johan looked to see if he could see Teresa anywhere, just as she was coming over.

“Hullo, you’re Eileen, aren’t you?”

“Leen’, ma’am. Johan wants me to interview him today. Is that OK?”

Teresa turned to the assembled front men and women of the media and their cameramen. “Sorry guys, Johan and Bel are not giving any more interviews today. Please find someone else to interview.”

The crush around Johan and Bel started to break up, and with a bit of muttering the interviewers and cameramen moved on.

“Nice one, Leen,” one of them called, as he moved away.

“Ouch! I’m going to be at the back of the queue for a while. They’ll see to that,” said Leen. “But don’t worry, it’s mostly good natured rivalry.”

Teresa said “Sorry you two. That was a bit rougher than I expected. Come in here.”

They moved into a side room.

Teresa said “Ask anything you want. If you touch on something I have a problem with, I’ll stop the interview so that we can discuss it. Is that OK with you?”

Leen nodded, cleared her throat, asked the cameraman if he was ready, and launched into the interview. Teresa sat out of line of sight of the camera. Since they had already covered the basics in the earlier interview, Leen concentrated on the current test. Johan looked briefly at Teresa before answering some of the questions.

“Cut, Leen,” said the cameraman. “Johan, you keep looking at the Princess for her OK. From the camera’s point of view it looks odd, as if you are glancing over Leen’s shoulder. OK, sorry folks. Let’s start again.”

“Thanks, Al,” said Leen. “Sorry, I should have spotted that.”

She started over again, and this time Al was satisfied with it. Teresa didn’t intervene once. When Leen was done she called cut and everyone relaxed.

“Nice work, Leen,” said Teresa. “You’re good. Do you want me to let you out another way?”

“Thanks, ma’am,” said Leen. “I’ll have to work with those guys. I think I’d better face the music. I expect that they’re mostly just jealous!”

She stood up and gave Bel and Johan a hug.

“Good luck, you two. Keep in touch!” and then she and the cameraman were gone, back through the door.

“Right! Time to throw the media out, I think,” said Teresa.

She strode off and followed Leen and the cameraman through the door. At her signal, an attendant rang a bell.

“Can I have your attention please? This press conference is closing. Can the media representatives please make your way through the end doors? Thank you for your attendance. Any more questions that you have can be sent to the Public Relations Team here at the Palace.”

There was some good natured grumbling as the media teams made their way out of the room.

“Right, it’s now eleven o’clock and lunch will be at noon in the cafeteria. Your pages will direct you. At two PM please assemble in the Princess Afua Room. That’s when we will start the third test. OK?”

The Test Begins

Couples started to drift off, and Dougal and Mikey met up with them.

“She didn’t say where the bar was,” complained Mikey.

“You can get alcoholic drinks in the cafeteria,” said a girl behind him.

“Oh, this is Bex, our page,” said Dougal.

“And this is Victor, our page,” said Bel, as Victor caught up with them.

“The cafeteria, it is then, please Victor and Bex!” said Mikey.

When they got there, it appeared that it was a popular choice. Many of the couples had arrived and the bar was busy. Mikey ordered a whiskey and soda, and Bel and Johan had a white wine and a red. Dougal took a beer. The two pages stuck with soft drinks. The six of them grabbed a table.

“You’re OK sitting with us?” Johan asked the pages. Both nodded.

“Yes, we’re allowed, but we can’t drink alcohol of course,” said Bex. “By the way, there’s a one drink limit at lunchtime, if you are drinking alcohol.”

“You’re both very young. Are you students?” asked Bel.

“Well, I am, and you are, aren’t you, Vic? Some of the pages are older, and they are permanent staff. I’m a history student.”

“And I’m studying political science,” said Vic. “We had to learn the layout of the Palace and the names of all the rooms. Then we were tested on it. In one test they blindfolded us, took us somewhere and removed the blindfolds and asked us where we were. That was hard.”

“And the history of the rooms and halls. Which monarch decorated the room or lived in it and so on,” said Bex.

Johan took out his sketch pad and pencil and did a sketch of the two pages and showed his drawing to them.

“Wow, that’s good,” said Bex, showing Mikey and Dougal. They passed book to Victor, so that he could see the drawings too.

Dougal started. "Johan.... Did you paint 'Seated Girl in Romance Style'? I thought I'd heard your name somewhere! I saw that picture at the National Gallery. It's amazing. Oh, wait a minute. The girl was Bel, wasn't it?"

"Yes, you're right, Dougal. Are you a painter?"

Dougal waved that away. "No, an admirer of art, and a gallery owner. I try, but I'm not very good. I recognised your style."

"Well, you have a good eye, anyway. Yes, the girl was based on Bel."

He told the story of the painting.

"Oh, how romantic!" said Bex.

"Well, yes, but it was also frustrating and a lot of hard work!" laughed Johan.

Just then food started to be served, so they all lined up and got their meals. Mikey cheerfully commented on the food, which he allowed "wasn't bad". In fact it was very good. When they had eaten, Bex and Victor volunteered to get the coffees and they went off on that errand.

Mikey had noticed that Bel had been a bit quiet. He put his hand over hers.

"Are you worried by the test, Bel? You've been a bit quiet."

"Thanks, Mikey. I'm missing the kids and you're right, I'm not looking forward to the test."

Johan held her other hand.

"I'm not looking forward to it, either," he said. "Hold up, my love. It'll all be over by Friday. If not earlier."

"Oh, I hope so. I really hope so."

Dougal put his hand on Mikey's shoulder.

"Are you OK, old boy?" he asked.

Mikey patted Dougal's hand. He rolled his eyes.

"Oh, I'll live. But it's a bit of a downer, isn't it. Anyway, here's the coffee. Chins up, folks."

And just like that, Mikey reverted to his usual cheerful persona.

After the coffee, the group broke up and Victor took Bel and Johan back to their rooms. As soon as the door closed Bel hugged Johan tight. He encircled her with his arms.

“I wish this was all over,” she said. “Even if... Even if one of us is positive, I want this to be all over.”

“So do I, my love. I miss the kids. Let’s put on a brave face.”

He turned on the television, which was a mistake. All programming seemed to have been cancelled and replaced by endless discussion and speculation on the topic of the search for the new heir. They watched appalled for a few minutes and then switched it off.

There was a tap on the door, which proved to be Victor.

“Princess Teresa’s compliments. She suggests you don’t try to watch television.”

“Too late, Victor,” said Johan, “but thanks.”

“Boy, I’ve never seen her so angry,” said Victor. “She says she should have anticipated it. Nothing she can do about it, though.”

“Thanks, Victor,” said Johan. Victor retreated to his post and Johan shut the door.

“Well,” said Bel, defiantly. “I’m going to pamper myself in that amazing bathroom.”

She disappeared and Johan settled down to wait. He got his sketch pad out and swiftly drafted out his memories of the morning. Teresa standing and speaking. The media scrum, Leen and Al, her cameraman. Teresa sitting silently behind the cameraman. Mikey raising a glass, with Dougal next to him. Even Victor at his post in the hallway, framed by a huge glass window.

Bel came out of the bathroom, smelling of scents and soaps, her hair wrapped in a towel. He showed her his sketches.

“Oh, a record of the day.”

“Sort of. Impressions mainly. I might make them into something later.”

She went of into the bedroom to dry her hair. When she came out, she looked amazing. Johan stood up and wrapped her in his arms again.

“Five to two,” she pointed out. Just at that minute Victor rapped on the door.

“OK, let’s go,” she said to Johan.

The Princess Afua Room was a hive of activity. As couples came in they were directed to seats on the left. One by one the spouses who were being tested were called up to a short row of tables. The testee then answered a few medical questions then the nurse or doctor gave him or her a bracelet with the testee's name and number on it. Then the testee was fitted with a cannula in the back of the hand and a sample of blood was taken and a small amount of liquid from a small brown bottle was injected through the cannula.

"We insert the cannula so that we can take frequent blood samples. You just had your injection of the substance, as we've been told to call it. We'll take blood once an hour for the first few hours, then every couple of hours tomorrow. Can you please sit over there on the right?" said Johan's doctor.

Johan wandered over to the seating area. Mikey and Dougal were already there, sitting on a couch> Mikey was looking a little grey.

"Poor dear, doesn't like needles," explained Dougal.

Johan thought that the cannula wasn't painful, though it was uncomfortable.

"Bel's not through yet. They make her a bit irritable."

Bel arrived just at that moment. She didn't look pleased.

"A cannula! I had enough of these darned things when I was giving birth. They are so uncomfortable. Why are you all smiling?"

She was mad at them at first, but then started to laugh herself.

They were just having a coffee when the last of the testees came over to the seating area. A doctor in a white coat came over.

"Um, Princess Teresa sends her apologies. She couldn't make it this afternoon. Anyway, we'd like you to stay here until the evening meal, which is at seven today. We'll be calling you up every hour until then to take blood samples. Testing the samples takes about an hour, and Princess Teresa tells me that about five or six of you will test positive for draconin A, today and can go home. Your pages will help you with that. If you have any question, please ask."

Time passed slowly. Now and then someone would be called up, and someone would wander back. They chatted together and read magazines. A few wandered off into an adjoining television lounge, but neither Johan nor Bel fancied that. Bel leaned against him and he put his arm around her., and they dozed through the hours between calls. Dougal had gone off into the television lounge, but Mikey stayed behind, reading a book.

Dougal came back and sat next to Mikey and held his hand.

“Are they still going on about the search?” asked Mikey.

“Yes, but I think that they are winding it down. They haven’t got much real information, and they won’t have until Teresa releases it, later tonight. Basically they are guessing and showing snippets of your interviews all the time.”

“Oh no!” said Bel.

The afternoon dragged on, but then someone rang a bell. Two of the fifty three and their spouses waved goodbye as they exited through the doors. They looked relieved as they went, as if a great weight had been lifted from them. Johan quickly sketched the scene, as he had been doing all afternoon.

The bell rang a few more times as more people left, and, just after six PM Teresa appeared.

“Sorry I haven’t been around this afternoon, but I had something urgent come up. Also I had to prepare for tonight’s announcement. I don’t know if anyone is counting, but six people tested positive today and have left. We expect another twenty or so to test positive tomorrow, and then most of the rest will come up positive the next day.”

“Today has been both gruelling and, at the same time, boring, I know. However, tomorrow you don’t have to stay here, in this room. In fact, you can leave now, if you wish. You have the freedom of the palace, so long as you turn up at your testing times. You can even leave the Palace, so long as you take security guards with you, so long as you are here for the testing.”

Day Two – The Testing Continues

When Teresa had left, Mikey stood up.

“Listen everyone. I’m calling the first meeting of the ‘Survivors Club’, in the cafeteria before the evening meal. Is anyone coming along?”

Most of them started to make their way to the cafeteria, following Mikey and Dougal.

“You’re a bit glum, in patches, Mikey. Are you OK?” asked Bel, linking arms with him.

Mikey laughed. “Yeah, I’m not myself today. It’s all a big facade. Underneath, I’m the gloomiest person alive. It’s hard to keep up the show.”

“It’s not true, Bel,” laughed Dougal. “He’s cheerful enough, normally. It must be something he’s eaten.”

Bel laughed and dropped back to walk hand in hand with Johan. Looking around she saw some long faces among their fellow “survivors”. She nodded. She’d mention it to Teresa next time she saw her, but Teresa was probably aware of it.

The next morning at nine when she and Johan arrived at the Princess Afua Room, Teresa was already there.

“OK, ‘survivors’. Thanks to Mikey for inventing the term! We are only going to take blood every two hours, but we will have a lot of hours to fill, today and tomorrow, so we decided to see if we can make things more bearable. I’ve talked with Mikey, who apart from being a prize clown, has some good ideas. We have a luxury spa in the Palace, but you will have to book it if that takes your fancy. We can also run little tours of the Palace, with a bit more depth than we usually do. Johan, I think that you would be interested in a tour of the artworks. Gregory, you were interested in the gardens. There are a couple of you who are fitness enthusiasts. The kitchen are happy to show some of their techniques if cooking is your thing. If you want to do something I’ve not mentioned, seriously, let me know and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Don’t forget the whisky,” called Mikey, who had been spluttering with laughter over Teresa’s description of him.

“Oh, yes, Mikey’s family run a couple of distilleries and he’s arranged for one of his guys to run a whisky tasting session. Oh, and as regards alcohol, we don’t want to be party poopers, and a couple of drinks in the evenings will be OK, but we will be keeping an eye on consumption, and will step in if we consider a line has been crossed.”

“I’m booking for the spa,” said Mikey. “Anyone else?”

“No, not me,” said Dougal. “You go and book up for it though.”

“Come with us on the art tour,” suggested Bel. Johan nodded.

“OK, you’re on,” said Dougal. “Oops! The vampires want your blood, Mikey.”

When they had had their blood taken, Johan and Bel, joined Dougal for the art tour. There were a few others who wanted to look at the pictures and statues and other artworks that adorned the Palace walls.

The senior page who showed them around was very knowledgeable about the paintings and sculptures and other art works. He knew which of them were originals and which were just good copies. He also pointed out the wall hangings and furniture, as well as the decoration in some of the rooms.

“Do the paintings and statues all stay here all the time?” asked Bel. “It seems a pity if only a few people get to see them.”

“Oh no,” said the senior page. “We have an exchange program with galleries all over the country. Some of the ones here don’t belong to the Palace, but are on loan. We also sometimes send out pieces of furniture and even the finest crockery. But also, it’s not well known but anyone can apply for a tour.”

“Here’s one that will interest you, Johan,” the page said, as they turned a corner.

The painting was done in the romantic or romance style and showed a seated woman. In the background a train crossed a viaduct.

“Oh, it’s yours, Johan,” gasped Bel.

Johan was startled. “I thought that that was in the National Gallery. Wait....”

He shook his head.

“No, this isn’t mine. There are tiny, tiny differences. I think I know who painted it though.”

He looked at the page.

“It was done by an autistic fellow,” said the page. “He saw your painting once and he did this from memory.”

“Yes,” said Johan. “Johnny. I met him once, though he wouldn’t talk to us. It was sad really. He had an enormous talent, but he only copied things. Paintings by other people. Or photographs. Or even

views that he had seen just the once, years ago. It's like he had all the talent but no creativity, no spark. It was amazing, but incredibly depressing. He died didn't he?"

"Yes stepped out in front of a car. They reckon he didn't understand that it would hit him and hurt him."

"It's a great painting," said Johan. "But it's not art. It's no more art than a photocopy is art. And it's very, very sad."

"Well, I need to get you back," said the page. "Your next blood tests are in thirty minutes, so time for a coffee or a tea, if you want."

Mikey was back from the spa looking fresher when they got back. They went and got coffee and joined him and the group around him.

"Ten more gone as a result of this morning's first test," he announced. "Thirty seven left. I asked Teresa to put up a running total, but she thought it would be depressing and a distraction. She's probably right."

They all waited for their names to be called, and it was noticeable that it was already quicker. It was noticeable that the "survivors" were developing a structure. The largest group surrounded Mikey, Dougal, Bel and Johan, with about fifteen members with their spouses. Two other groups formed, each of around six or seven members. The rest moved between groups from time to time or sat alone with their spouses.

After their bloods were taken the remaining survivors seemed, without discussion, to stay around for the results. The first one to be called for from the largest group was a farmer called Phil.

"Phew, that's a relief," he said as he and his wife left. "Good luck to you all, whatever happens. It's been nice to meet you all."

"Another eight," said Mikey who had been keeping count. "Twenty nine."

He jumped up and started walking aimlessly up and down.

"Let's visit the gardens," said Dougal.

"Sure, sure," said Mikey, distractly.

"We'll come too," said Bel.

They wandered through the gardens, not really seeing much.

“You know, it’s not the passing over that worries me. We all have to go some time, and apparently it isn’t painful. It’s being King. I think I’d make a terrible King. It’s too serious a business for me. I like a good laugh and a King can’t have a good laugh, can he? Oh, dear. All that pomp and circumstance.”

He sank down on a bench and put his head in his hands. Dougal put his arm around him, and on the other side, Bel started to reach for his hand. She stopped and looked at Dougal who nodded, and so took Mikey’s hand in hers.

“Johan, we need Teresa,” said Bel.

Johan nodded and he and Victor hurried off in search of her. They found her talking to the doctors and she commandeered one of them and they hurried back to Mikey with a wheel chair.

“Mikey, take this,” Teresa said, giving him a pill.

“What is it?”

“Just a sedative.”

Mikey took the pill and swallowed it.

“Mikey, I’m sorry we didn’t notice that you were having trouble. We’ve helped a number of others before they got to this stage. That sedative will relax you and you may fall asleep. Bex, Dougal, let’s get him to his rooms.”

Teresa, Bel and Johan watched as the doctor, Bex and Dougal took Mikey off. Teresa turned to Bel and Johan.

“What about you two? How are you holding up?”

Bel and Johan looked at each other.

“Well, it’s not fun, but at the moment we are OK, aren’t we?” said Bel, turning to Johan.

“Yes, at the moment.”

A page arrived with a message and Teresa apologised and hurried off.

“Mikey has a point though,” said Bel. “Being King is probably going to be hard, especially as we haven’t grown up in the job. But Teresa didn’t grow up in the job and she seems OK with it.”

“Yes, he’s also right about the passing over. From the stories that are told, it seems like the Monarch becomes more and more tired and finally falls asleep. For the Monarch anyway, it’s a fairly easy

way to go. For the Monarch's spouse, though it's hard, it's not like seeing their partner wasting away and dying from a painful disease," said Johan.

Mikey didn't turn up for lunch or the one o'clock blood collection. Dougal stopped by though, to give them an update. Everyone knew Mikey, and Dougal had to answer lots of questions. Finally he sat down next to Bel and Johan.

"Phew, that's tough. I've never seen Mikey so down, but he'll be cheered up a bit when I tell him that everyone asked after him."

"How is he?" asked Johan.

"Well, sleeping mostly. Apologising to anyone within range when he's awake. Teresa stopped by and told him not to worry. No, she ordered him not to worry! He wants to be around for the three o'clock collection, and he is a lot better. Oh, there goes another one!"

One of the pages had just drawn one of the "survivors" aside and taken him and his wife to one of the side rooms. Some people returned to say goodbye to their new friends, but others went out of another door and were not seen again. This man decided to go out the other way, a survivor no more.

After lunch Dougal went back to Mikey and Bel and Johan returned to their rooms and rested. The television coverage no longer concentrated on the search, except for an occasional bulletin as ex-survivors told their tales. Relieved but also disappointed seemed to be the usual feeling.

"Oh look, there's Leen!" said Johan. "So she didn't get frozen out after all."

"Oh, I'm not surprised. Leen always gets what she wants, though she's a nice girl for all that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look how she hooked Pete! Oh, she loves him, there's no doubt of that, but he never stood a chance, did he? Although I don't think he cared."

"What do you mean?" asked Johan once again.

"Well, she's an expert at unarmed combat. They both are, and she's not clueless. So, how come she supposedly put herself in danger, so that Pete could rush in and save her?"

"What? You think that she arranged that?"

"Pete said it himself. If he hadn't rushed to her defence she was preparing to flatten the goon."

"But..."

“And they were always fighting and getting back together. And the last time, when she knocked him out and he proposed, I bet it was on purpose, to get his attention.”

Johan just sat there with his mouth open.

“I wonder if she hit him a bit harder than she meant,” mused Bel. “I bet she’s a lot better at unarmed combat than he thinks.”

“Surely not,” said Johan finally.

“Oh, you don’t think that it’s odd that they never fight now.”

Johan thought about it. Then he looked at his wife.

“What?” she said. “Oh. Oh, no, I’m not the manipulative sort.”

She snuggled up to him on the sofa and he put his arm round her. He still looked at her.

“What? I didn’t even know you were around when that yob was bothering me! And don’t you remember what happened when you showed me your sketchbook?”

“Sure. We were meant for each other, I’m sure. I’m sure that you didn’t do anything underhand then. But after that? In all the years that we’ve known each other and have been married?”

“Never,” she said definitely, batting her eyes at him.

“Thought so,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

He kissed her on the head.

“Mikey’s Back”

At the three o’clock blood collection. Mikey was back looking much better. He threaded his way through the back slaps, the greetings and the friendly banter, and sat down next to Bel and Johan.

“It’s Dougal’s turn to take a rest,” he said. “He was grey with worry, but he promised to be here for the whiskey tasting. Sorry to worry you all. Teresa told me off for letting it go so far, once she stopped being worried for me. She’s right, and if my some fluke I do end up as the heir, she’ll be a tower of strength, I hope.”

“Yes, but Bel and I were talking about that earlier. She’ll have her grief over Steven to handle once this process is over.”

“Yes, Dougal and I were saying as much too. We’ll prop her up while, she props us up!”

He laughed. He seemed to be back to normal.

“Another seven, last time. Twenty two. We’re well ahead of schedule, you know. Teresa was expecting twenty five by the end of the day, and we’ve still got the five o’clock collection to go. Are you two coming to my whiskey tasting after this collection?”

“Sure, Mikey. Most people are,” said Johan.

The survivors were called up one by one to have their blood collected. Bel reflected that while the cannula system wasn’t comfortable, it wasn’t too uncomfortable. Her collection went fine, and she rejoined the rest. Mikey didn’t wait for everyone to pass through the collection, but headed off to a side room and most people followed him. While Mikey checked that everything was OK, the survivors and spouses checked out the range of bottles on offer.

Teresa arrived in the room and called “They’re all through, Mikey! You’ve got almost a full house. Only two couples opted out, so you’ve got nineteen couples in all. And me!”

Everyone laughed.

Mikey stood up. “Right, OK folks, the whiskeys on display come from all over. They’re not just our whiskeys, though of course, ours are the best.”

That got a laugh too.

“I’ll hand you over to Eric, who is one of our official tasters. He’s also a judge in whiskey competitions and incredibly knowledgeable about whiskeys. Eric!”

Eric was an older man with a cheerful expression and bushy white eyebrows.

“OK, everyone,” he said in a Northern Provinces burr. “The rules are, everyone gets four glasses, each containing a quarter of a standard measure of whiskey. All four are our whiskeys, just so you know. You should take the shot of whiskey into your mouth, all of it, and roll it around to get the full flavours that it contains. If you don’t want to drink it, there are spittoons available. Don’t be shy, I use them all the time, in my line of work. I have to.”

He chuckled and so did the survivors.

“Oh, I’m aware that some people have never tried whiskey and some others have tried it and are not keen on it. I encourage you to have a go, but it doesn’t matter if you don’t. This is supposed to be fun! So come over here and pick up your testing boards, and tasting sheets, then find a seat.”

The survivors queued for a board and then distributed themselves over the tables. The board were paddle shaped with five shallow depressions, each of which held a glass. Four of the glasses were small, and contained the whisky, and one contained a large glass of water.

After the buzz died down, Eric continued. “Right, put the handle to the left. We’ll work from left to right. If you haven’t read the tasting notes for the first tot, please do so now, then take the tot into your mouth and savour it. Sip it if you are new to it, but take the whole shot into your mouth to get the best effect.”

Eric gave brief descriptions of how whiskey is made, and how it is aged in casks, and how it gets its characteristics and then talked about the particular whiskey that they were tasting.

Bel meant to sip the tot, but it was so small that she got most of it in the first sip. The fumes caught in her nose, but they weren’t so strong that she had to choke or sneeze. Then the taste in her mouth was pleasantly smooth. She finished off the tot and rolled it around in her mouth. She recognised a smokey taste, and maybe something like pine needles. There was a strong flavour she couldn’t place. Tannins?

“Wow,” she said. “That’s nice. Johan, what do you think?”

“You’ve never tried whiskey, have you? The difference between this and ordinary whiskey is like the difference between our little car and one of those luxury limousines. It’s beautiful.”

“Huh. Our little car is beautiful too,” said Bel.

Johan wisely said nothing.

Mikey said “What do you think, Bel? I’m guessing that you don’t drink whiskey?”

“Who, me?” Bel was flustered. “Well, it caught in my nose, but that wasn’t too bad. It was smokey like smoked meat or fish, I think. Oh, and something made me think of pine needles. Is that too silly?”

Eric said, “No, not at all. That’s very good. And the tannins are quite strong in this one.”

“Oh, yes,” said Bel. “I wondered about that. Like a strong tea or a rich red wine?”

Mikey said, “I’m going to award you a spot prize, Bel. I’ll send you a bottle of this whiskey after all this is over.”

“Oh thanks, you don’t have to!”

So they moved on to the next whiskey. Bel was surprised at how different it tasted, though she couldn’t put her finger on how it differed. Nice though. Someone at a different table was called on to give their opinion, and also received a spot prize of a bottle of the whiskey. It turned out that this was the product of a different distillery and slightly different process brought out slightly different flavours, making it slightly more fruity.

Eric then showed a short film taken in one of the distilleries.

“People are interested in the distilling process,” he said, “but the product from that process is almost colourless, and tastes of nothing much. It does matter though because there are certain chemicals that are removed in the process and others carried over that the ageing process brings out. The smokey flavour usually comes over from the malt of a malt whiskey.”

“Much of the colour and the flavouring comes from the barrels used in the ageing process, though. A five year aged whiskey tastes a lot different from a ten year aged whiskey, but there’s limit. Leave a whiskey too long and it could become distasteful. It could even lose alcohol. Sometimes a whiskey is moved to different barrels to add a desired flavour, and this is often done with cheap whiskies to add an illusion of maturity that it doesn’t have.”

He almost sneered.

“Once it is put in the bottle, it changes very little, unlike wine. If it was bottled five years ago, ten years ago, even twenty years ago, it makes no difference.”

“Anyway, let’s try the third one. This is a little different.”

Bel tried it and went “Oh!”

Mikey asked someone their thoughts about it. The person said that he could taste the difference, but he couldn’t really tell what it was. Mikey awarded him a spot prize, and threw the question open to the floor.

Bel raised her hand. "I think it's the tannins. They are a lot less strong, aren't they?"

She guessed. "Is it aged less than the other ones?"

"Exactly right," said Eric. "I've included this one as an example of a young whiskey. It's on the verge of not being ready. Eastern Provinces like young whiskies and this is one that sells well over there. Well done."

Johan looked at her. "You're a whiskey expert and you've never drunk whiskey before. I'm amazed"

"Oh, Johan, don't tease."

She was embarrassed by her success. He leaned over and kissed her.

"Sorry, though it makes me proud of you, silly."

He held her hand, and she leaned against him. She loved him so much. He was her rock.

"OK, now for the last tot. Again, this one is different. It's about the same age as the first two, made in much the same way, but it's distinctly different. Please try it."

Bel thought that it was smokier, but it wasn't that. It was sweeter, but it wasn't that.

Mikey asked someone at the front for their opinion.

"Well, it's sweeter," they said. "And it's smokier. It's different from the other three. Was it distilled differently?"

Mikey awarded him a bottle.

"Bel, what do you think?"

"Me? Well it is sweeter and smokier. Were the barrels different?"

Eric said "Yes, that's part of it. The barrels are made of charred oak. Anything else? It's quite young, but not as young as the third tot, so it's not that."

"Well," Bel was at a loss. "If it wasn't the barrels, and it wasn't process, I guess it was something to do with the mash?"

Someone up the front said "It's a bourbon, isn't it?"

“Yes, both of you are right, of course. It’s made from a maize mash, which is called corn mash in the Western Provinces where they drink this style of whiskey. It’s a new one for us, and I’m not sure we have got it quite right yet.”

“You’re up against strong opposition from the Western Province bourbon makers, aren’t you?” said the man up the front.

“Sure, they have a few hundred years lead on us, of course.”

Everyone laughed.

“If you haven’t guessed from his accent, John here comes from the Western Provinces,” said Mikey ironically. “OK, that’s the end of the tasting, but please come and look at the whiskies up here, and our photo album. Eric will love to answer your questions. Oh, and I’ll send every couple here a bottle of one of the whiskies up here. Just let me know which one you want. I’ll even send you a bottle of our competitors’ whiskies if you’d prefer one of those. All the whiskies here are good ones, even the bourbons.”

Everyone laughed. People got up and started moving around, looking at the whiskies, the photo album. Some chatted with Eric or Mikey.

Dougal came up to them. “Hey, Bel, you made Mikey’s day! He now thinks you are an unsung whiskey expert. Eric wondered if it was a setup, too. Mikey is always teasing him.”

“Oh, I think it was blind luck,” said Bel, laughing. “I could taste the differences, but I wasn’t sure what I was tasting. Mmm, I’m not sure that I want to be a whiskey connoisseur!”

Mikey came over. “Bel, you’re a star. Eric thinks I set this up. What a laugh!”

“Oh, Mikey, I hope you told him that you didn’t. I was just lucky.”

“You’ve got a good palate, Bel,” said Johan. “Anyway, Mikey, this went down really well, didn’t it? Everyone enjoyed themselves. It was inspired.”

Mikey was pleased. “You think so? That’s great. The main thing is to help the time pass, and if people find it fun, that’s a bonus.”

Teresa was drawing two couples aside, and they left the room.

“Mmm, there go another two. We’re down to twenty now.” said Mikey.

Dougal took his hand.

“Don’t worry, guys, I’m not going to crack up again. I think. I don’t remember ever doing that before, but the constant disappearances are a bit grim, aren’t they? Perhaps it was a mistake to make a circus of it.”

Unbeknownst to Mikey, Teresa had returned and came up just as he said that.

“I think you’re right Mikey,” she sighed. “We should have pumped the stuff, the substance, into people and then sent them home, but I wanted them all here so that we could all go through it together. Oh well, too late now.”

“It’s getting real now,” said Johan. “Only twenty survivors. Each survivor who leaves means that the remaining survivors are closer to the throne. Well, we aren’t really, but it feels like it. Tell us Teresa, what is it like, really?”

“What is it like? Well, I was a nurse. I had my career, and I enjoyed it. I met Steven, and I had to give it up. Oh, I tried to keep on with it, but Steven and I had to be away so often, that it became impossible. If only I had gone with him on that last trip!”

Bel, who was next to her held her hand.

“Sorry. What is it like? It’s a whole new thing. People have to listen to what you say. People have to do things for you. People try to impress you. People try to work around you. You don’t have a default role, as consort, and you have to make it up yourself. I tried to help and advance the cause of nursing. I tried to get nurses into the provinces that are short of them, such as the deep south and the far west. You try and make it better, in any way you can, using whatever powers the role gives you.

“I meant as Prince, Teresa,” said Mikey. “I’m sorry if it upsets you, but one of us may become Prince elect.”

Everyone was listening by this time. Teresa looked around and sighed.

“Yes, you all have the right to know. Well, Steven was born to the role, of course, but much of what I said about my role holds for the Prince’s role too. There are no rules for the role, but of course there are expectations. The opening things. The conferring honours. The visiting places, especially those that had disasters or whatever. But Steven had his favourite causes, just as I did. He was a supporter of the miners and their safety and well being. He was an avid supporter of the Air Force.”

“We were happy, even though we didn’t have a family. We were surrounded by formality, but we strived for informality in our private lives, and to a great extent we got it. The King and Queen supported us in that. We’d watch soaps on television in the evenings if we felt like it. No one was allowed in our apartments unless we wanted them to be and we cooked for each other, or loaded the dishwasher, did our laundry ourselves if we wanted. The King and Queen copied some of that too.”

“In the fairy stories or legends the woodcutter’s daughter becomes a Princess and all is roses. The Princess gives up all ambition and becomes the consort of the Prince. Cue rainbows. But after the marriage, life goes on, the Princess doesn’t lose her ambitions, of course. The Prince just waits for his father or mother, whoever is the Monarch to die. But he doesn’t, of course.”

“What I’m saying is, that it is up to you. There will be constraints. There will be things that you can’t do. But there will be things that you can do as Royals, that you couldn’t otherwise do.”

She turned to the assembled survivors. “Twenty of you left. We are ninety nine per cent sure that one of you will be the new heir. My role has changed and I will now do my best to support whoever is the new heir. I hope that gives you an idea of what it is like.”

Twenty Survivors Left

Most of the survivors and spouses decided to gather for coffee in the Princess Afua room. There was only about forty minutes before the five o'clock blood collection.

“Isn’t this whole thing strange?” said Mikey.

“What do you mean, Mikey?” someone asked.

“Well, most people meet, spend time getting to know each other, then make a commitment to each other. We, all of us here, met, and ‘something happened’. We knew, within minutes, that we had met our life partner. None of us had any doubts. Even those near us knew that ‘something happened’. That is strange by anyone’s standards.”

“And the whole business of the heir. If there is no heir, because he or she is killed without siblings or offspring, some random citizen becomes the new heir. How does that happen? Now I’m the closest known relation to poor Steven, who was a great friend of mine. That’s on record. But if you believe the legends, the heir will be someone else. I hope so, and I feel sorry for that person.

“And what about the ‘passing over’. It happens to one person in a generation, and it’s always the current King. It doesn’t seem natural. If it was natural, you’d expect it to happen to others too.”

“Have you heard the story of the Mage and the Boffin, Mikey?” asked Johan.

“No, what’s that?” said Mikey.

“It’s one of a set of tales from the Times of Mystery. My father, who is a historian, translated it, with the help of Bel,” said Johan.

“I didn’t do much!” protested Bel. “I just set up a program to analyse the texts that Johan’s father had been studying. And I found some hints about sentence structure and some of the inflections and.. a couple of other things.”

“She won a prize for it, with my father. Anyway, do you want to hear the story?”

Mikey and several others nodded.

A Story From the Times of Mystery

There once was a land divided. Each small kingdom fought against the other small kingdoms, and as is usual in such cases, the people suffered. They died as armies fought over their towns and starved as armies criss-crossed their fields and destroyed their crops. Their children died as the kings and queens enlisted them into their armies by force.

The Mage and the Boffin watched this from their safe place. Their three children watched as well, and were horrified.

“Please do something, Dad. Make them stop, Mum,” their eldest begged.

“Yes, we need to do something.” said the Mage. “But what?”

“I know,” said his wife, the Boffin. “We’ll make a safe place, like this one, but not this one, and we’ll invite all the kings there, and when they are there, this is what we’ll do....”

So the Mage created a new safe place, big enough to contain all the kings and queens and the Boffin made houses for them to live in, and the Boffin built a large building for the kings to gather in. But none of the kings would come.

The Boffin sighed. “You’ll have to fetch them, my dear.”

So the Mage did. All over the land, the kings and the queens disappeared and reappeared in the safe place, and all the wars petered out.

The Mage and the Boffin appeared in front of the kings and queens and said “You are our guests for as long as it takes for you to make peace.”

“Peace? I’ll give you peace,” said one king.

He drew his sword and charged the Mage and the Boffin and brought it down on the Mage’s head, but the sword passed through him as if he was made of air.

The Mage sighed. “I’m not actually here. What you see is a hologram created by the Boffin. And I have just cast a spell on this place, so that weapons cannot be used. If you try to use a weapon, it will burn you.”

The king’s sword became red hot and he dropped it.

“We’ll not be forced to make peace by you! We’ll break out and raise armies and kill you!” he raged.

It took a year and a day. At first the kings and queens fought each other, wrestling and punching, since they couldn't use weapons, but this was undignified and didn't solve anything. They tried to escape, building ladders and digging tunnels, but they couldn't get out of the safe space. So they started talking to one another, started forming groups and alliances, and eventually, they came together in one big Parliament and made peace.

The kings and queens rejoiced and the Mage and the Boffin commended them. They sent the kings and the queens back to their homes, and the people rejoiced. Everyone laid down their weapons.

However, one king had a sliver of hatred hidden so well in his heart that the Boffin could not detect it with her instruments, and the Mage could not see it with his charms and spells. The king's armies cruelly ravaged all the kingdoms and welded all the kingdoms into one nation which the king ruled by force, savagely.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” said the Mage to the Boffin.

“We will have to do something about it,” said the Boffin, but before they could decide what to do, the king summoned them.

“I have your sons,” he said, gesturing.

A screen was drawn aside and their three sons stood there in chains.

The Boffin gave him a look which chilled him to the core. “You had better not harm a hair of their heads, or you will have to reckon with me. AND TAKE THOSE CHAINS OFF!”

The king gestured and the chains were removed.

The king said “You will now perform three tasks for me, and I will release one of your sons as each task is completed. Your first task is to build me a castle, one that surpasses all other castles in the country. It must be impregnable.”

The Mage and the Boffin worked away together for a month and a day, and produced an oval object the size of a football.

When they presented it to the King, he said, “What is this?”

The Boffin said “It’s the egg of your castle. Put it where you want the castle to be, tap it gently three time and it will grow into the castle. It will take a year and a day to completely grow.”

The king was pleased and took the egg to the top of a ridge which ran down the side of a mountain close by. He carefully placed the egg and rapped it three times. The egg flowed outwards and formed a platform, the platform extended sideways and walls started to grow out of the platform. Everything was a brilliant white to start with, but hints of colour started to appear. The material of

the Castle merged into the rocks of the mountain. A darker rectangular area on a wall grew protrusions, and turned into a door. The king stepped up to it and pulled it open. He laughed with joy.

“You can have your youngest son back in a year and a day,” said the king.

After a year and a day the Mage and the Boffin were called to the king’s presence. The three sons were standing by his side.

“I release your youngest son, as agreed,” said the king.

“We agreed to nothing,” said the Boffin coldly, and the king wisely decided not to comment.

The youngest son walked over to his mother and father.

“Are you OK, my son?” asked the Mage.

The boy nodded. “We’re OK. We mostly lived with the king’s son and his daughter. His son is nice, and made us as welcome as he could. His daughter is OK for a girl, too.”

The Mage and the Boffin smiled.

“The next thing that I want is to be able to fly from one end of the kingdom to the other. When I can do that, you can have your middle son back.”

The Mage looked at the Boffin. “Can you handle this one, dear?”

“Yes, of course. It will take me three months and a day.”

So the Boffin retreated to her workshop. Crashing and banging could be heard, and the sounds of drills and saws. Bright flashing lights of welding arcs leaked from the cracks around doorways and the shuttered windows. After three months and a day she rolled a machine out of her workshop. It had an engine at the front to pull it through the air and great solid wings to hold it up in the sky.

“Here are the plans for the machine,” she said handing them to the king. “I’ve trained one of your pages to fly it, and it will go from one end of your kingdom to the other in about a day. Now give me back my son.”

“Not so fast,” said the king.

He jumped in the machine with the page and the page flew the machine round and round the Palace, then back to where the Mage and the Boffin were waiting.

“I suppose you fulfilled my request,” he said grudgingly. “I release your middle son.”

And the middle son was allowed to join his parents and his younger brother.

“How are you, my love?” his mother asked.

He nodded. “Pretty good. The king’s son was kind to us and helped us with our homework. His sister is quite nice too. We played together a lot. She’s good at chess and badminton.”

The king was not happy. “I wanted to fly like a bird. I didn’t want a machine. So my last request, for your oldest son, is for you to make me able to fly like a bird.”

“Hmm, are you sure?” asked the Mage.

“Of course I’m sure,” raged the king. “Just do it.”

The Mage went away and toiled for a month and a day. Pungent smells and clouds of multi-coloured smoke rolled from his laboratory. Bubbling and hissing could be heard and he sent out for some quicksilver and the venom of a cobra. A month and a day passed and once more he and his family stood before the king.

“In this syringe I have a medicine which will allow you to fly like a bird, with wings. Are you sure that you want me to inject you with it?”

The king bared his arm and said “Inject away.”

“This will take a while to work,” said the Mage, as he injected the king.

“How long,” said the king suspiciously.

“A few months.”

“A few months’! Well you don’t get your son back until it works!” ranted the king.

The Boffin looked at the Mage. “Give it a week,” he reassured her.

Sure enough, a week later the king called the Mage and the Boffin and their two sons in front of him. Their oldest son still stood alongside the king.

“Why am I so tired? Why am I eating so much? What is happening to me?” the King complained.

“Well, the food is a fuel for the process, and the tiredness is your body preparing for the process.”

“Process? What process?”

“Metamorphosis. You will go to sleep while your body transforms. You will grow claws, your jaw will lengthen and you will grow extra teeth. You will get an extra heart and bigger lungs. Your arms will become wings.”

“You’re turning me into a monster?” screamed the king. But he didn’t have the energy to maintain his rage and fell back into his seat. “So tired. But at least I have your son!”

The Boffin waved her hand in a pattern, and suddenly her son was by her side.

“How are you, son?”

“Pretty good, Mum. The king’s son looked after us. We played soccer and swam in the pool. The king’s daughter is amazing. She has long dark hair and her skin is as smooth as silk and as dark as chocolate. Her eyes are brown and as deep as a pool. She’s kind and generous and...”

He looked like he could go on for a long time, but his mother stopped him.

“Your Majesty, you are not changing into a monster. You are changing into a dragon, a noble creature. It’s the only creature as big as a man which can fly, though it needs physics to achieve that.”

“Physics?”

“Or magic. They’re much the same thing. You wanted, no, you demanded the ability to fly like a bird, and that is what we have given you.”

“Reverse it!”

“I’m sorry, we can’t do that. It’s a one way process.”

“You tricked me! Guards, arrest them!”

The Boffin waved her hands in another pattern, and a shimmer surrounded her and her family.

“We will leave you now, your Majesty,” said the Mage. “Don’t try to stop us and don’t try to find us. You won’t succeed.”

They turned and walked away through the Palace. No one tried to stop them but someone called to them.”

They halted. It was the king’s son, and his sister, the king’s daughter.

“Please, what will happen to our father? I know he isn’t a good man, but he is our father.”

The Mage looked into his dark brown eyes, and saw the intelligence there. He saw the compassion and the love for his fellow man in there. He would make a good king. He held the boy's dark hand in his pale hand and told him the truth. The Mage judged that he could handle it.

"He will eat more and more, and will become more and more tired and will eventually fall asleep for good. His body will grow a leathery skin and he will lie there for several months, changing internally. Eventually his body will transform into that of a dragon, and when it is ready the dragon will burst out of the skin. The little bit of the king that is left will fly like a bird, with wings. Don't worry, it isn't a painful process," said the Mage.

"Best leave the Palace now," said the Boffin. "If you don't, he will infect you, and you will 'pass over' as he is going to. The first born of all your descendants will also 'pass over' if you are infected."

The prince looked at the Boffin and the Mage. "He is my father. I must stay around him and help him through it. I'll take him to his Castle, and he can finish his change up there."

The Boffin put her hand on his. She was darker skinned than her husband, but her hand was still pale compared to the prince's. "You are a brave boy and a much better man than your father. Your own change will happen when you are more than sixty. You have many useful and hopefully happy years in front of you. You will need to repair the damage that your father has done, and govern wisely. I think that you can do that. You will need to search for your bride as soon as you are able, but I assure you that she is out there and you will know her when you meet her. Something will happen."

"Something will happen?"

She nodded and she and her family walked away. The Boffin's oldest son kept looking back, and as they were about to take the step into the safe place, he gently waved to the king's daughter, and she waved back. To the prince and the princess it looked as if the Mage and the Boffin and their family just disappeared between one step and the next.

"So, son, how did you find out that the princess's skin was as smooth as silk and that her eyes were as deep as a pool?"

"Well, I, errr.... Oh, Mum!"

The Third Day

“I’ve never heard that story,” said Mikey. “It doesn’t address our current situation, though!”

“No, that’s true,” said Johan. “I wonder if any of the Mage and the Boffin tales do.”

“There are more?”

“Yes,” said Bel, “Quite a few of the oldest documents contain stories of them. Sometimes they have three children, and sometimes less. For example, in one they have a daughter with golden hair and fair skin, not three sons. The translators are not sure if they are the same people or if the titles of ‘the Boffin’ and the ‘Mage’ are just roles and can refer to different people. They always seem to be together and they always have at least one child, and they mostly seem to live in the ‘safe place’.”

“The translations are hard to understand, and Johan’s Dad employed a professional writer to make the stories more readable for people today. The writer said that it was really hard, but I think it turned out well, didn’t it? Johan’s Dad plans to publish a book of the stories soon, but he has already writing some scholarly papers,” she concluded.

“He named Bel as a co-author on most of them,” said Johan.

“Oh, Johan! There were three or four others named on those too.”

Mikey laughed. “Don’t turn down a compliment from your husband, Bel. If I’d had a hand in it, I’d be bragging from the rooftops!”

Bel thought a bit. “I don’t think that there were any other stories that mention dragons,” she said. “I’ll have to talk to Johan’s Dad again, and maybe we can set up a search for the symbols for ‘dragon’ over all the texts. Then we can concentrate on the documents that have a number of dragon references in them.”

Just then Teresa returned with the King and Queen. The King slumped into a seat.

“As you can see,” said the Queen, “my husband’s condition has progressed quite a bit. It had been in remission, but now it is accelerating.”

The King was looking bulky and tired. His face was red and his skin seemed stretched and hot.

“Hi everyone,” said the King. “We’ve popped down to say goodbye to you all, as we are leaving for The Castle tomorrow. I thought that I could stay to the end, but I’m having trouble staying awake. We’re not going to be able to ride to The Castle on horses the traditional way, so we will be flying

in. If any of you should prove to be the next heir, I may see you at The Castle, but otherwise, I give you my thanks, including those of you who will be going home today or tomorrow.”

He yawned and leant back in his chair and started to doze.

The Queen sighed. “I’m sorry. He’s been like this since yesterday. Sometimes he doesn’t know where he is, and who he is with. He’s been asking where Steven is, the poor dear.”

She stroked his brow.

“If it proceeds as usual, he will not forget me, thank goodness, and he’s actually quite happy in himself. Come on, dear, we have to go.” She gently shook his shoulder.

The King woke up. “Did I fall asleep again. Oh, yes, the search for the new heir. I sometimes forget that Steven was killed, poor chap. I miss him. Sometimes I forget about the crash and wonder where he is.”

He stood up. “Thank you all. But I think I said that already, didn’t I? We’d better go.”

The King and Queen left with their pages, but Teresa stayed behind.

“He wanted to see you before he moves to The Castle. I’m surprised he managed to stay awake and coherent to be honest. Thankfully he recognises his wife and me, and also some of his older staff members. When he is lucid I think he is looking forward to it, although he knows the risks.”

“The risks?” someone asked.

“That the process doesn’t complete properly. Sometimes the dragon doesn’t manage to break out of the leathery skin, and the creature that the King should become, dies. There was a time when a successful transition was rare, but in recent times that has reversed and most transitions have been successful, thank goodness.”

“We are studying the process, and the current King has given us permission to take samples of the remains that the previous Kings have left behind. For the successful transitions that will be mostly the leathery skin, but for unsuccessful transitions we will have more material to work with.”

“Do you anticipate being able to stop the ‘passing over’ completely?” someone asked.

“Maybe. Or maybe we will just be able to ensure that the process is successful more of the time. Legends aside, we don’t know why the process exists. If we COULD stop the process, the question is SHOULD we do so? I’ll leave you to think about that.”

“Anyway, it’s time for the five o’clock collection. After that the ‘survivors’ will probably meet as usual in the bar, Mikey? Tomorrow is going to be a tough day and I suggest that we all stay

together. Yes, I'll be with you all day. My psychologists say that we should be more open when people test positive, and I agree, so we will announce the names to the group, as they come up. Many of you have made friends here, and everyone at least knows everyone else by now."

So they all one by one had their blood taken and one by one they headed to the cafeteria, where a quiet sort of celebration happened, as they passed the time before the evening meal.

Teresa joined them after the meal. "Well, you all 'survive' for tonight," she said. "No one tested positive that round. Our guesses were that there would be twenty five survivors by tonight, but we have a few more positives than expected, so we have twenty survivors. The next round is ten o'clock tomorrow."

Teresa stayed to chat, but eventually people started drifting off. The party was over, such as it was.

"Shall we go back to our rooms?" said Johan to Bel.

"Yes, and we can phone my parents and see how the kids are. I said I wouldn't ring, but I miss them so much. I thought we'd be finished by now."

"We ought to let them know what is going on, that's true."

So they did. The kids all wanted to be Royal of course, but Bel's parents were more concerned as they knew some of the implications.

"Are you sure that they've got it right?" asked Bel's Mum, and Bel had to reassure her that though the tests had not proved positive, that the testing was thorough.

"Yes, Mum, the testing is OK. We'll ring again tomorrow, hopefully with better news."

Johan phoned his parents and brought them up to date and they chatted for a while. After the calls Johan and Bel sat on the sofa and Johan puts his arm around Bel.

"That's weird," said Bel.

"What is, my love?"

"When I said 'hopefully better news', I meant that hopefully we would be found positive and be sent home. But I suddenly felt that being found positive would be disappointing. Teresa said that would happen didn't she?"

"Yes, everyone says it is the prize that no one wants to win, but people will be disappointed not to win it. Mikey chose a good name when he called us the 'survivors'."

Neither of them slept well that night, and ended up just cuddling until they dozed off.

Johan woke early and was just making coffee when Bel got up sleepily.

“Rough night, wasn’t it?” said Bel.

Johan nodded. “Hey you’ve got time for a spa treatment if you want. Why don’t you ring up. It seemed to do Mikey some good when he had one.”

She kissed him and picked up the phone and booked a spa treatment.

“You have good ideas sometimes,” she said.

She went off with Victor looking more cheerful. Johan ordered breakfast in, and took a shower. When he had finished, his breakfast had arrived, a full plate of eggs, sausages, bacon, and beans, with orange juice on the side.

He found his pad and sketched a few things. Mikey and Dougal laughing. Teresa making an announcement. A doctor taking blood from a ‘survivor’. Bel asking a question. The King dozing in a chair. He attempted a drawing of the Mage and the Boffin and their three sons, but he wasn’t happy with the result. He tried the evil King and he came out fine. He tried the Mage and the Boffin again and again he failed. Maybe they didn’t want their portraits done, he mused. Or more likely, something in him didn’t want to draw them.

Bel returned looking refreshed.

“That was great!” she said “What are you up to?”

Johan showed her, including the failed ones of the Mage and the Boffin.

“I wonder if they are still there, in their ‘safe place’ wondering if they should intervene?” she said.

In the Princess Afua room, the ‘survivors’ and spouses gathered to await the blood collection. Teresa arrived and called the first five up for the collection. Mikey was in the first batch and those who weren’t called out their encouragement to them. Mikey turned and faked a salute before he turned and went into his booth.

So the first batch was processed, and came back and sat down. The second batch were called and they got similar encouragement. “Good luck,” people called. Bel was in the third batch, and Johan in the last.

While they waited for the results people chatted and asked questions of Teresa. There was a sense of anticipation in the air, and when one of the medical people gave Teresa a sheet of paper everyone stirred.

“Right, in no particular order,” she joked, “Can these people come up here.”

She called out six names. First to rise was George, a farmer from Southland. He was weather beaten chap who Bel and Johan had spoken to briefly. He had told them about his farm and his three kids. “Well, it’s not mine, actually. It’s my father’s, but I do most of the work these days,” he had said.

George and the others and their spouses went up and stood by Teresa.

“Right, you are all positive, so you are free to go and resume your lives. Thanks for agreeing to take part in this search.”

The remaining survivors clapped them.

“No disrespect, ma’am,” he said to Teresa and everyone else, “but I’m glad it’s over and I can get back to the farm. I’m sorry about your loss, that led to this search, and I hope that you find the new heir. Good luck to you all.”

With that he waved and he and his wife headed for the door. The other five also waved and called their goodbyes and left with their spouses.

“Fourteen, Mikey. Fourteen,” said Teresa. Mikey nodded.

“The next blood collection will be at midday. Until then you can do what you want. If anyone is feeling the strain, please let us know. We can do something about that. Mikey, please tell them.”

“Sure, Teresa. As you all probably know, I suffered, what, a mini collapse? Anyhow, Teresa’s docs gave me something, a sedative, I think, that let me sleep for a while, and when I woke up, I felt much better. So if you are chasing this thing round and round in your head, see Teresa. Spouses too, by the way. I know that you are under strain too.”

He held Dougal’s hand, and Dougal nodded.

“You two are probably feeling twice the stress,” said Dougal to Johan and Bel. “You don’t look it, though.”

“We weren’t able to sleep last night,” said Bel, “I don’t know if we are handling it better than most though.”

Johan and Bel took a stroll through the gardens. The strict formality of it irked Johan a little, as he liked a little randomness in a garden. There was no doubt that it was beautiful in a precise sort of way.

“Have you seen the maze?” asked the ever present Victor.

“There’s a maze? Where?” asked Bel.

“You’ll laugh when you see it,” said Victor cryptically. “It’s this way.”

Bel did laugh. It was hidden behind a big box hedge, and the hedges of the actual maze were about knee height.

“Oh, it’s sweet,” said Bel laughing. “Come on, Johan! Where do we start?”

Johan discovered that while being able to see over the hedges helped, it didn’t completely remove the fun. More than once he ended up in a dead end when he thought that he knew what he was doing. Annoyingly Bel reached the centre well before he did.

“Slowcoach,” she laughed, giving him a kiss.

“Humph! Let’s see who gets out first,” he challenged.

Bel immediately started racing off through the maze. Johan watched her for a bit.

“I’m winning!” she called.

Johan merely stepped over the hedges until he was outside the maze.

“Cheat, cheat!” she said, laughing.

Johan merely stuck out his tongue. Victor was laughing at them.

“There’s a full size maze at the Royal holiday home in the Southern Provinces,” said Victor.

“Have you been down there with them, Victor?” asked Johan.

Victor laughed. “No, I’ve been down there with my family. The gardens and some parts of the house are open to the public. My Palace pass got me into places that most people don’t see, though.”

At midday the ‘survivors’ returned to the Princess Afua room for the blood collection. Bel and Johan were feeling a bit more cheerful, but Mikey was feeling the pressure.

“Hi guys, I think that I’m going to have to ask Teresa for some more of her magic pills. Do you think that she is the Boffin?”

“Oh, Mikey, I do hope it isn’t you,” said Bel. “But I think that you will be OK if it is. You’re a nice person, you really are!”

“Thanks, Bel. Nice of you to say so. But your Diane is not your one and only child, is she? Di is my one and only. For some reason that make her extra precious to me.”

Bel was quiet for a while.

“I see. Mikey, all my kids are important to me, and I hate the idea of this happening to any of them. But your thinking is all mixed up. Having two other kids doesn’t make any difference. If you’d had more, you’d know that they are all precious to you and the fact that two of them will be spared the fate of the other makes no difference at all. No difference at all.”

Her eyes watered, and Mikey grabbed her hand.

“Bel, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry. I’m so stupid, projecting my worries on you. Please forgive me!”

“It’s OK, Mikey. We’re all trying to make sense of this nonsense. It’s a wonder we aren’t all crying or despairing. But it’s something we can’t change. We either test positive, or we don’t, and if we need Teresa’s pills to cope, then we take them.”

“You’re right, Bel. I’ll see the docs after the blood collection. What ho, Teresa!”

Teresa had come up while they were talking. “I heard some of that Mikey, so don’t try to be jolly with me, you big clown. I’ll talk to the docs about you. And Bel, I can get you something to help you sleep. I think you should take it if you are still a ‘survivor’ tonight.”

She raised her voice.

“Listen folks. You are all ‘battle weary’. Don’t be shy of asking for something to help you sleep if you ‘survive’ until tonight. Four or five of you probably will. Anyway, I’ll hand you over to the docs. The next blood collection after this will be at five this afternoon, and that will be the last of the day.”

After a very short period of time, all the ‘survivors’ were back in the seating area. Some of them went off and got coffee, others just skimmed magazines, or chatted. Two started to play chess but they quickly gave up.

“We can’t concentrate. We were making silly errors,” said one.

Teresa was wandering around, gauging the state of mind of the ‘survivors’ and their spouses. Eventually one of the medical people handed her another sheet of paper. Bel grabbed Johan’s hand.

“Right, there are four names on this list. Can I have the following people and their spouses up here, please?”

Teresa did not call Bel's name or Johan's name. Bel noticed that Mikey wasn't called either.

"Oh no!" she said to Johan. He squeezed her hand.

"Next time, maybe," he said.

"Yeah, next time," said Mikey who was close by. "Bel, you are now the last remaining woman. Ten 'survivors', nine couples."

A Guided Tour

The remaining couples congratulated those who were leaving and watched them leave. Teresa looked at her charges.

“Right guys, we are into the home stretch. At five o’clock we should be able to eliminate all but a handful of you. I’m sorry that this process is so prolonged, but we can’t do anything about that. To pass the time, I’ll take you on a tour of the more private rooms in the Palace, even mine if you wish. The King and Queen are already on their way to The Castle, so I can show you their apartments. They’ve already suggested that. So please follow me.”

“These rooms are the ones that Steven and I used to live in,” said Theresa. “Since the accident I have moved out, to a smaller set of rooms. I didn’t want to stay here. We had it set up as an apartment, with all the usual facilities so that we could pretend that we didn’t have the burden of the throne for a while. It was all a bit silly, I suppose, but we liked it.”

The ‘apartment’ was to Johan’s eyes was tidy and a bit barren.

Bel was thinking along the same lines. “It’s very tidy,” she said.

Theresa laughed. “It wasn’t when we lived here. Every time we had one of the Palace staff in here, I could tell that they were itching to tidy up. Of course when we weren’t here, they had permission to come in and tidy up, and it would be spick and span when we came back.”

Next door were the rooms of the King and Queen, and they surprised one of the Palace staff with a clipboard, making notes.

“This is Florence,” said Teresa. “Florence, these are the remaining couples from the search for the new heir. Flo is the chief of the tidy up crew, and general all round useful person to know.”

Florence laughed. “Good afternoon to all of you. I’m ‘house manager’ for the Royal apartments, and supervisor of the teams who look after your rooms.”

“Flo probably knows all about you already, through her contacts in the Palace. Mikey knows her already, don’t you Mikey?”

Mikey gave Florence a hug. “Of course I do. How are you, Flo?”

“I’m OK. It’s sad, though to be packing up the apartments. The King won’t be back, and I think the Queen will want to move. I was just scoping out the issue. I’ll be working with the new heir and his or her spouse to set up their new apartment, when he or she is found.”

“It all looks very nice,” said Bel. “Where do they keep their clothes?”

“Through here,” said Florence, guiding them through a door off the bedroom. The room was lined with cupboards, some modern and built in, and some older and free standing.

“Most of the cupboards contain the various uniforms that the King has to wear for formal occasions. He doesn’t like those very much. The Queen has her own formal clothes but she tries to keep the number of outfits down. These built in cupboards hold their less formal wear.”

She threw the doors open. The clothes looked much like those found in any cupboard, shirts, jeans, slacks. Comfortable shoes rubbed up against brown and black brogues and sandals.

Florence opened one of the other cupboards and showed them some of the uniforms and formal suits.

“He’s never worn most of these. Most of them have been passed down and it’s possible his father didn’t wear them either. As you know the Monarchy has been moving towards less formality since Queen Afua’s time, so the King and Queen have been looking at moving much of this stuff to the museum.”

“Please tell them about the ‘private apartment’, Flo,” said Teresa. “Of course, we won’t go there.”

“The King and the Queen, if they didn’t have any appointments out of the Palace for a day or two, would ‘holiday’ in some private rooms that they called their ‘apartment’. Even I wasn’t allowed in there, unless they invited me in, which they did now and then. They made me tea and gave me biscuits! The hardest bit was not talking about work.”

“You liked them,” said Bel.

“Oh, yes, very much, and Prince Steven and Princess Teresa too.” She nodded to Teresa.

One of the ‘survivors’ was a chef, they did a quick tour of the kitchens, and on the way back they visited the library and even laundry.

Teresa said “Most of it is sent out, but the personal stuff of myself and the King and Queen is laundered here. I’ve been looking at changing that. It’s not a job that Palace staff like very much, and we have many other jobs that need doing too. At one time all used personal clothing like underwear and socks, and even shirts was burnt after just one use.”

There were gasps of surprise.

“Yes, since Queen Afua’s time we have been working hard to reduce such wastage. Now I’ll take you to my favourite place.”

They all went down several flights of stairs to the basement.

“Sorry, no lifts down to here, I’m afraid.”

She approached some big brass doors and typed a code into a keypad beside it.

“Come on in, folks. This is the storage area for every present that the Kings and Queens have been given, going back centuries.”

It was a long gloomy cavern with cupboards and shelves. Larger objects were covered in drop sheets, and everything was dusty.

“We go through and dust it every three months, would you believe! Here’s one of my favourite items.”

She pulled a box file off a shelf and opened it to show them.

“Pictures of the King and Queen drawn by children at a school in the Eastern Provinces. The King and Queen have an Eastern look to them! The dates show that the King and Queen are Henry and Afua.”

Someone asked “Is this stuff kept for ever?”

“Well, at one time it was,” said Teresa, “but lately we have been looking into the options. This place is almost full, and we have to do something. Some things will be destroyed after being digitized, like the childrens’ drawings. Some stuff we, the Royal family, that is, are considering donating to museums.”

She uncovered a small statue of an elephant, carved in white stone.

“My mother would love to see that,” said Johan. “She does sculpture, in a very similar style.”

“Oh, is that lion in the King’s Park one of hers?” asked Teresa.

Johan nodded. “Yes, she had just completed it when I met Bel. It was still in her studio. Remember, Bel?”

“Anyway, I need to get you back. It’s about four o’clock now, and you will probably all need a coffee after this,” said Teresa.

When they got back to the Princess Afua room Mikey brought his drink over to where Johan and Bel were seated, talking to Dougal.

“Have you got any more Mage and Boffin stories Bel?”

“You could tell them about ‘Golden Hair and the Bears’,” said Johan. “That’s not about the Mage and the Boffin, though. It’s more about their daughter.”

“Ok, I’ll do it,” said Bel. “I like that one, anyway. It’s fairly short though.”

Golden Hair and the Bears

The Mage and the Boffin had a daughter whose name was originally Jean, but which became Patricia, and then changed to Helga. They weren't sure why her name wouldn't stay the same, so they gave up and nicknamed her "Golden Hair" because of her long blond hair. And the name stuck.

At the time they were not living in their "safe place" but were living in the forests of the North West where there were few people. It was just a step from their home to their 'safe space' of course.

Golden Hair loved to be outside and loved roaming the forests. She charmed the wolves and the owls and the reindeer and the caribou and the hawks and the squirrels and all the other non-human inhabitants of the forests.

Her mother, the Boffin, worried about her at first, but made a device in a necklace and hung it around Golden Hair's neck, and knew that she could contact her daughter at any time. The Mage also cast a charm on her to keep her safe and stowed it safely in the necklace. The charm also made sure that Golden Hair couldn't ever lose the necklace.

Golden Hair ran for kilometre after kilometre with the caribou, or the wolves that trailed them. She cowered under the ground with the mice and she hovered overhead with the hawks. She hid nuts with the squirrels and she swam in the streams with the salmon, leaping the waterfalls in a flash of silver.

She understood the cruel truth of death in the forest. The hawk lived by killing the mice and rabbits, and the wolves ate only when they came across a dead reindeer or managed to kill one. When she ran with the wolves, she helped them bring down a reindeer, and when she flew with the hawks, she stooped on the mice and other small animals.

"I'm concerned that she is spending so much time in the forest," said the Boffin one day.

"Don't worry dear," said the Mage. "She's learning the way of the world. She can easily catch up with the formal stuff later. She's intelligent enough."

So the Boffin let her daughter spend time in the forest. She just checked with Golden Hair every so often and made her come back for a bath now and then, and only took issue with her when she didn't completely shake off the forest when she came home.

"Golden Hair, you're shedding fur everywhere. And please cut your nails. You're scratching things."

Golden Hair, who was a good girl, said "Sorry Mum", then took a shower, unplugged the drain hole, and cut her finger and toe nails. Then she went round the house with the vacuum cleaner.

“Thanks, dear,” said the Boffin and trimmed the golden hair to a reasonable length and brushed it until it gleamed.

“Thanks Mum,” said Golden Hair. “I love you, you know.”

“Of course, dear.”

Of all the animals in the forest, Golden Hair loved the bears the most. In the section of forest closest to home there lived a family of bears, a mother bear and two two year old cubs. Golden Hair spent hours and days with the bear family, eating bugs and worms, berries, nuts and seeds. She broke open rotten tree trunks with her strong claws to get at the grubs, and learned with the cubs to catch the salmon leaping up the rapids. She tore into the delicious pink flesh with her strong teeth and squabbled with the cubs for the mother bear’s leavings.

She lived with them for so long that she learned the language of the bears, though bears don’t talk a lot as a rule.

“Why is there no father bear?” she asked the mother bear one day.

The mother bear shook the water from her coat. “I hope he stays a long way away. He would kill the cubs. Do human fathers not kill their cubs?”

Golden Hair was not shocked. Bears were not humans and did things differently.

“Why would he kill the cubs?”

“There’s only so much food. And they might grow big enough to kill him or drive him off.”

Golden Hair nodded in the bear fashion. It made sense from the bear point of view.

As Autumn drew on, Golden Hair and the bears started to gorge themselves on whatever they could lay their claws on. When they weren’t eating they were dozing in the sun.

One morning the ground was covered with snow.

“Time to find a place to stay,” said the mother bear, leading the cubs and Golden Hair higher into the mountains. They found a place under a jutting rock, and the mother bear nodded in the bear manner.

“This will do,” said the mother bear and she and the cubs and Golden Hair scraped out the uncomfortable pebbles, twigs and other debris and settled down to sleep.

In the night a heavier fall of snow had covered the rock and built up a wall around the bears and Golden Hair. The mother bear stirred and went back to sleep. The cubs and Golden Hair didn't wake.

"Dear, look at this," said the Boffin.

On her screen, Golden Hair's necklace showed the hibernating bears and Golden Hair with them in the den.

"Do you want me to bring her back?" asked the Mage.

"No, let her sleep. But next spring, she will have to come back and go to school. It's time."

So the bears and Golden Hair slept through the winter, cosy in their den. Golden Hair, since she wasn't really a bear was occasionally a little restless, and woke a little, but the gentle snores of her companions and the warm smelly atmosphere soon sent her off to sleep again.

The days passed, the weeks passed, the months passed, and eventually the snug little hollow started to get a little damp as the snow began to melt. The bears and Golden Hair started to stretch and wake. They crawled out of their cosy nest and started to look for food. They found some moss and grass and ate some bark off a tree. Then they happened on a rabbit which had frozen to death, and not been found by anyone else.

The mother bear knew that Golden Hair had to go home, without actually thinking about it like a human would, so she led her cubs and Golden Hair down to the lowlands and towards Golden Hair's home. In the lower altitudes the spring flush had brought out the flowers and the grass was dense and cushioned the cubs and Golden Hair as they rolled and tumbled through the meadows.

What the mother bear didn't know and wouldn't have understood was that some of the few people who lived in the area had seen Golden Hair and reported the sightings to the Baron.

"Five hundred dollars to the man who brings me the pelt of the golden bear," he declared.

It happened that a young lad of about Golden Hair's age was walking through the forest, with his gun, looking for a turkey for the pot. He was not trying very hard, to be honest, as he didn't like killing things, but he'd shoot if he stumbled across one.

He heard a crashing through the forest and the golden bear and two other young bears tumbled onto the track, followed by the mother bear who reared up on her hind legs. The boy saw the golden bear and remembered the bounty on its pelt. He raised his gun and shot at the golden bear.

Rings of fire spread from the golden bear and radiated into the universe. The moon glowed slightly more brightly for a second, and the boy found himself looking at a blond girl of about his own age, totally naked except for a necklace, but totally unharmed.

The mother bear lumbered forward and the boy raised his gun again, but his gun was knocked aside by someone coming up behind him. The mother bear dropped to all fours and nuzzled the blond girl.

“She’s only checking her out,” said the Boffin, tossing a coat to her daughter and getting between her and the boy. “Why did you shoot at my daughter?”

“The, the, the baron offered five hundred dollars for her pelt,” said the lad, suddenly thinking that pelt was not a good word to use in this situation.

“Did he? I’ll have to have a word with him,” said the Boffin.

The boy was suddenly glad that he was not the baron. Golden Hair walked up to him, tightening her belt around her waist.

“You’re cute,” she said.

“Don’t mind her, she’s not completely back in human mode yet,” sniffed the Boffin.

“What’s your name?” said Golden Hair. “I’m Golden Hair.”

“Jack,” said the boy.

So they walked home, with the Boffin resolutely walking between Jack and Golden Hair who kept sneaking looks at each other. The Boffin was not too displeased though, as she realised that it shouldn’t be too hard to persuade Golden Hair to go to school next term.

When they got home, Golden Hair took a shower then came and gave her Mum a hug.

“Mum, the mother bear, when she nuzzled me, said ‘It’s over.’ Is it over?”

“Yes, dear, I think it’s over. Now, about school....”

Golden Hair never spent as much time in the woods after that, and she did it as a human. She occasionally came across the mother bear, but they went their separate ways. The two cubs moved away shortly after Golden Hair left the bears, and one spring the mother bear had two new cubs. The mother bear wouldn’t let Golden Hair near them. She said, in bear, “These two don’t know you.”

Golden Hair was thoughtful as she walked home. She found the Boffin and said “Mum, I think that my name is Alice.”

And it stuck.

Nearing the End of the Search

“Those stories have a very light feeling to them, almost comedic. Is that a reflection of the tone of the original documents or was it something that the translators or the writer put in, Bel? Do you know?” asked Dougal.

“We talked about that,” said Bel. “Or at least, the translators, including Johan’s Dad and the writer discussed that all the time, and I mostly listened. Johan’s Dad was in two minds about it until one day when we were at a conference.”

“I was there because I was going to talk about the methods we used to analyse the texts for regularities and tried to tie them to words and syntax. Boring stuff, unless you are interested. Johan’s Dad was giving a paper too, as was his friend and rival from Southern University, a guy called Finn.”

“Finn came up to us and said to Johan’s Dad ‘I like what you have done with those stories, Mark. I think that your popular translations get the tone of the texts exactly. I believe that the original writer definitely had his or her tongue in their cheek.’. I thought that Johan’s Dad was going to burst with pleasure.”

Teresa came up to the much reduced group of ‘survivors’.

“Right everyone. This blood collection is the last of the day, and the next one, the last before the final stage will be at eleven o’clock tomorrow. Chins up, we are nearly there.”

“‘Chins up’, she says,” said Mikey. “I’ll do my best, Teresa. We’ll do our best, I think.”

Everyone nodded. The first batch were led off to give their blood, and it just so happened that Mikey, Bel, and Johan were all in the same batch and returned more or less together.

“This cannula is getting annoying. At least we can look forward to them being taken out,” said Bel, sitting next to Dougal.

“At least we spouses don’t have that irritation. Mikey had to have his redone, did he tell you?” said Dougal.

“No, he didn’t mention it. They were thinking of redoing mine, but they decided not to in the end. Say, we’ve heard Mikey’s story of how you met. How was it for you, if you don’t mind me asking?” said Bel.

“Oh, my story is quite boring really. I’ve known for as long as I can remember that I preferred boys to girls. My Mum spotted this early on, and warned me that some people could be prejudiced

against me. Fortunately I haven't had any problems in that respect. I've had a few dates with boys over the years, but I never went out with the same boy twice for some reason."

"Anyway, after I left school I went and studied art at college. I liked the theory and the history of it, and I especially liked the classical paintings. I was never much good at doing it, though I can do a fair cartoon. I worked at a gallery for a while, then I got a small inheritance and bought half of it. We did well, but my business partner, a lovely lady, split from her partner and wanted to leave the Capital for a while. I scraped together some money, enough to buy the other half of the gallery, but I literally lived in the office for a while."

He mused for a bit. "I'd given up on finding a partner, and didn't want brief liaisons. Maybe I was waiting for Mikey, without knowing it. I had plenty of friends. I wasn't lonely. I was however very busy."

"I don't what made me volunteer to organise the charity do. Well, one of my friends asked me, but I usually turned such things down. But the gallery was going well, and I had some spare time and my friend begged me. She'd actually been dropped in it by a mutual pal. As she said 'Fancy him getting appendicitis right now. He knew I was depending on him.'. Of course she was joking and he did let us use his restaurant and function room, and he did help as much as he could when he came out of hospital."

"I didn't see Em and Mikey come in. I was busy greeting people as they came and handing them off to the waiting staff. My pal was doing the same. I remember that Em was dressed up and looked amazing. Mikey was by comparison very dull. I shook hands with Em and then with Mikey, and looked in his eyes. Then the world changed, or as people keep saying 'something happened'. I was really shaken up, and so was Mikey, I could see."

"Em took charge and dragged us off. My pal saw us go, and raised her eyebrows, but I sorted it out with her later. Em invited me for the weekend and we somehow made it through the rest of the party. I don't remember much about it."

"I really enjoyed the weekend with Em and Mikey. Di was small at the time, but she was so cute. She made me read to her all the time. But Mikey and I went for walks around the estate. It was a bit of a culture shock as my family lived, still live, in state housing."

"Em gave Mikey and me permission to get to know each other, but we had to be discreet because of Mikey's Dad, and Di's inheritance. Oh, that was a trying time. We spent a lot of time together, going to restaurants, and sometimes Em came along too. She's amazing. I love her almost as much as I love Mikey."

"Em got herself into the marriage with Mikey even though he wasn't sexually attracted to women, though she says that she should have figured it out before it got that far. But her solution was to work with what she had. She wanted a baby, Mikey needed an heir, so she fixed it."

“Mikey met me. Em accepted that and set the rules for us, all of us.”

“Mikey blossomed after we met. Before we met he was quiet and subdued. Yeah, you can all look at him in disbelief, but he hadn’t long come to understand his own nature, and he was happy to blend into the background.”

Mikey was chuckling as he listened to Dougal’s story. “I still blend into the background. If the background is bright and noisy enough. It’s true enough though, what Dougal said. When I met him I was still so mixed up. Em was helping me get sorted out though.”

“Anyway,” said Dougal, “Mikey’s father died. Mikey won’t mind me saying that he was a strange old coot. He was strangely likeable, in spite of his irritability and idiosyncrasies. Em used to cope with the old bully brilliantly.”

“Divorce is usually stressful for those concerned, but we three were really happy as we went through all the legal processes. The only concern was that Mikey’s Dad had put something unpleasant in his will, but he hadn’t. The will was executed, the divorce went through and Mikey and I got married. Em walked us both down the aisle, one on each arm and little Di carried a posy. Em was so happy for us that she cried, and so did we.”

“Has Em got a boyfriend or anything?” asked Johan. “Sorry if that’s something you don’t want to share.”

“No, that’s all right,” said Mikey. “She’s gone out with a few guys, but none of them seem to stick. She jokingly says she’s still waiting for ‘everything to change’, but she knows that it might not happen that way, if at all.”

He took Dougal’s hand. “In many ways we are more of a trio than a couple. It will be strange if she does find herself a partner. He’d have to be a special person, and I hope she finds him soon.”

They all fell silent.

“Uh oh,” said Dougal. “Here come the results.”

Teresa walked over to the group and gave Bel and Johan a strange look. She also looked for a long time at Mikey.

“OK, here are the latest names. Could these people, and their partners come and stand over here, please?”

Johan held Bel’s hand. He looked around and saw that all the couples were tensely holding hands. Teresa read out four names and Johan, Bel, and Mikey were not called. Mikey sighed. Dougal put his arm around him, and Johan held Bel. The four couples who had been called out said their goodbyes and headed off.

“Six left. Five couples,” said Mikey. He listed their names. “Myself, Johan, Bel, Ted, Stefan, and Vali. Let’s head for the bar. Teresa, are you going to join us, later?”

Teresa nodded and the six ‘survivors’ headed off with their spouses, somewhat shaken.

When they got the bar Bel called for champagne all round. In the walk from the Princess Afua room she had suddenly cheered up.

“What’s got into you, Bel?” asked Dougal. “You’re suddenly very cheerful.”

“I just realised. A bit late really, but I just realised that we can do nothing to change anything, so why worry? If I’m to be Princess, or if any of you guys are going to be Princes, well, that’s the way things are going to be.”

They all looked at her.

“She’s right you know,” said Johan. “It doesn’t cheer me up much, but it takes the edge off. Cheers, everyone.”

He raised his glass.

Stefan spoke up. “Let’s change our name. We’ve survived. That’s a given. We could be the Star Chamber. Or the Inner Chamber.”

“Yes, Inner Chamber. Not Star Chamber. That’s synonymous with oppression, isn’t it?” said Mikey, laughing. “I don’t want to oppress anyone, should I draw the short straw.”

“That’s true,” said Stefan. “Though I’ve been wondering if the three of us, myself, Ted, and Vali, aren’t just making up the numbers, Mikey. You have a blood connection to the throne, even if it is indirect, and Bel and Johan, well, you seem special somehow. I’d put money on the fact that the new heir is one of you, and I’m sorry if that upsets you.”

Mikey looked at Bel and Johan. “Well, it doesn’t worry me. It puts into words what I’ve been thinking for a while.”

He grinned. “I’ll tell you what, if you are right I’ll send you another bottle of my best whisky. Ah, Teresa, welcome. Would you like a glass of champagne?”

“Sure. How’s everyone holding up? OK?”

Everyone nodded.

“Well, Bell just said that we are doomed to whatever fate awaits us and we should enjoy it. Stefan said he’s not worried because he reckons that the new heir will be me, Bel or Johan,” said Mikey.

Everyone looked at him.

“Sorry, everyone. That was a bit harsh. Sorry again,” he apologised.

“Johan,” said Teresa sharply.

Bel spun around and looked at him. “Oh, no,” she said.

Johan was sitting with his pad on his lap and a pencil in his hand. Bel had never seen him with his pad and pencil, just sitting there and not drawing.

“I just remembered what Teresa said before. She had to give up her job when she became the wife of the Prince.”

“But you wouldn’t have to give up your art, dear,” said Bel.

“That’s not the point. Suppose I am fated to become the Prince. I think I could handle the job. Well, I’d have to. But my art. Would people buy it because it was good, or because it was painted by the Prince?”

Bel grabbed him and kissed him hard. Everyone clapped.

“Does that help?” she asked.

“A little,” smiled Johan.

Teresa said “Johan, you already have a reputation as a great artist. Yes, you do! Look, Dougal agrees with me. He’s nodding. Those who appreciate your art will still appreciate it. Sure, people will buy your art because you are the Prince, if it turns out that you are the Prince. But that means that more people will get to see it. The quality is intrinsic, isn’t it? It’s not valued in dollars, is it?”

Johan looked at her for a minute, then his pencil flew across his pad. He passed the pad to Teresa, and she looked at it and laughed.

“Sorry, Teresa, you’re right. I’m being silly. As Bel says, there’s nothing I can do about it anyway. I’ll try to cheer up a bit.”

Teresa showed the drawing around. It was just a cartoon, but it showed Teresa from a low point of view, with her finger pointing, obviously telling someone off, like a school teacher.

“Very flattering, Johan,” said Teresa, still laughing. “Please can I have a copy.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s throw off the doom and gloom and have another glass of champagne. We’re allowed, aren’t we, Teresa?”

Teresa nodded. “Sure. But let’s have it with our meal, which should be about ready. We’re in the side room tonight, as there’s only a few of us.”

As they were getting their meals, Dougal came up to Johan.

“You needn’t worry, old boy. I think that your art will become a little more collectible, if you turn out to be the Prince, and you won’t be unable to sell your stuff, but, you know, in a few years, it won’t make much difference. Those who know art will know how good your stuff is. You already have a reputation, and a bit of popular fame won’t impact on that.”

“Thanks, Dougal. I was depressed by the thought of my art becoming worthless, but that will never happen, will it? I think I’m mostly over it, but thanks anyway. Your opinion as a person in the know helps me a lot.”

Later as Bel and Johan were preparing for bed, Johan said “It’s funny. I’m much less tense than I was before. For a minute I thought that my art would be useless if either of us became the heir, but now, I’ve accepted the situation, whatever it might be, and I think that I’ll sleep OK tonight. What about you?”

She came up to him and hugged him. He kissed her.

“I’m OK too. It no longer scares me. What will be, will be, I guess. But, my darling, it doesn’t change your art in the slightest. If it turns out that you are the Prince, you will still be you, and your art will still be your art.”

“Yes, I know. Dougal, who is in the business told me as much. It’s funny isn’t it. We went into this thinking we’d soon be eliminated, but now we are on the verge of finding out that one of us is the next heir. Or Mikey, or one of the other three, it’s true. But the closer we get, the more that I feel that there is a strong chance it is going to be one of us. But I think that if we asked any one of the other, they’d probably say the same.”

And sleep well they did, after calling home to update their parents.

The New Heir is Revealed

In the morning the last six ‘survivors’ and their spouses gathered in the Princess Afua room at eleven. Looking around, Bel thought that the ‘survivors’ themselves looked relatively cheerful, but the spouses, with the exception of Dougal looked downcast. Well, it would soon be over for most of them, in all probability.

Teresa arrived. “Right, last bloods collection in the first phase. The specialists reckon that three of you will be going home, statistically. Stefan, I’ve checked with them, and they see no reason to prefer Johan, Bel, or Mikey over you other three. I’m sorry about that. But then again, they keep telling me about ‘margins of error’ and ‘small sample size’.”

The remaining ‘survivors’ went up and had their bloods taken.

“One way or another we lose these darn cannulas today. That will be a huge relief,” said Ted. “One guy that I was talking to had his come out twice, and in the end they gave up and just took his bloods the normal way, with a needle.”

They all nodded in agreement. No one liked the cannulas. They sat around drinking coffee and chatting, as had become the habit while they were waiting for the results. Teresa looked around and noted that the general mood was not downcast. Even the spouses had cheered up a bit. Ted’s wife was busy knitting something, and chatting to Vali’s wife. Stefan was talking to Johan and sketching on Johan’s pad. Stefan was an architect and not a bad artist himself. His wife was talking to Dougal. They were bonding as a group, but the group would soon be split. One of the doctors headed across with a piece of paper, which he gave to Teresa. Suddenly all the attention was on her. She read the piece of paper.

“Right, I’ve told all those who have already been eliminated that the Crown will give all those who were tested but eliminated a sum of money as thanks for taking part in this testing. We are also providing counselling to them, and security if they need it. We are also ensuring that they have support if they are approached by the media, which many were. If you need anything after this is over, I’ll give you a special contact number.”

“Anyway, these people have been eliminated as a result of this final blood collection in this phase. There are three of them. Firstly, Vili.”

Vili sighed and put his head in his hands. His wife put her arm around him.

“Oh, my!” he said. “That’s... I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I feel. Can I stay around to hear the other names?”

Teresa nodded. “OK. The second name is Ted.”

Ted put his arm around his wife and hugged her. "I told you, dear. But it sure was close, wasn't it?"

His wife was crying quietly.

"I'm glad," she said, "but you would have made a good Prince, I believe."

"Maybe you are biased," Ted joked.

"I think that you all would make great Princes," said Teresa, "The last name is Stefan. It seems that you guessed right, Stefan."

Stefan looked at the remaining three and Dougal. "I'm sorry, guys," he said. "I don't what it was that made me think that you would be the last ones left, but several others that I talked to said the same. Good luck with what happens next."

Bel, Johan and Mikey, not to mention Dougal, sat stunned. The doctor took Stefan, Ted, and Vali and their spouses off and they all looked back and waved as they went out of the door.

Mikey was the first to recover. "Then there were three. What happens now Teresa?"

"Well, you all receive the second 'substance' and then we wait. One o'clock we take your bloods and then at five we take them again, just as a check."

"And after that?"

"Well, if someone is positive, which means that we haven't wasted everyone's time, then that person is the heir. If Bel or Johan is the heir, you can go home, Mikey and Dougal. If it is you, Mikey, then they can go home. That much is obvious. We will announce the findings on television, and believe me, the media are slavering for them."

"We, well, I, will help the new heir with the transition from his or her current life. I won't sugar coat it. The heir's old life is ended. We will have to move fast to protect his or her families, but some of that is in place all ready, whoever the heir is. The heir will have to front up for an interview for the media, but we will help with that."

"But let's get the process under way. The doctors are ready."

Bel, Johan and Mikey went up to have the 'substance' injected, and came back somewhat sombrely to Dougal. Dougal put his arm round Mikey, who was quieter than usual.

"Can we order in sandwiches, Teresa? I don't know about anyone else, but I'm not in the mood to traipse over to the cafeteria," asked Mikey.

Everyone agreed, and Teresa sent a page off from some snacks.

“What do you think, Teresa?” Mikey asked. “The favourites have made it through. Is it pure chance, or something deeper?”

Teresa thought. “You have to be careful if you start down that track,” she said. “You might end up concluding that poor Steven’s death had a purpose behind it. It would be a cruel world if that were true. I don’t believe it.”

She looked upset, and Bel held her hand. Teresa patted it.

“However, as many people have pointed out, Mikey, you are the nearest to the Royal line that we know of, and that may explain your presence here. Bel and Johan, we’ve had people looking into your genealogy, just the publicly available stuff of course, and you are both very distantly related to the Royal line, but then so are a huge number of others. Probably most if not all of the survivors. That doesn’t explain your presence.”

“There may be something deeper, Mikey, but if there is, we don’t know what that is. By the way, Mikey, you were the favourite from the start, and Bel and Johan as the only couple in the fifty three were equal in the betting some way behind. Everybody else was an also-ran.”

“There’s betting on it?” said Bel, surprised.

“Yes, of course. There’s intense interest.”

The conversation died.

“Oh, by the way, Bel,” said Mikey. “We got a message from Em. She’s engaged! The message was a bit confused, but she did say ‘something changed’, so I have high hopes! Apparently Di was a bit quiet when they told her, but it turns out that she was only worried about what she would call us all. She calls me ‘Dad’ and she was concerned about what she was going to call him!”

“Oh, I’m so glad, Mikey. Em sounds nice and she deserves to find her life partner. You’re happy for her, aren’t you?”

“Yes, of course I am. We are. We’ll all have to adjust, not just Di. I’m looking forward to meeting with him. I’ve a feeling that our trio just became a quartet. Maybe a looser quartet but still a quartet.”

“Oh, I hope so, Mikey,” said Teresa. “I know Em, and she’s a remarkable woman. But let’s eat.”

A platter of sandwiches and rolls and a platter of fruit had been delivered and they helped themselves.

Bel laughed. "I've dined on this many times in the past. At the places I've worked and at conferences and so on."

"It is a bit of a cliché, isn't it?" said Teresa.

After coffee, Teresa said "OK, do you want to know the result after the first bloods, given that we will be double checking at five, or do you want to wait until after the last bloods?"

Johan looked at Bel and Mikey. "Well, speaking for myself, I'd rather wait until the result is certain, so I vote for after five."

The others nodded agreement.

"OK, so let's get your bloods done. We'll delay any announcement until after the last bloods."

After the bloods they came back and all sat together, chatting about all sorts of things. The two couples, Bel and Johan, and Mikey and Dougal felt the need to stay together. Teresa stayed with them and supported them, answered their questions and encouraged them through the afternoon. When someone tried to give her a piece of paper she waved them away.

After a very slow afternoon, Teresa said "Right team. Last bloods. Let's get this done, and then, I've a treat for you."

They had their bloods taken and the cannulas removed at last, then Teresa took them to a private room off the cafeteria.

"We've got a really top rank meal arranged for you. It's a degustation meal from the top chef in the Capital. So, get your taste buds ready!"

The meal was fun, Bel thought, but Dougal was looking a little down. Bel linked arms with him.

"What's up, Dougal? You're a bit quiet."

"Oh, nothing to worry about Bel. I'm the odd one out here. The only one who definitely won't be the heir. But honestly, it's not a big thing."

Bel kissed him on the cheek. "Oh, Dougal, you're a sweetie. Such a nice man. Mikey is so lucky."

Dougal grinned. "Actually, so am I. Thanks, Bel."

They were relaxing with coffees when a page brought Teresa a piece of paper. She read it carefully.

"OK. Is everyone OK with me announcing the results right now?"

Everyone nodded.

“Right then. Both sets of results agree. Johan, you test positive in the second phase. You are the only one who had draconin B in his or her blood. You are almost certainly the next heir. I’m not sure whether or not to congratulate you or commiserate with you. How do you feel?”

Johan swallowed. “Numb,” he said. “The whole process has been weird. Oh, Bel, what have I let you in for?”

Bel hugged him. “Let me in for? We did this for our son, remember. And I’m your life partner, and I stand alongside you whatever may happen. We’ll cope with this, just as Teresa has coped with it. Darling, don’t you see? The only difference between me and Teresa is that Teresa knew that Steven was the Prince when they met. With us, you have become the Prince after we met.”

Mikey clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m so sorry for you, and so pleased for you at the same time. I really thought that I was going to be the one, but I’m not, apparently. I’ve come to like you and Bel, and if I can help in any way....”

“Teresa, what do you think?” Johan asked.

She thought about it. “I think Steven would have been happy with the outcome. There’s something about you and Bel, that reminds me of myself and Steven. I’m happy with it too.”

She turned to Mikey. “Mikey, you’re a dear friend, and you helped me so when Steven died, but I don’t think that you would ever be a Prince. I’m sorry.”

Mikey laughed. “That’s OK, Teresa. I didn’t want to be a Prince, but I’d have done my best if it was my fate to be the one.”

“I know you would Mikey, but it’s a moot point now, isn’t it?” She signalled to a page.

“Let’s have a toast,” she said, as the page brought in a bottle of champagne. They took their glasses and Teresa filled them.

“To Prince Johan and Princess Bel. I know that they didn’t really want the job, but I hope that it is not too burdensome, and that there will be joyful times ahead for them. I know that Steven and I were able to make a difference and do some really good things. The job, and it is a job, can be rewarding, but it is up to you to make the role worthwhile. In a monarchy like ours, which is largely a symbolic monarchy, we have no power to order anyone to do anything, but we have huge power to persuade, suggest, and influence.”

They all drank.

“Wow. ‘Prince’ and ‘Princess’. That’ll take some getting used to. How hard is the transition from ‘Mr’ and ‘Mrs’ to ‘Prince’ and ‘Princess’, Teresa. You’ve done it,” said Johan.

“Yes. When Steven and I became the Prince and Princess, well, when I became the Princess, the Queen was by my side pretty much all of the time, and she was a great help. She showed me what was important and what was not. She picked my staff...”

“Staff!” gasped Bel.

“...and showed me how to avoid the worst of rigmarole that surrounds the throne. And she made sure that Steven and I had plenty of time to be ourselves, and more importantly how to arrange it for ourselves.”

She turned to Bel. “Yes, Bel, staff. They are there to help you and to oil the wheels. They are super important. Johan will inherit Steven’s staff of course, and you and I, Bel, will share mine at first, I suggest.”

Mikey said “Well, we’d better say our goodbyes. It’s been nice getting to know you two, and I hope that you do OK.”

Bel rushed to him and hugged him. “Oh, Mikey, you’ve been such a rock. Dougal too. Go and meet Em’s new man and report back soon. I’m going to miss you and Dougal!”

Mikey said “Sure. We’ll be around. We’re Teresa’s support crew too, remember? And if you get so fed up that you need time out, you can come and visit. We’ve plenty of room.”

Teresa nodded. “Mikey’s right. He’s been a friend for so long that he’s practically a fixture and his place is ideal for a short break.”

The group shared hugs and kisses all round then Mikey and Dougal left. Johan and Bel watched them go with some regret.

“Right,” said Teresa. “You need to tell your families the news, and then get some rest. I’m going on the television in half an hour or so to announce your names to the nation, but we won’t present you to the media until tomorrow, so get some rest. The media already have your bios, so they will have to make do with those for today.”

“One thing, though. We will have to visit The Castle, to see the King. He wanted the heir to be brought up to see him as soon as he or she was found. He’s drifting in and out of things but he always seems to remember the search.”

The Introduction to the People

Johan and Bel went back to their rooms and hugged each other.

“What are we going to do?” said Johan.

“What? What can we do? Can we turn it down? I don’t think that is an option, is it?”

“We keep saying we did this for Alex, that he needs to know. Did we? Or did we do it for us, because we need to know. Have we been fooling ourselves, all this time?” said Johan.

Bel laid her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t know. I’ve been wondering why we did it. But it’s too late now. We know. Oh, my darling, in thirty years or so, you are going to be lost to me. My darling boy will be your age by then, and he will see you pass over. He will be warned, of course. We will teach him about the process, but he will see it happen to you, and know it will happen to him.”

“Yes, but remember. If we didn’t know, I would suddenly and unexpectedly pass over. Alex would not know, would not expect it. Of course he would be thirtyish, but it would still be a shock. It would change his whole life, and not for the better. He would suddenly be Prince. Much like me,” he said ironically.

He thought a bit. “Yes, you are right of course, my love. We didn’t do it only for Alex. We did it for us too. We did it for all of us, for all our kids, Alex, Si, and Diane. We had to do it, and now we know, and we are caught up in the engine of the monarchy and we have to ensure that it doesn’t chew us up. We need Teresa for that, and I think that she needs us.”

“Yes, Teresa is already a good friend. So, the three of us, together. We’re resolved then? Not that we have much choice, do we.”

“We’re resolved. How do you think this interview is going to go?”

“Oh, Teresa is going to have it under control, I bet,” said Bel.

Next morning Teresa called them. “OK, can you get down here to the studio at eleven. Guess who we’ve got to interview you?”

“Leen?” said Johan. “I bet you got Leen!”

Their page delivered them to the Palace studio at eleven and not only was Leen there but Pete was acting as the studio manager.

When Bel saw them she squeaked and ran up and hugged them both.

“It’s great to see you both. Pete, I thought you’d given up the business for writing?”

“Oh, I’m still writing, but I couldn’t pass up this opportunity. Leen practically insisted, anyway.”

Leen grinned. “I’m in serious trouble. I bumped Pete up over several senior studio managers. They didn’t like it, but I couldn’t let Pete miss out.”

Teresa arrived. “Hi, Leen, glad you could make it. This must be Pete. Right, the ground rules for this interview, we do each question and then pause for a second or two. If anyone has an issue, they raise a hand and we stop and discuss things. OK? Leen, please stick to the questions you submitted but you can reword if you like.”

Leen nodded “OK, Pete, take it away.”

Pete said, “Recording, three, two, one”

He gestured at Leen and mouthed the word “Go!”

Leen said “Good evening, I’m here with the new heir to the throne, Prince Johan and his wife Princess Isobel. Sire, how do you feel about being the heir to the throne?”

Johan said “Terrified.”

Immediately Teresa raised her hand. Leen sighed. She looked at Johan.

“Johan, you have to be positive in this first interview,” said Leen. “I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but you could say it was challenging or something. Let’s start again. From the top, please Pete.”

Pete said, “Recording, three, two, one”

He gestured at Leen and mouthed the word “Go!”

Leen said “Good evening, I’m here with the new heir to the throne, Prince Johan and his wife Princess Isobel. Sire, how do you feel about being the heir to the throne?”

Johan thought carefully. “It isn’t something that I sought for. It will no doubt be a challenge at times, especially at the end. I do feel that, with the support of Princess Teresa and Princess Isobel that I can honour the memory of Prince Steven and continue his work in the causes that he supported.”

Leen turned to Bel. “Ma’am, what do you think about Johan becoming the heir?”

“Well, ever since we met, he has been the centre of my life and I have been the centre of his. As Johan says, he didn’t seek this, but I know that he will do it to the best of his abilities.”

Leen asked her “You say that he didn’t seek to become Prince, but it might have been you who became the next heir. Why then did you take part in the tests?”

“We came into this mainly for our kids. If we hadn’t, in thirty years or so, Johan would suddenly have shown symptoms of passing over and this would have been a shock to us and to our children, particularly Alex, our eldest. He is going to see his father pass over, and he will know that he will also pass over eventually, and that his first born child will also pass over. We have the opportunity to teach him what is known about the process while he is still young and so it won’t be a complete shock to him.”

Johan added “Ironically, we are trying to save him from what I am faced with – the shock of suddenly finding out that I will eventually pass over as many have done before me. I feel that, had I known about it from a child, that it would be easier for me.”

Leen turned to Teresa. “Ma’am, can you comment on this? Did you and Steven talk about his passing over?”

Teresa laughed ironically. “Only every week or so. But Steven wasn’t afraid of it. He said ‘Oh, Terry, there are worst ways to go.’ We’d visit hospitals where people were dying slowly and painfully. But he knew that he would merely become uncomfortable, and forgetful, and sleepy, and would eventually go to sleep and never wake up. Only, he never made it that far.” She drew in a shuddering breath and Bel held her hand.

Leen switched back to Johan “Sire, what differences will this make? You say that you will support Prince Steven’s causes, but surely you will have your own?”

Johan looked briefly at Bel and Teresa. “Well, I pledge that I will continue with the support for Prince Steven’s causes. Forgive me, I’ve only been the heir for less than a day, and I don’t know what influence I have and how this job or role if you prefer works. I’m not even used to being called ‘sire’ yet. But with Bel, Princess Isobel that is, and Princess Teresa by my side, I will do the best job that I can. I can’t honestly say what differences that this will make.”

Leen made a cut throat gesture to Pete.

“Cut. Recording stopped,” said Pete.

“OK,” said Leen, “that’s great so far. Let’s review what we have so far. Johan and Bel, I’ll want to go into your family a little later, if that is OK. Names and ages. That sort of thing. Avoid too much detail.”

And so the interview was put together. Once or twice Leen posed a question another way, and Teresa had some suggestions, while Johan and Bel mostly went with the flow. At the end, Leen, Pete and Teresa agreed that it had gone well, while Johan and Bel were exhausted.

“Don’t worry, it gets easier,” laughed Teresa.

Pete said “We’ve got some news. Leen has to give up work for a while.”

“What?” said Bel. “Why? For a while? Do you mean...”

“Yes,” said Leen. “We’re expecting number three! We always wanted three, but I had complications after our little girl was born, and we thought that that was that. But I had a minor operation and they fixed up some issues, and then they asked me if I was going to have any more kids. I said that I’d been told that I couldn’t have any more, and they looked at me and said that that was wrong! We’d given up of course. So we just let nature take its course and it happened.”

“We’re so pleased,” said Pete. “We both come from three child families. It just seems right. It’s going to be a girl, by the way.”

“Oh, I’m so pleased for you!” said Bel. “That’s wonderful news. I’d love it if we could keep in touch.”

“Oh, and we met up with Maisie and Doug. They are such a lovely pair and their little boy is sweet. The baby is due about now, I think. They went through a rough time when Doug got laid off from the oil rigs, but I get the impression he is good at his job and he was soon working again. They looked so happy.”

“I’m so glad,” said Johan. “Tell them we said ‘Hi!’ if you see them soon.”

The interview, edited to remove the pauses and glitches went out the next day, and reactions were favourable. People seemed pleased that the heir had been found, and it was a bright moment after the gloom of Steven’s death and funeral.

Teresa arranged a morning meeting with them, and some of the top people in her staff and Steven’s staff, and showed them how to get things done.

“You don’t have to arrange everything. The art is to know what to delegate and how to delegate it. If you need to go to the Southern Provinces, discuss it with Roger, who was Steven’s Private Secretary and who will be yours, Johan, for the time being, and it will be arranged.”

“For the time being?” questioned Johan.

“Being someone’s Private Secretary is a very personal relationship, sire,” said Roger. “I’m happy to serve for as long as you need me, and for as long as we get along OK.”

“I understand, Roger,” said Johan. “I think that you must all miss Steven greatly, and I commiserate with you all, those who are here, and those who I have yet to meet.”

“Thank you, sire,” said Roger.

“Roger, you know the rule. At this morning meeting we are on a first name basis, remember?” said Teresa.

“I’m sorry, Teresa, you are right. I apologise, erm, Johan, that I was hesitant to use your name.”

“Right, the first thing on the agenda is the most important. We need to get Johan and Bel up to The Castle as soon as possible. The King’s condition is slowly progressing, but we don’t have much time left with him. He expressed a wish for Johan and Bel to meet with him as soon as possible. Roger, I believe that plans are already underway?”

“Yes,” said Roger. “We will transfer to The Castle tomorrow. Everything is in place.”

“Excuse me,” said Bel. “My kids. I need them with me.”

Johan nodded. “You said that they will arrive today, with their grandparents. They are our top priority.”

Teresa said “Yes, of course. Of course. I’m sorry Bel, they are arriving just after lunch. They are going to be in the rooms next to the ones that you are in at the moment, and the connecting doors will be opened. It’s the best we can do at the moment. You will all transfer to The Castle tomorrow, if that is OK?”

Johan and Bel looked at each other. Johan said “Teresa, how important is it that we transfer to The Castle tomorrow? Can we leave it for a day or two? Roger, I’m sorry to put this burden on you, but we are absolute beginners, and we need to talk to the kids and our parents.”

Roger and Teresa nodded. “Of course, Johan,” said Teresa. “Roger can organise that. I’m sorry, we’re not used to considering kids and we were assuming that you would go along with flow for the time being, until you are able to take over the reins. I can only apologise and we will arrange things as you wish. Roger, I think we should cancel the rest of this meeting, and you and I can just chat with Johan and Bel about the future. Is that OK, Johan?”

“That would be great. I’m sorry that we are disrupting things, but we really miss our kids.”

So Johan, Bel, Teresa and Roger discussed the calendars and schedules.

Johan looked at them with some distaste. “After a week at The Castle, you have us making a public appearance every day. Can we please ease into it? Also on Thursday, I am at one place and Bel is at another. The kids are not on the schedule at all! Where are they supposed to be at the times that we are elsewhere?”

“Of course, Johan,” said Teresa. She looked at Roger. “We’ve not done very well have we? OK, let’s scratch everything. Start from nothing. We’ll have to introduce you to the public, we have to get you up to The Castle, and we have to make provision for the kids. Is there anything else we need to consider, Johan? Bel? Roger?”

“Where do we send our resignation?” joked Johan.

Teresa sighed. “Sorry, Johan. Not accepted. I’m truly sorry.”

Roger said “I’m sorry too. I have kids myself. How could I not have figured your kids in?”

They spent most of the morning sorting things out, and came up with a schedule that satisfied Johan and Bel. The only question left was whether or not the kids would go with them to The Castle. They went off to lunch at the cafeteria, with Teresa and Roger. Teresa was happily humming to herself.

“You’re very cheerful, Teresa,” said Bel.

“Yes, well, I wondered if you two would be, what’s the word? If you would be pushy enough. You’ve pretty much just gone along with everything up until now. Oh, don’t get me wrong, We had messed up badly, but you politely pointed out our mistakes, and we sorted them out. I was afraid that I might have guide you through things for the foreseeable future. But now I don’t think it will take you long to take over the reins.”

“I think that we will still need you, for a long time, Teresa.” said Bel. “Roger, thank you for making this so easy for us.”

“That’s OK, ma’am. It’s my job, of course, to keep things running smoothly, but it’s nice to be told that I’m being successful.”

Johan and Bel Go Up To The Castle

After they finished their meal they chatted for a while, but then a page came up to Johan and Bel.

“Excuse me, sire, ma’am, you have visitors,” he said.

“The kids!” exclaimed Bel. “Sorry Teresa, we have to go.”

Teresa laughed. “Go on you two. I’ll drop by later on to see your kids and your parents, Bel, if that is OK.”

“What do you think, Roger?” asked Teresa.

“Yes, I agree with you, ma’am. I think that they will work out well. We’ll have to get Princess Isobel a Private Secretary soon, so that she doesn’t depend on me. Oh, I know we Private Secretaries work very closely together, so it doesn’t matter at the moment. And maybe we should get one for the kids, just to keep things simple.”

Bel practically ran back to their rooms, and the page and Johan had a job to keep up with her. Another page opened the door just in time and Bel flew through it. Little Dianne shrieked and ran to her and the boys clustered around her. Then Johan came through the door and Dianne ran to her Dad and he picked her up.

“Hullo, Dad. Am I really a Princess? Where’s my crown?”

“Yes, sweetie, I think you are a Princess. Princesses don’t wear crowns all the time. It would make their heads ache.”

“Oh. The boys are Princes too?”

“Yes, they are.”

Johan greeted his mother and father in law, who both looked a little shocked. Bel finished greeting her sons and then hugged her mother and father.

“It’s a bit of a surprise, isn’t it?” said Bel “How are you coping with it?”

“I don’t know. Will we have to come and live here in the Palace? I’d rather not. We’ve got some nice new neighbours. A couple. Strangely they call themselves ‘Smith’ and ‘Jones’,” said her Mum.

“Oh, I know them,” laughed Bel. “An elderly couple.”

“No, dear, I don’t know why you would think that. They’re just a bit older than you and Johan, I’d say. I heard a clanking noise and looked over the fence. Smith was lifting weights and she saw me and invited me over for a cup of tea. She’s really nice. Jones was out somewhere, Smith said, ‘On duty’.”

“Ah, one thing that I do know is that you can trust them. Rely on them. They’re there to stop people bothering you because of us. Oh, by the way, Teresa, Princess Teresa that is, will be along later and we can talk about what happens next. We have to go up to The Castle soon apparently, for a week or so and we can talk about that. If you have Smith and Jones looking after you, you’ll be able to go back home and you won’t have to move to the Palace I think.”

“Is Princess Teresa a little girl, like me?” asked Dianne.

“No, lovely, she’s the same age as me almost.” Bel reflected on the fact that Teresa was a few months younger than her, yet Teresa seemed older. It must have been the shock of losing Steven and the subsequent hunt for the next heir. Or, she pondered, maybe the strain of being part of the royal family.

Later in the afternoon Teresa came round to see them. Dianne called her “Aunty Terry” and they hit it off right away. Dianne climbed up on the armchair alongside her. Johan and Bel looked at each other.

“Don’t worry, Bel, it’s OK,” said Teresa putting her arm around Dianne. “It’s fine, if it’s fine with you.”

“Sure,” said Johan. “We talked to Roger earlier this morning about the trip to The Castle. It’s the school holidays so we thought that the kids should go with us. Bel’s mother and father want to stay in the Capital for a few days to visit Bel’s Auntie and Johan’s parents, so they can stay at the Palace and Roger will get them someone to arrange cars and access and so on.”

“That sounds good. Great, in fact. I’m coming with you, and we will be driving from the local airfield to The Castle. It’s slower than the helicopter access, but we don’t use that much these days unless we are in a hurry.”

The next day they all went up to The Castle. Bel and Johan found it strange that they now had people to do most of the packing for them, and all that they had to do was grab some really personal stuff, like Bel’s notebooks and Johan’s sketch pad. Johan was still tossing off sketch after sketch as everything was still new to them.

Teresa came round just before they were due to leave.

“Are you ready for the off?” she asked. “My stuff is all ready. Shall we make our way to the cars?”

They collected the kids and followed Teresa down to the cars. Dianne skipped along holding Teresa's hand. Johan, Teresa and Dianne went in one car and the boys and Bel went in another car.

"Is Roger coming?" asked Johan.

"Yes, he went early this morning. So did my Private Secretary. Everything should be in place when we get there, or Roger will not be a happy man."

They swung into the Air Force airfield without pausing at the gates and the car stopped by a small jet aircraft, and the small party were shown into the aircraft by an efficient man in Air Force Blue. Bel suddenly remembered and looked at Teresa. Teresa was seated with Dianne and was supervising her attempts to fit her own seatbelt. She saw Bel looking at her.

"No need for concern, Bel. I'm OK. I've flown a few times since the accident, and it makes me a little sad, but I'm not scared, and I won't collapse or anything."

"You can hold my hand if you want, Aunty Terry," said Dianne. She had been told what had happened to Prince Steven, but was not big enough to understand all the implications and the emotions that the event had given rise to.

"Bless you, lovely. I might just do that," said Teresa.

They took off into a blue sky and banked into the direction of The Castle. Soon they were too high up to see a lot of detail and they settled back to enjoy the trip. The Cabin Crew served them coffee and snacks and drinks for the boys and Dianne.

The kids were shown around the cockpit, and of course the boys loved it. Dianne came back looking a bit puzzled.

"What's up, Dianne?" asked Bel.

"The pilot and his friend showed us lots of buttons and dials and things. And they showed us a sort of map thing with a small plane on it which moved slowly on it, and another thing that showed that the plane was level, but they didn't look out the windows much and they didn't touch the handles and the pedal things at all, and some of the levers were moving by themselves."

"Yes, so what were you puzzling about?"

"I thought that the pilot flew the plane?"

"Ah, did they mention the autopilot?"

"Oh, yes, but I didn't understand. They said it was a robot but I didn't see one."

“It’s not a robot like a man. It’s sort of built into the plane. It’s sort of like a computer. The pilot tells it where we are going and what height to fly at so they don’t have to touch the handles and the pedal things at all. But for the take off and landing, the autopilot is switched off and the pilot uses the handles and the pedals to fly the plane.”

“I see,” said Dianne thoughtfully. She looked at Teresa anxiously. “Maybe some day the robots will be good enough to do the landings and take offs and there won’t be any more crashes.”

Bell gasped and went to say something, but Teresa stopped her.

“Yes, Dianne, my dear” said Teresa. “You are right. That would be wonderful. But it will be a long time before that happens.”

Her eyes were glistening, but she seemed OK apart from that.

“Oh, I wish I’d had a little girl like you, my lovely,” she said.

They landed at the Air Force base nearest to The Castle and transferred to a small bus for the last leg of the journey. Another bus carried their baggage.

Bel, looked at the mountains that hung over the base and the small town. The biggest peak was obscured by clouds, but was a bulky presence, while the smaller peaks and ridges wrapped around it like a cloak. A helicopter popped up over a ridge and headed towards them.

“You can’t see The Castle from here,” said Teresa. “I’ve been up there in a helicopter and it is terrifying. The pilots ride the updraft, which they call “The Elevator” then settle into a landing at the top. We went up with an Air Force Marshall who was talking about risky landings he had seen. He wasn’t really boasting, just answering questions. When we got to the top he looked ashen. ‘That’s got to be the worst of all,’ he said. I’m glad we are driving up.”

The buses wound up the hill, sticking closely to the rocks at the side of the hill. On the other side the descending lane was close to the edge. At times the drop was steep and at others it was just a steep downhill slope.

“The road used to be much narrower,” said Teresa. “At one time there was a single lane, no passing places. People used to ride up on horses. We’ll stop here for a moment.”

The road wound backwards and forwards across the steepening slope, passing through undercut cliffs and short tunnels. Then they passed through a slightly longer tunnel and the buses emerged to a view of The Castle and the bridge. They stopped. Johan instinctively reached for his sketch pad and pencil.

The Castle was a gleaming white seemed to join to the rocks seamlessly. It was still a good way above them, on the end of a large spur that stood out from the large bulk of the mountain. While

they were watching a helicopter rose from the gulley between them and The Castle and rose quickly on the updraft until it was level with the top of The Castle, then slipped sideways and put down on a huge circular tower jutting from main body of The Castle. It was one of two towers, the second of which was much higher and had a rounded top.

“That’s the New Tower, where the chopper landed,” said Teresa. “It’s hard to believe, but it was once a man made construction and not part of The Castle itself. When Princess Afua and her team fixed up the broken ‘Old Tech’ of The Castle, The Castle incorporated the New Tower into itself and all the man made parts were changed to the material of The Castle.”

“It’s because of Princess Afua that we no longer talk about ‘Old Tech’ and ‘New Tech’ isn’t it?” said Bel, “She and her team rediscovered the principles behind the ‘Old Tech’ stuff that was left around from olden times so that we no longer had to rely on it, didn’t they?”

“Yes, that’s right Bel. Except for the diggers and lifters. We still don’t know how they work.”

While The Castle perched high on the spur, lower down the road that they were on led to a bone white bridge which spanned the gully between them and the spur that The Castle was on. It swooped across the chasm, pure and unadorned. Johan thought that it was one of the most beautiful bridges that he had ever seen. He worked to capture its essence on his sketch pad.

On The Castle side of the gulley the road disappeared into the hillside. Teresa had told them that the road spiralled up inside the rock and emerged in a courtyard just outside of The Castle proper.

They drove on until they came to the bridge.

“It’s called the Devil’s Bridge,” said Teresa. “In the time of Princess Afua there was a great chunk of it missing, just past halfway. There are pictures and photographs of it with a hole in it. The story was that it took a year and a day to mend itself, but actually it was closer to eight months.”

Close up the bridge was awe inspiring. It had twin towers at each end and the deck was supported by white filaments from two thick suspension cables. Johan could hear it humming quietly as the wind caused the filaments to vibrate. It was a harmonious sound. The white of the bridge and the darker rocks merged seamless in an uneven winding line.

“The bridge is slowly getting wider and stronger,” said Teresa. “They tell me that we can now drive over it. We’ve always disembarked and walked over it before.”

The buses inched over the bridge, and the harmonious sound rose in pitch as the buses put more strain on the cables and filaments. They got to the other side and the buses headed up the spiral tunnel. There was plenty of room for the buses but Teresa realised that they would need to open out the tunnel a bit if bigger vehicles were to use it.

At the top they passed through a large square cavern just before they drove out onto the courtyard.

“We think that The Castle is making a car and truck park here,” said Teresa. “The courtyard can be crowded with vehicles at times.”

“You talk as if it was intelligent, this Castle. Is it, do you think?” asked Johan.

“Princess Afua said that it was ‘almost alive’. It does seem to work in with whatever we are doing, though slowly. We’ve never found a master plan in The Castle’s circuits, though Princess Afua was convinced that there was one, and spent years looking for it. If we could find one, we might be able to direct it to do things that we want to do or need to do.”

They disembarked in the courtyard and met the commander of The Castle, who on this rotation was from the Navy, then pages escorted them to their rooms. Princess Afua insisted of less formality in the Crown and the rooms were set up much like they were in Afua and Henry’s day, as a sort of small apartment within The Castle.

Teresa rang on the internal phone. “The King and Queen would like to see you for tea, in about an hour, if that is OK. Just ask your page outside your door. See you there.”

Bel gave the kids a wipe over and brushed their hair. She’d already rinsed her face, and changed out of her travelling clothes. She made Johan change his sweater and change his sneakers for plain black brogues.

They followed the page to the King and Queen’s rooms and the page knocked on the door them. Another page opened the door from inside and they walked in and were shown to the sitting room. Teresa was already there, and the King rose ponderously to his feet and proffered his hand.

“Welcome, Johan and company,” he said. “Do come and take a seat.”

They all sat down and started chatting about the search process.

“I hated that damn cannula,” said the King. “Not that I was ever going to test negative, but they persuaded me and poor Steven to do it when they were developing the tests, of course. So you drew the short straw, Johan. I’m sorry about that. And Bel! You passed all the tests except the very last one. You are a very unusual couple.”

The King was fatter and ruddier than when they had met him last. He seemed to have all his faculties about him, but Teresa had warned them that he may not be able to keep it together for long.

Dianne walked up to the King and looked at him. “Are you going to change into a dragon?” she asked.

The King laughed. “I believe so,” he said. “They tell me that it won’t hurt. It hasn’t up until now. I just feel tired and uncomfortable. Things ache a bit, but it isn’t painful.”

“Will my Dad and my brother turn into dragons too?”

The King glanced at Johan who nodded.

“Yes, it looks like they will. Does that worry you, little one?”

“A bit,” she said. “But Dad says that it won’t be for a long time.”

“That’s true. You will be all grown up by then.”

“Good. Can I sit next to you, Aunty Terry?”

She crawled up next to Teresa on the big armchair, and Teresa put her arm round her.

The King said “I have signed the document to make you my official heir, Johan. It only needs to be acknowledged by Parliament, and that will happen tomorrow.”

He sighed deeply. “Now I have to go and rest. Tomorrow I suspect that I won’t remember much if anything of this, but that doesn’t worry me too much.”

“Sire, I’ve just sketched you. Would you like to see?” said Johan.

“Yes, yes, I’d love to. I’ve seen some of your pictures, Johan.”

Johan handed his pad over, and the King examined it.

“Hmm,” he said, “So that’s what I look like to someone who has a seeing eye.”

He showed it to the Queen, who put her hand up to her mouth.

“That’s so lifelike,” said the Queen.

“Now I really must go,” said the King, handing the pad back to Johan.

“I think that I need the wheelchair,” he said to a page, and was wheeled off.

“That’s the most coherent he has been for ages,” said the Queen. “He insisted on coming down here for this meeting, all the way from the King’s Tower. He lives up there now.”

The King's Tower

The King's Tower was the sole tower on The Castle until the New Tower was built for the helicopter landing pad. It was shaped like a huge mushroom with a long stalk and had huge windows at the top.

Access from inside was through what might be called a matter transporter. Teresa, Johan and Alex walked into what looked like a dead end. As they walked towards the end wall they suddenly found themselves walking out of a dead end.

“We’re up in the tower now,” said Teresa, “just below the gallery. This is the Hall of Cylinders.”

Rows and rows of cylinders faded into the darkness.

“The light stays with you if you move into the dark,” said Teresa, “but you quickly lose track of where you are so people don’t generally go far. This level seems much larger than the width of the tower so there’s some ancient trickery happening.”

“Look at this.” She touched one of the cylinders and it became transparent. On a platform within the cylinder lay a few tatters of what seemed to be old leather.

“This is what is left if the King manages to ‘pass over’ successfully. Just a few tatters of leathery skin. Do you want to see what happens when the monarch doesn’t manage to ‘pass over’? I warn you that it is not pretty.”

Johan put his hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Are you OK with this, Alex.”

The boy nodded. Teresa moved to a different column and touched it to reveal a monstrosity. It seemed to be loosely wrapped in leather, but the eye eventually saw that these were wings. The body wrapped in the wings was bent and twisted, with the head thrown back. The head had a long muzzle and a mouth which was partly open and showed two long rows of sharp teeth. Long strangely shaped legs ended in long curved claws.

Johan sucked in a breath. He felt his son tremble. Teresa took her hand off the column and it went opaque.

“Scary isn’t it? We don’t know why this one didn’t succeed, as he seems to have cast off the leathery skin that covers them when they are changing. Other failures are almost intact, sealed in their skins for ever. Many are half way out. Lately though, since the time of Queen Afua and King Henry, all ‘passings’ have been successful. We don’t know why.”

Johan asked Alex “Are you OK?”

Alex was trembling. “Yes, Dad. You told me that you are destined to pass over, and that nothing can change that. The same is true for me, so I have to face it sooner or later, and I think that the longer I have the better. Isn’t that why you took the tests? If we do pass over successfully, how glorious would it be to soar like a dragon?”

Teresa said “I find it helps a little to consider what would happen if you were an ordinary person, like me or the Queen. You’d just get sick and die. Oh, you might live on for thirty years or more after reaching sixty, getting weaker and losing your mental abilities. Is that preferable to becoming a dragon while at the peak of your abilities?”

“Anyway, shall we go on?” asked Teresa.

In the middle distance there was a lighted area. They walked towards it and their pool of light tracked with them. The lighted area proved to be stairs leading upwards. The small group walked up the stairs and into the dome at the top of the tower, a bright area lighted by wrap around windows. A large chair sat to one side, and a dais filled much of the rest. A few cupboards stood against the walls.

“Why hullo, Johan,” said the King. “This is Alex?”

He came forward and shook the boy’s hand. “I’m sorry, I forget if we’ve met or not. I remember meeting people downstairs, but the details are vague.”

He walked to a small table which held a tray of food. “All I do is sleep and eat and look out of the windows. It’s strangely restful, but doesn’t make me very sociable, I’m afraid.”

He turned back to them. “Hullo Johan, hullo Alex. I think we met downstairs didn’t we? Oh, I’m so tired. Would you mind if I asked you to leave? Come back later and I might be more awake.”

He lay down on the dais and started to snore. Teresa, Johan and Alex left down the stairs. In the distance a lighted area showed where the exit was, and they headed in that direction.

“He didn’t seem unhappy,” said Alex tentatively.

Teresa nodded. “He’s happy and content, I’d say. He rarely comes down into the main part of The Castle these days.”

The next day Teresa took Bel to see the King. He was a little surprised to see her.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Bel, Johan’s wife”

“Johan? I don’t know any Johan. Where’s Steven, Teresa?”

He suddenly turned to Bel. "Oh, I remember! The accident. Poor Steven. I'm sorry Bel, I'm a bit confused these days. I remember Johan and your boy now, they visited yesterday, I think. Didn't we see you at the Palace. Some party or reception wasn't it?"

"Something like that," Bel said. She came up and took his arm. Teresa took the other.

"Ah, both my girls," he laughed.

Bel felt the solidity of his body and the swellings of his joints through his robes. His body felt hot to the touch and his face and hands were a little red.

He had another vague moment. "Where am I? I'm hungry."

He spotted his food tray and made his way towards it. He seemed to have forgotten them, so Teresa and Bel crept away.

Over the next few days he suddenly started to sleep on the dais for long periods. He only ate berry fruits and a little broth. Then came the day when he didn't wake up. Teresa, Bel, Johan and Alex visited the tower one morning and found the Queen already there holding his hand and stroking it.

"He's left me. I can feel it. I can just touch him when I hold his hand, but he's getting further away all the time," she said. "It's not long now until I will not be able to reach him at all."

She sat in the chair and Bel and Teresa each held a hand. The Queen was weeping quietly. Johan took one of the King's hands. It was hot. Suddenly he felt the essence of the King somehow at a distance. Johan didn't have a religion, and he wasn't a follower of the official religion, the Mystics, so he was a little shaken.

Alex had taken the King's other hand. He sighed.

"He's not at a distance. He's weaker, smaller, I think."

Over the next few months Bel and Johan would often visit the King, though their duties often took them away from The Castle. Alex would join them if he was with them, as would Teresa too. The Queen was almost always there. She no longer had any official duties, as she had handed them over to Bel and Johan.

On this first occasion though the Queen invited all of them back to her apartment. She showed them her scrapbook of her life with the King, and pictures of Steven. In the later ones, Teresa started to appear.

When they left Teresa walked part way with them.

“You know, Steven’s death was a tragic shock, a wound to reality. But you guys seem to be healing the wound. You seem so right for the job.”

She left them at the entrance to their rooms.

“What do you think, Alex? Does this worry you at all?” asked Johan.

Their first son, who was now Prince Alex, and destined to pass over some time in the future, after watching the King and his father pass over, was thoughtful.

“The King said it wasn’t painful. And I think that the bit that was the King was fading away after he fell asleep. Who knows if anything of him will remain in the end? As Teresa said, I might get really sick and suffer for years. Above all, there is no way to change things.”

“So, yes it does worry me. But we have many years to get used to it. Maybe it will be difficult at times, but at others, it will not matter too much. I feel sorry for Teresa though. She married Steven and was prepared to watch him pass over, only for him to be killed. It’s like the train was headed for a certain but not particularly desirable destination, when it was violently thrown off the tracks. It’s sad.”

“Well said, Alex,” said Bel. “Well said.”

And so Johan and his family faced the future. They were now Prince Johan and Princess Bel, and soon to be King Johan and Queen Bel. While the current King lay in his long slumber, they would perform their duties and, so that they could face the future squarely in the face, they would study the videos of Kings who had passed over before them. They would see the struggles of the Kings to be reborn as dragons, watch the current King pass over.

As many had before them, they would discover the wonder in the process, as well as the sadness. They would see that the life of the Kings were not ended but transformed into the life of a magnificent beast, and this would provide the consolation which would allow them to fully accept their fate.