

# The Change

Hunter forwarded the email on to the Prince's Private Secretary, with a note. He sighed. The email was business and Harry handled all the business stuff now.

He could go down and chat with Harry, and they'd probably have a cup of tea, but Hunter didn't want to slow down the Prince's Private Secretary. Harry had a lot more work on these days as the load shifted from Hunter to him.

Hunter decided to go to look for his boss instead.

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Hunter found the King in one of the solaria. The King had had a couch brought in, and a computer was mounted on an arm which extended over the couch.

"Hi, Hunter," said the King. "Tea?"

"Yes, please, sir."

The King touched a few keys on his computer and a minute or two later a page brought a tray with the tea and with coffee for the King.

"Look at us, Hunter! Just a couple of old-timers, hanging round and getting in everyone's way!"

"Yes, sir," laughed Hunter.

In fact, people seemed to be going out of their way to catch up with both of them, which was pleasant.

Hunter was sixty-two, older than most Private Secretaries. He had worked for the King since they were both in their early twenties, and had been his Private Secretary for nearly as long. He was a tall, thin man, with silver hair and moustache, and he wore a neat business suit.

The King was a slightly shorter man. He had gone grey, rather than silver, and he too wore a neat suit.

Hunter regarded his friend and employer. The King was cheerful, but he was no longer the fit and active man that Hunter remembered. He still looked fit, but in recent months he had put on a lot of weight, and it seemed to Hunter that his joints were feeling the brunt of that. His skin was taut and ruddy, with a bronze tinge. Some people whispered 'fake tan', but Hunter knew that the colouring was natural. It was part of the King's condition.

"My doctors suggest that I move to the country, old friend," said the King. "Would you come too, Hunter? I know that your family is here in the Capital. We might be down in the country for a while."

"If I can bring my wife, sir... Then yes, I'd like to come along, thank you, sir."

They were peacefully quiet together.

"Do you remember the early days. When we used to break away from the Palace and the protocol now and then. You used to call me 'Jack'."

"Yes, I do, sir. We went all the way down to the coast once. We drove security mad!"

"Until we let two of the security guys come along!"

Hunter sighed. "There's not much chance of a breakout these days."

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"I'm glad you are coming down with us, Hunter. You'll get priority access. Day or night."

He had met the Queen in the corridor.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Well, you've known the King longer than I have! You're practically family."

Hunter laughed. "Thank you again, ma'am. I only met him a few months before you, you remember?"

"Yes, and I remember you and your wife covering for us when we wanted some alone time. She's coming down?"

"Yes, ma'am. It wasn't just us, of course. All our friends helped out, and we all had a marvellous time."

"Yes," said the Queen, "and everyone but you and Lois has dispersed to the ends of the Earth." She sighed.

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Harry dropped by Hunter's office shortly before the King and Queen moved down to the country. Harry was one of the next generation, and he wore a shirt without a tie. Today he was wearing a dark jacket and pale trousers, which was fairly normal for him. The Prince wore much the same, unless he was taking part in a formal ceremony or occasion.

Hunter had become used to the relatively casual dress of the next generation. He had found that Harry was as professional as he was where the job was concerned.

"It's over to you, Harry," Hunter said.

It's true that Harry had been left in charge of the Palace before, but this time it was different. The King would not be coming back.

"Thanks, Hunter. I'm a little nervous. I didn't think that I would be, but surprisingly, I am."

Hunter smiled. "Don't be. I've trained you well. You're the best."

Harry laughed. "Thank you for all the advice and help that you've given me over the years. I couldn't have had a better mentor. I hope that I am as capable as you think I am."

Hunter just smiled and nodded. They chatted for a while then Harry left and Hunter got on with what was left of his job.

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The room was big, bright, and airy. It was more or less circular, with the windows running from close to the ground to the top of the walls. Hunter knew that the roof could be completely removed, turning the room into a sort of enclosed courtyard. Round the glass walls were plants in mobile planters, and in one place, a large barbeque grill.

Hunter noticed a difference. There was a dais in the centre of the room, which had never been there before. It was a plain wooden dais, about waist high, with a thin mattress on top of it.

The King was standing at the foot of the dais, deep in thought.

"Oh, hello Hunter."

"Hello, sir."

The King looked him. There had been a catch in Hunter's voice.

"Don't worry, Hunter. It's not so bad." The King placed his hand on Hunter's shoulder and Hunter could feel the heat in him. "It's not painful. It's hot, sometimes uncomfortable, and late at night I get itchy. Sometime I get forgetful. That's only going to get worse, I'm told. But I don't care. In many ways I'm looking forward to it, my friend."

The King looked around at the trolley of food beside his lounge. He wandered over and started to eat a large pie. He gestured that Hunter should help himself, but Hunter declined.

"You know, the Queen won't eat with me. I don't blame her. All I do is shovel down food these days."

Hunter knew. The Queen had told him. He looked at his friend, and the man who Hunter had known for years was gone, and in his place was a barrel shaped man with thick legs. The bronze colour of his skin was now pronounced.

"I need to sleep," said the King. "Will you please help me onto the dais, Hunter."

"The dais, sir?"

"Yes, yes. I sleep there now. I think that I will move in here for good."

Hunter helped the King onto the dais and waited until he was snoring gently.

"Good night, sir," he said, although it was only late afternoon. As he left the room, he passed one of the King's doctors coming in.

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Hunter remembered the conference that he had had with one of the doctors about a year ago.

"I don't need to tell you about the King's condition," said the doctor.

"I've read about it. Tell me anyway, Chris," prompted Hunter. "Let's make sure that we are on the same page."

He suspected that the doctor just wanted to talk, and the cliché was appropriate. Hunter would be at the centre of arrangements.

Chris smiled. "Ah, yes. You know of course that the King's condition is genetic? At least, we think that it is genetic."

It wasn't really a question. "Yes, of course. The Prince has it too."

This time the doctor frowned a little. "Yes. That is strange. It's always the firstborn. The heir... Anyway, we have detected the first signs of the progression of the condition in the King."

"I see. How long has he got?"

"We reckon it will be about a year before he falls asleep for good."

"And then?"

"About six months before the King is no more."

Hunter nodded his head. "Yes, so I have heard. His father..."

"Yes. I was only a child then."

"Ah. Is there anything else, Chris?"

"No, thanks, Hunter. Erm, I've already told the Prince and his Private Secretary."

"Thank you." Hunter realised that the doctor was embarrassed. Oh, yes. He was no longer the first to be told anything!

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The Prince, the King, Harry, and Hunter were gathered around the small conference table. Most of the conversation was between Harry and Hunter as the business of the Crown was being steadily moved to the Prince and Harry.

"So you can handle the visit to the truck factory, sir?" asked Hunter.

The Prince and his Private Secretary both nodded. "Yes," said the Prince. "We will write to the manager, and explain. He'll understand."

A quiet snore caused them to look at the King, who was fast asleep in his chair. He woke up with a jolt.

"What? Sorry. What were you saying, Harry? Is this about my sixtieth birthday? Oh no, I remember. That was a year or so ago. You'll have to remind me."

"Father," said the Prince gently, "we are making arrangements to transfer your duties to me."

The King looked at his son with a blank face for a moment or two. Then his face cleared. "Oh, yes. I remember. Sorry, everyone."

The Prince looked at the two Private Secretaries. "I think that we will wrap it up here, you know. I'll take my Father back to his rooms."

"Thank you, son. Thank you. You know, I think that you three can handle it from here. Don't invite me to these meetings, please. I'm not going to be much help."

The King pushed himself up and tottered to his wheelchair. Hunter helped him get seated and watched as the Prince rolled him through the door.

“Where are we?” asked the King. “I think that we need to move to the country, son, before...”

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The King was fading fast. He was still eating voraciously when he was awake, which wasn't often. When he did wake, he didn't seem to know where he was.

Hunter brought his wife to see the King, and as luck would have it, the King was awake, and recognised her immediately.

“Lois, Lois. Come on in my dear. I'm afraid that I don't leave here very much. How are you?”

“I'm fine, Jack. It's nice to see you.”

The King laughed. “No one has called me ‘Jack’ in years. Not even your husband. Ah well. It was a long time ago. Would you like some tea?”

Hunter's wife looked at him. “Ah, no thank you, sir.”

“Hmm?” The King had turned away for a moment. He looked puzzled. “I know you, don't I? Your face is familiar.”

“I'm Lois, Hunter's wife, sir.”

“Oh yes. I was just talking to you. I'm sorry, my dear. I'm a bit confused these days. I think that I'll have a nap. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, sir,” said Hunter's wife, as she and her husband helped the King onto the dais. The King immediately started to snore.

“He's less coherent every day,” Hunter told his wife. “But he's still happy enough.”

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Hunter was looking at his computer screen, but wasn't reading it or typing on the keyboard, when one of the doctors arrived.

“Sir, I have to report that the King has been asleep for around two days now. We don't expect him to wake again.”

“Thank you, doctor. The Prince already knows?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there anyone with him? Family?”

“No, sir.”

Hunter strolled down to the room that the King was in. It wasn't far, of course. There were two doctors in white coats in the room, tending to the machines that were ranged around the King, but they were busy. His boss and friend lay on the dais covered in a light sheet. Someone had removed the King's clothes and his skin glowed bronze. His arms had been folded over his chest.

Hunter approached the dais, and put his hand on the King's hand. The King stirred a little, surprising Hunter. Hunter seemed to feel the presence of the King somewhere around, and that presence seemed peaceful, relaxed, and maybe there was even a touch of anticipation.

A voice said “Well, he's finally on his way. He is at peace.”

Hunter spun around and removed his hand. It was the Prince.

“I'm sorry, sir,” Hunter said. “I shouldn't presume...”

The Prince laughed. “Yes, you should, Hunter. You've known him longer than I have been alive! You are welcome to be here any time. To touch him.”

Hunter still moved away and the Prince regarded his father.

“You're going to retire now, aren't you, Hunter?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Look after Lois. She was a good friend of his too.”

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There were changes, but for Hunter and the others of the King's family and close friends who saw him every day, the changes were almost unnoticeable.

"His legs are fusing together," said one of the doctors, one day. "His arms are fusing into position across his chest. His head is extending, I think, and also merging with his chest. All his features are blurring. And look at his heartbeat! It's dipping below forty. He is only breathing at about six breaths per minute."

"I think that he is getting further away," said Hunter. He realised that it sounded silly, the minute that he said it, but the doctor nodded.

"Yes, I know what you mean," the man said. "It's not scientific, but yeah, I know what you mean."

The doctor and Hunter looked at the King. "We haven't tried to take blood since he fell asleep. No needles, the King said, when he still could. I'm glad," said the doctor.

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It was weeks later. The King's skin was now dark brown, and his body was almost a featureless oval, like a large cigar.

"Look at this," said the doctor. He was excited. There were two heart lines on the monitors. "His body has started to tremble and the heart rates are starting to climb. At their lowest they were around fifteen to twenty, but they are already up to forty!"

Hunter laid his hand on where the King's chest used to be. "Oh! Was that a breath?"

The doctor nodded.

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Over the next week or so, the King's family and friends watched as the King's body became more active. The watchers could hear the breaths, and see the trembling and shaking. Finally, one day when Hunter happened to be elsewhere, a page called him. As he made his way to the large theatre, he found others hurrying in the same direction. He made his way to the row of seats behind the Royal family.

Harry noticed him and clasped his hand for a moment. "It's beginning, Hunter. Are you OK?"

Hunter nodded and took his seat. The screen showed a view of the room that the King was in. Except for the King, it was empty, and all the doctors who had been tending the King were seated over to one side of the theatre. The roof of the King's room had been removed, and Hunter reflected that a press helicopter had already been warned away.

The King's body, or what had once been the King's body, was writhing on the plinth. Someone had surrounded the plinth with a low fence to stop the body from falling off.

The body turned and a murmur ran around the room when a split appeared along the backbone. The flesh underneath was white and seemed to glow beneath the brown integument. The body bucked and two clawed and scaly feet broke through the brown skin at the foot end. Everyone in the room gasped.

A head that was nothing like a human head broke free. It was long with a muzzle, and was topped by two pointed ears. The eyes were large, dark, and shiny. The mouth opened to reveal two rows of pointed teeth and the creature wriggled, and stood up. It was bright white and still had scraps of brown skin here and there.

The creature that had been the King still seemed to be wrapped in something, but then it unfurled its wings. They too were white but supported by blood-red ribs. As time passed the whiteness of the skin faded to a sandy brown and the ribs changed to a darker brown. Darkness fell and the creature

hopped about the dais and then with a flap and a skip it moved to the top of the wall. It bugled once and then flew off into the gathering darkness.

The mood was confused until the former Prince and new King stood up.

“There’s champagne being distributed, Please take a glass.”

When the wine had been distributed, he said “Please drink in honour of my father, the former King. There will of course be a special service in a few days, but tonight we farewell him.”

He raised his glass in the air. “The King!”

Everyone said “The King.”

“We have all seen him changing over the last few months. Those who have been close to him have felt that the essence of the King, in the body that lay there on the dais, was fading away. No, not fading away. Moving further away. There was not much of the essence of the King, if any, left there at the end.”

The Prince looked over the assembled people, the family, the staff, his friends.

“Lastly, I would like you to raise your glasses to honour the creature that left here a few moments ago. The Dragon!”

And everyone raised their glasses to the Dragon, and everyone cheered. So did Hunter, but he, and others, also shed a tear.

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