

The Emperor of Nowhere



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by Derek P. Blake

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This is a fairy story and a romance, in the best tradition of story telling. It was originally written as the script for a British pantomime, but never hit the stage.

Like every fairy-story and pantomime it has a happy-ever-after ending.

Pantomime (informally, **panto**) – not to be confused with the theatrical medium of mime – is a form of musical comedy stage production, designed for families, developed in the United Kingdom and mostly performed during the Christmas and New Year season. Modern pantomime includes songs, slapstick comedy and dancing, employs gender-crossing actors, and combines topical humour with a story loosely based on a well-known fairy tale. It is a participatory form of theatre, in which the audience is expected to sing along with certain parts of the music and shout out phrases to the performers.

[From Wikipedia]

This short book is dedicated to my long-suffering wife, Dawn, who has to proof read my many scribblings, with brutal objectiveness. For which I am forever grateful.

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Electronic edition

All characters appearing in this work and events portrayed are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Stage Play - Pantomime

The stage script for this work is available in standard script format and contains stage directions. The staging is particularly suitable for amateur productions. The script is available upon application to:
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CHAPTER 1

A Place at the Palace

In a distant and long lost kingdom, on the western edge of Europe, some six hundred and sixty-four years ago by our reckoning, there lived a young man who was to grow up in a very short space of time. The kingdom was known as Hambel, it was a poor but happy land, whose inhabitants were devoted to their King, and the Princess Royal, Eleanor Korbin. The kingdom was located in the area known today as The Bay of Biscay, in size it was smaller than Wales but its heart was as mighty as great Gaul. The climate was temperate, long hot summers and snow covered winters. The southern most shire of Hambel, where it was joined by a narrow band of land, to Spain, was warm and the living was easy. This shire was the birthplace of Josef the son of the Royal Armourer, Krief. Krief was a master craftsman who could fashion swords from almost any metal, some of these metals were lost and would not be discovered again until the supersonic age. Krief's fame covered most of southern Europe and it is said that the sword makers of Toledo learned their secret craft from this very craftsman. Needless to say Josef grew up with all the knowledge that his father had gained and became, himself an expert in arms. Not the use of them but their making, for Krief, although an armourer, was a man of peace and would never allow his son to learn the art of the swordsman. Josef therefore was also a man of peace, a gentle young person who would not, it was said, hurt a fly, although he had swatted a few. Such is the way of things that destiny decrees otherwise and so it will be for Josef our reluctant hero.

Shortly after Josef's sixteenth birthday his father received a visitor from the royal Palace at Harmony some eighty leagues to

the North West. The visitor sought out Krief, as Dophin, the Kings Man at Arms, had been boyhood friends with the Armourer. Dophin was a tall well built man some two meters in height and although he was dressed in both chain mail and plate armour, he had a pleasant friendly manner. The surprise came when Dophin announced that his visit was because he wanted to meet with Josef. The young lad could not understand why this stranger had travelled all that way especially to visit him, but life was too short to spend too much time worrying over puzzles like that. On the second morning that Dophin was in the village, Josef was summoned to the Berger's Hall to meet this mysterious stranger.

"Ah, I assume you are Josef, the armourer's son. So good to meet you at last" boomed a low and friendly voice as Josef entered the Hall.

As Josef looked up his sight met the embodiment of the voice. Before him was the stranger Dophin, a large man standing on the Berger's dais and towering over Josef and almost half his height in width. His face beamed a greeting as much as his voice, and he seemed like everyone's favourite Uncle with a warm and trusting personality. His skin was bronzed and his clothes declared that this man was not only rich but also important.

"Nice to meet you also," Josef replied a little hesitantly, "I'm Josef son of Krief the Armourer".

"I know who you are lad, that's why I'm here. Come over here and sit down I need to talk to you," said Dophin as he strode down from the dais and seated himself at the large oak table. Josef, as if in some sort of trance almost floated over to the large polished table that was usually used for council meetings, and seated himself beside Dophin. "Good" said Dauphin "would like a drink of beer or some mulled wine perhaps?"

"Yes thank you, I mean beer please" replied Josef " what's this all about?"

“Josef, your father tells me that he has imparted to you all the knowledge that he has about metals and arms. You are possibly the most expert Armourer in Hambel apart from your father himself” Dophin poured the golden liquid from a large jug and passed the beer over to Josef and continued “It would be silly to leave the two master armourers in the same village and so I am here to offer you the chance of a lifetime”. Dophin stood and wandered over to the fireplace, which was decorated with trophies of the village’s past triumphs and victories. “How would you like to become the Kings personal Armourer? Become part of the court entourage; travel with the King wherever he goes, see the world my boy, well at least Hambel. Think of all the wonderful places that you will be able to see the Seven Wonders of the World, palaces that will astound you. How about it Josef, will you accept the King's offer?”

For what seemed like minutes, Josef sat and stared at Dophin but finally managed to force his mouth open

“Yes, yes. But why me, I mean I know it’s an honour but there must be other people with more experience than me”

“Although we have not met for many years, your father and I have been friends since before you were even thought of, and he has been training you for this moment all of your life. If your father says that you’re the best, well that’s good enough for me”

“Right, how long do I have, I mean, when do I start” corrected Josef quickly, “it’s just that it’s a bit of a surprise you see”

“I’m very well aware of that, just take some time to think it over. I’m here for another two days, as long as I know by then I can return to Harmony and prepare for your arrival,” said Dophin softly, trying to calm Josef’s mind.

“What would my duties be, if I accepted this position?”

“You, as Royal Armourer, would be given free rein to develop arms and weapons for the King and the Royal Guard and the army of Hambel. Admittedly the arms are mostly ceremonial

these days but our spies have sent dispatches to the King recently concerning one of the Spanish Dukes who seems to be intent on annexation. I guess it will come to nothing but we must be prepared. Anyway you will have your own staff and complete control of arms production. As Master at Arms you will report to me and I will give you our requirements. Make no mistake it is a honourable and responsible position and you will be required to swear allegiance to King and Country, it will be hard work Josef.” Almost before Dophin had finished speaking Josef’s answer was on his lips and verbalised on the air.

“I accept the position, I will return to Harmony with you in two days, that way we can get to know each other and you can tutor me in the ways of the Royal Court”

“Splendid, I knew you were the right man. If you’re half as good as your father was when he held the position you will do well enough for me. Welcome to the Royal Court of Hambel, Josef, Son of Krief.”

So it was that the gullible young man of just sixteen became the Royal Armourer of Hambel, a career that would ultimately not only change the course of Josef’s life, but history. The journey to Harmony took some five days most of which were taken up crossing the San Ham Mountain range. The mountains had for aeons acted as a natural rampart protecting the greater part of Hambel from the Spanish and Moorish hoards from the South. Not only by their formidable buttresses and walls but also by virtue of the many legends that proliferate, concerning strange creatures and ghouls. Many an invading army has lost its nerve in the foothills and fled in the face of howls of the east wind. Of course the locals encourage such stories and indeed helped them along their way, not to mention inventing new ones. The many caves that honeycomb the solid rock often generate weird sounds that seem emanate from the very core of the mountains. Some of these cave systems form tunnels, which those intimate with the area can use as short cuts to save the steeper climbs.

Even then one should exercise care as many of the passageways end in dramatic drops hundreds of feet to valleys and dark chasms below. Of course the denizens of that region have signposted each passage with misleading finger-posts, especially for the aggressive stranger or invading army. Some claim that the Swiss took these mountains as their inspiration for the Swiss Cheese, but there are holes in that story too. Each night by the camp-fire Josef and Dophin would talk of the court, of the current political situation, of new ideas for arms, of the past when Krief was The Royal Armourer, and many other subjects that were of interest to Josef. By the time the two reached Harmony they were firm friends with a bond almost as strong as the bond Josef had with his father.

By mid afternoon on the fifth day the two could see the uppermost turrets of the Summer Palace, piercing the sky from beyond the trees. A half-hour later they came out of the forest and for the first time Josef eyes fell upon the most magical scene he had ever beheld. The late afternoon sun reflected in great shafts from the copper clad roofs of the turrets. The hanging banners fluttered in the breeze, creating a cacophony of colour that dazed and excited the viewer. The stone walls glowed in the warm sunlight with a sort of pink luminescence that warmed the soul. The windows glinted like a thousand stars and on the air floated the sounds of happy chattering people, music, laughter and the general hub-hub of a contented population. Josef's heart jumped for joy as the sights and sounds permeated his mind. As they walked along the road that lead up to the main gate, the people who passed them by hailed them with cheerful greetings, at first Josef assumed that they spoke because of whom he was with, but soon he realised that he too was the subject of their good will. Again Josef's heart was buoyed by the comments from these strangers, did they already know who he was, and if they did how was this possible?

As they approached the heavy oaken gates, Dophin took the lead and was greeted by the guard coming to attention and giving him a reverential salute, which consisted of placing their left fist at the shoulder and inclining the head in a sort of nod. In a friendly manner Dophin acknowledged the salute and ordered the guard to relax as their horses strode past them into the courtyard. Inside other members of the Royal Guard also acknowledged the presence of their commander. Everywhere was mutual respect and friendliness and to Josef's amazement there was no curiosity about himself. It was as if he were expected and was already 'one of the family'. Once or twice Dophin stopped to exchange a joke or give an opinion. As they progressed down the length of the long courtyard the cheery waves became even more frequent and as the door at the far end of the courtyard became more and more obvious as their destination, the guards each side of it came to attention.

"Who approaches?" spat out the guard to the right of the door.

"Master at Arms in the service of the Korbin Family Sovereign of this realm," answered Dophin.

"Do they not recognise you Sir," puzzled Josef.

"Of course they do, but tradition has to be observed. What are we if we do not have our history and traditions," explained Dauphin, "You see it's our heritage that makes us who we are and what we are, in exactly the same way that our parents mould us in their own image."

The door before them swung open and Josef followed Dophin along a passage illuminated by tar lamps. Although the walls were of bare dressed stone the coldness of the stone was broken by drapes, flags and banners, some obviously were very old, and more of the flag was missing than remained.

"Are these a part of our heritage," Josef asked.

"Very much so my boy." was the quick reply "See this *rag* over here, well this is the banner which flew at the head of our first

army when they gained independence from Espero after hundreds of years of oppression. Juan of Korbin, our first King of Hambel swore by that that banner that never again would any subject of Hambel be enslaved.”

“I never imagined....,” said Josef as he swallowed hard in awe.

“Come,” said Dophin urgently, “I have something else to show you.”

Again Josef was forced to almost run to keep up with Dophin as he followed him along the corridor and up winding staircase at its far end. The seemed to climb forever and Josef felt faintly dizzy from the spiralling of the steps. Suddenly they were in a large gallery containing more, but larger, banners each depicting scenes from Hambel’s history. There were suits of armour from various periods, each of which interested Josef, but Dophin ploughed on leaving him further and further behind. Dophin in the mean time reached the far end of the gallery and was standing beside a display case. Josef pulled himself away from a very unique piece of head-wear and joined Dophin at the case. “You can examine every one of those when ever you wish in the weeks and years to come, but I have something here which is of more import than any of that stuff.”

“What is it,” asked Josef.

“This my boy is the scroll on which our very society is built.”

“Is it a design for the palace?”

“No” replied Dophin, with a smile, “much more important than that. This document guarantees the freedom of every Hambolian, it means that you had the right to refuse my offer to come to court. It also ensures that you have the right to become what you aspire to become. This piece of parchment also tells us that no one is above the law, not even the King himself.”

“Well said, Dophin”, rang a voice from behind them.

Dophin and Josef both turned to find a late middle aged man dressed in a dark blue tabard trimmed with gold. The newcomer

had neck length hair and a chin beard of salt-and-pepper hair, he was about the same height as Josef but had a bearing that said authority.

“Your Majesty, forgive me, I did not intend to disturb you”

“You did not disturb me Dophin, I was curious as to who you were talking to with such passion”

“Is, is that the King,” Josef whispered, trying to hide behind Dophin.

Dophin ignored Josef’s question and thrust him forward, “This is Josef, the young man I was telling you about Sire.”

Josef immediately bowed deeply and felt himself start to shake, whilst his face flushed, he Josef, was actually in the presence of The King.

“Welcome to Harmony young man, I hope you will be as much a part of our little family as you father was in his time,” said the King, as he offered his hand to Josef. Josef took the King’s hand and touched it to his forehead as Dophin had coached him.

“Thank you your Majesty,” Josef answered with a lump in his throat that turned his voice into a croak, “I will do my best.”

“I’m sure you will Josef,” acknowledged the King, “Next week is midsummer’s day and each year we have a banquet, please, come and join us. It will be a wonderful opportunity to meet everyone and for them to meet you, you will also have a great time.”

“Thank you your Majesty, I would be honoured to attend” was Josef’s reply.

The King then turned, and as he walked into a nearby room said “Look after him Dophin, I feel that this man has a destiny to fulfil. Come back and see me later Dophin, There is a new report to consider.”

“I will sire,” replied Dophin. “He is a King in the true tradition of the House of Korbin. . Now come, I will show you to your quarters and you can settle in.”

Josef's quarters were to his mind palatial. He had expected a sparse room with a cot but in reality it was how he had imagined the King's apartments would appear. The stone walls were covered with a cream coloured substance, which Dophin told him was called 'Plaster' and over this were hung tapestries of rich reds and blues. In one corner was a large cabinet made of teak, with double doors, this was for storing clothes he was told. There were chairs and a strong table, oak chests and a bed with a real horse hair mattress and wool covers. The stone flagged floor was covered with various tapestries, which were called carpets. To the left and right of the large cabinet were doors set into the wall, through the left door Josef discovered his workshop and adjoining it an alchemy laboratory, which he would use to experiment with metals from which new arms would be made. Both rooms were equipped with the tools and machines of the master smith, which Josef had seen in his father's workshop, and other pieces that were strange to him. Through the door to the right he found a large water tank of copper, next to the tank was a stand with a basin, above which hung a highly polished sheet of copper, Josef thought that the tank was for cooling metal. It was over a week before Josef found out that the copper tank was for bathing, a better solution than an annual trip to the river. In the weeks that followed the workshops became as familiar to Josef as his father's workshop had been. Conversely Josef became as familiar a figure around the palace as Dophin himself.

The week after Josef arrived at Harmony the midsummer Festival arrived, an event that would change his life as much as the move from his home village had done. Although Josef had received his invitation from the King himself, he had not thought too much about it. Until that was, the day before the festival, when Dophin asked him what costume he intended to wear at the ball.

"Costume. What costume" replied Josef.

“It is our tradition to attend the midsummer ball in disguise. We dress as one of the fruits or benefits of summer, I am going as the ‘South Wind’,” Josef could not help a small smile at this, but Dophin ignored him and continued, “the wind that brings the bees that pollinate all the blossom, and in turn produce fruit. You should give it some serious thought” advised Dophin.

Josef spent a sleepless night following that, worried that he would chose the wrong costume or worse have no idea at all. In the end the choice was made and it was decided that Josef would attend the ball as Baccus the Roman God of wine. No one however knew what Baccus looked like; so on the day of the ball Josef fashioned a toga and acquired a length of vine from the local vineyard which he used as a belt. There was one redeeming facet to this costume business; at least he didn’t need to wear the uniform that the Royal Taylor had provided him with. On the afternoon he’d gone for a uniform fitting it took him all his time to breathe. Dophin had thought it a great joke, one that Josef had not shared.

Midsummer’s Night was almost the most anticipated night of the year and by eight o’clock the whole court was assembled in the Great Hall awaiting the arrival of the King and his daughter. A group of musicians waited patiently on a gallery above the hall, tuning their instruments and sorting sheets of manuscript. Around the hall long tables were set out in the shape of a horse shoe, not another item could have been placed upon those trestles for they would have collapsed for sure. The hall itself was decked with all sorts of fruit and vegetable, tree and shrub, woven together in great bowers looped between the oaken beams.

Josef was relieved to find that he neither looked out of place nor had he duplicated another’s costume. Soon, as the conversation grew, Josef relaxed however the sudden blast of the fanfare, which heralded the King’s arrival made him jump

with fright, made worse by the fact that he was standing directly in front of the herald's trumpets. Josef recovered his poise quickly, but his hearing took rather longer to recover, enough to witness the entrance of the King. Here was a real king, dressed in all his splendour with crown and chains of gold, cloak, trimmed with rich furs and shoes that a man could use to shave by their reflection. He had a regal bearing that said 'I am a king and I am used to having my commands obeyed'. Yet this was the same man that had invited Josef to this very ball. There was a question that Josef could not answer, was this human side of the King strength or a weakness. Time would eventually answer Josef's question but for now there was another question in his mind 'where was this Princess Royal he had heard so much about? The King was alone! Everyone had told Josef that the Princess would accompany her father and he'd looked forward to seeing this alleged beauty for himself.

"Ha well," said Josef to himself, "there will be plenty of time to view this royal icon."

"Josef!" Dophin's voice boomed out from behind, breaking the lad's train of thought. "I don't think you have been introduced to Duncan yet" Dophin continued once Josef's attention had been gained. "Duncan is my Captain of the Guard, he also comes from a country called Scotland, far to the north past Angels."

"Good to meet ye laddie, I've been looking forward to the Armourer's position being filled. I have some ideas I'd like to discuss with ye," Duncan proclaimed as he proffered a hand.

"I would deem it an honour to discuss your ideas Lord Duncan," Josef replied.

"It's just plain Duncan laddie. We're all working to the same end here. If you have the time I will drop in to your workshop tomorrow"

"That would be fine," answered Josef.

"What would be fine?" interrupted a sweet female voice from somewhere behind the mountainous bulk that was Duncan.

Josef could only stammer, “Ss So Sorry, my Lady?”

“I was asking, what this great brute of a mountain goat persuaded you to do?,” the girl with the musical voice said.

“Nothing, just to discuss something,” replied Josef.

“And what exactly does this ox wish to discuss with you?” insisted the girl.

“This is where I abandon ye to yer’ fate my lad,” called Duncan as he retreated into the throng.

“Hello, my name’s Ellen, I haven’t seen you around here before.” she said as an invitation for Josef to introduce himself.

Josef, although he could not see her face, which was covered by a mask, he knew instinctively that she was the most wonderful beauty he had ever met. He needed no further inducement to make himself known to Ellen. So with his heart pounding in his ears he said, “Josef, I’m Josef, the new Royal Armourer”

“Ah, now I remember, I heard my father talking about you yesterday, a bit of a whiz kid I believe.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Josef, “Anyway what do you do around here?”

A slight smile flashed across Ellen’s face telling Josef that he was being played like a fish on a hook.

“I’m a sort of administrator I suppose, you know lots of paperwork and figures, that sort of thing,” she answered.

“ I think that sounds a very important job, I’m not very good at words and figures”

“We each have our own talents and contribute in our own way, no one is more important than the whole” explained Ellen.

Josef felt that this particular conversation was getting a little too deep for him, so to lighten the mood said, “And what do you do for fun, I mean when you get time off.”

“That’s not very often, I suppose I just dream,” Ellen replied in a wishful way.

Josef was amazed, “You cant just dream, you need to get out and have fun. Have you never been out in the forest to collect flowers or cut mistletoe for Cringlemas?”

“No.”

“Have you never laid on your back in the wheat fields, just before harvest and gazed up at the stars in the dark sky?”

“Never!”

“You don’t know what you are missing my Lady” added Josef.

The Lady Ellen looked deep into Josef’s eyes and knew that she wanted him to show her these things, and, she wanted them *now*. Suddenly, for a reason she could not fathom, she was desperate to experience all the joys of life but she wanted this new friend to show them to her, no one else just Josef.

“Will you show them to me, soon?”

“Yes, of course it would be an honour, my Lady” promised Josef.

“When?” asked Ellen “When will you show these things to me?”

“How about now? It’s a wonderfully clear night outside and the stars will be shining bright” Josef said as, without thinking, he reached out and took her hand, then started for the door. Instinctively she followed him; hand in hand they crossed the floor of the great hall, then out through the doors, along the passageways and out into the dark courtyard. Already they could see the stars shining above them but the light from a hundred torches paled them. They crossed the yard, passing the stables and headed for the main gate. The two sentries watched them and laughed, nudging each other over a private joke. As they came into the open the warm summer breeze stroked their faces and inflamed their passion. The land between the castle walls and the forest was planted with wheat and it was to these fields that Josef headed. Almost half way across the field of wheat they collapsed breathless into the tall stalks pressing them into a nest.

For what seemed like an age neither spoke. Josef dreamed of what may be, while Ellen just stared in disbelief at the diamond

studded velvet that was the sky. She had never realised before nor had she bothered to look, or was it just the company that made the difference. Ellen removed her mask in order to get a better view. Suddenly it hit her as if one of those stars had fallen upon her head, she was in love. It was illogical and unwanted; she could not afford to have her senses obscured by blind passion. Meanwhile, by this time Josef's imagination had the two of them married and having to move into larger quarters. Ellen lay there staring up at the stars, she knew she should get up and return to the palace but she couldn't, partly because she was still transfixed by the wonder above her and partly because she didn't want to leave Josef. They both dared to dream. As if by magic, it seemed that they were transported two hours into the future as the clock in the gate tower was striking twelve. Ellen was instantly roused from her dream-like state and jumped up, Josef, also jumped up not knowing quite why he had.

"I need to go, now," she said quickly.

"Will I see you again?"

"You can depend upon it, now let's get going before we're missed," Ellen said as this time *she* dragged Josef along with her. They crossed the wheat field again and headed toward the gate. As the two approached the guard issued a challenge

"Who requires entry to Harmony?" he shouted in a very disinterested way.

Then as Ellen and Josef entered the pool of light cast by the torches the guard changed his demeanour, suddenly he was alert and to attention.

"Sorry Your Highness, I didn't realise it was you. Do you need assistance," the guard asked.

"No, thank you, I will be quite safe."

"Who's that with you Majesty? Oh' it's you sir. Please pass friend," the guard continued his set script as he had been ordered.

Although Josef continued to walk into the castle, mentally he was frozen in time. What did this mean? He found the thinking process painful, as his mind did not want the inevitable answer. Outside the stable he stopped and turned towards the girl he had met that night and said, "You're the Princess Eleanor" He couldn't decide whether it was a question or a statement, but that summed up his confusion.

"Yes, does that make a difference," Ellen asked in a soft tone, almost pleading.

"Yes, I mean no, of course not. I think love I you," Suddenly he realised what he had said; it had just popped out, as if it had a life of its own. *'My Goodness, I've just told the Princess Royal of Hamble that I love her'* it was a thought that he had verbalised without intending to.

Ellen laughed and said "That's good, I think I'm in love with you as well."

With that she turned and strode off in the direction of the Great Hall. Josef never saw her disappear as he was either too stunned or he was too busy dancing and whooping to notice.

So began the love story which would capture a nation and lead to its freedom. For the first three years it was the best known secret in the kingdom. Certainly of all the members of the court there were only three people who didn't know. Dophin, who knew something was going on but couldn't put a finger on it. He'd caught the slight smell of Cologne around the lad so he knew there was a girl involved somewhere, which made him happy, as Josef was more content with life.

The second person was The chancellor, Don Miguel, who could not admit, even to himself, that the Princess was consorting with a commoner and so ignored the relationship completely. Don Miguel was of the old school and believed that each person had a station in life out of which they could not stray. Money, or the lack of it for that matter, made no difference, if you were born a

peasant, or artisan, that's where you stayed, even if you were a rich peasant. Of course as Chancellor one could not get much higher in the social order, so this philosophy was quite comforting and a safe position to hold. He was also a real stickler for tradition, heritage and the status-qua and it was his job to make sure that things were done in the correct manner, a sort of self appointed guardian of all the pomp and ceremony of Hamble. Don Miguel never ever actually spoke to anyone who was not, at the very least, a Sir. He was therefore always writing notes and letters to all the lesser mortals, he was known, among the commoners as 'Don Proclamation'.

Last but not least was the King himself. Yes he knew that his daughter seemed happier than she had ever been before, but he had neither the time nor the sensitivity to realise the reason for this happiness. She had always been a quiet lonely child, almost sad. Her position had never allowed her to play with other children so play had remained a mystery to her. Her Mother the Queen had died when the Princess was two years old and the King had really no idea of how to bring up a child. So a Nanny had been engaged to look after Eleanor and the two had become inseparable. Shinaé had assumed the responsibility for the princess much to the relief of the King. It wasn't that the King didn't love Eleanor, he adored her and always wanted the best for her. Eleanor also loved her father, they now had a classic father and daughter relationship, each looking after and trying to protect the other. As time had passed and the King had grown older and more frail, and over the same period Eleanor had grown more adept and expert at the affairs of state, she had therefore assumed many of the responsibilities of running a kingdom. As close as they were, the King had no idea that his beloved daughter was herself in love with the young Armourer.

As for the remainder of Harmony, they loved them both, Josef because everyone loves a romance, especially when it involves

one of their own. Local boy makes good was the subject of conversation in his home village who already had him married off and heir to the throne. The kingdom loved Eleanor because, well because they loved Eleanor, the Princess Royal could do no wrong in the eyes of the Hamble populace.

Each new assignation or event was reported with relish, it was also embellished. Such was the interest in the pair that they were forced to find a secret spot where they could meet away from the adoring eyes of the inhabitants. They chose the place where Josef had stolen his first kiss. One day in the first few weeks following Mid-summer they were walking in the old cloisters behind the palace, originally the palace had been a Monastery with a retreat apartment for the King and Queen. Slowly it had evolved into the Summer Palace, mainly because of its air of tranquillity and peace. Eleanor had been giving Josef the guided tour when he had suddenly darted into a small prayer cell and asked, "What's this carving?"

"What carving, I've never noticed a carving in here," Eleanor had answered as she followed him in. "Where are y..."

The question was cut short by Josef's lips closing over hers. She did not resist and returned the caress, paid with interest. That was enough to make the prayer cell 'their special place' and they continued to meet there over the following years.

The relationship grew stronger and stronger as time passed and by the time the King became privy to the knowledge there was almost nothing which could split them. Almost, but not quite.

CHAPTER 2

The Advent of Adventure

In the late autumn of the fourth year of Josef's Armourership he was called to the Audience Chamber by a Page who had been sent by one of the Chancellor's aids, Sir Bernardo. This was not the first time he had been summoned but the occurrence was such a rare occasion that it always struck him with trepidation. He asked Dophin about the audience but his mentor could not help him in the slightest. So at two hours before noon Josef left his quarters and walked on legs of jelly up the main staircase and down the Gallery to the Royal Apartments. The Ceremonial Guard stopped him at the doors and it was some time before he was allowed into the room. Whilst he waited he could faintly hear raised voices from with-in the room, he recognised the King's voice but the others remained too low to identify. Once he thought he'd heard his name but he dismissed the notion as the fantasy of nerves. Josef became bored and moved to the window which looked out onto the Court Yard. From the window he could see the door to his apartment and his workshop with the smith's shop, the stable was also in view and he watched with interest as various Knights arrived and departed. The scene lulled him into a daydream where he was a knight riding off on some quest. The dream was suddenly shattered by a voice over his left shoulder.

"Armourer, the King will see you now," pronounced one of the guards who lead the way into the chamber.

The King was alone in the large room, which was indeed unusual, and he stood looking out of the window with his back to the room, as Josef entered. Josef stopped just inside the doors which closed behind him.

At this point the King said, "Come over here Josef."

Obediently he joined the King at the window without saying a word, what was this all about, the King was acting very strangely.

“What do you see out of this window my boy ?” the Monarch continued.

“Sire all I see is the courtyard.”

“What else ?”

“People, horses, windows of the court apartments and the outer walls. Oh and the hills in the distance with trees.”

“Do you know what I see out of this window? Responsibility. Look out there in the distance do you see that wisp of smoke rising from the forest ?”

“Yes Sire.”

“That smoke tells you that there is a fire below it somewhere, but it tells me that there are people living out there with families, children, old people, sick people. There may be a full village there with houses and a civic structure that looks to me for direction.”

“I understand that Sir.”

“Do you Josef, do you really.”

“I think so Sire.”

“And who do you think will bear all these responsibilities when I can bear them no longer ?”

“The Princess, I assume, my Liege.” suddenly Josef knew what this interview was all about.

The thought seemed to stick in his throat and choke him so that no other sound would move through it, but the King pressed on.

“You are correct in you assumption young man, the Princess will have the mantel of rule placed upon her shoulders at some point in time, yet to be within our knowledge. Due to this fact whoever the Princess chooses as a husband must be acceptable, not only to me and the Royal Court but the whole of Hamble.”

At this point Josef regained his power of speech and attempted to interrupt but the King held up his hand and continued.

“I have been informed by my closest advisers that you are already very popular throughout the kingdom. It seems that I am the only person in the whole of Hamble not to know about this great romance between my daughter and yourself, but that is water under the bridge now. However popularity is not enough, I must be sure that my daughter’s spouse will not abuse that position for his own gains. I have already spoken to the Princess and she assures me that you are a genuine, sensitive and caring person. I can tell that Eleanor is totally in love with you so at this time it would serve no purpose for me to forbid her seeing you, or for me to banish you back to your village. So I have decided, in the face of disapproval from the Chancellor I may add, but then he disapproves of almost everything, to allow the Princess and your self to continue this liaison. You will of course be in the full glare of public life in future so we shall see just how strong this love of yours really is”

Josef could not believe his ears, he had expected that he would be executed or at best banished for ever. This was more than he could have ever wished for. All he could say was

“Thank you Sire, thank you Sire,” over and over again.

The King laughed “Go on get out of here, you still have a job to do don’t you ?”

“Yes Sire, Thank you Sire” repeated Josef as he backed out of the chamber.

“Josef, would you like to join us for supper tonight,” was the unexpected question, just as the doors had opened.

The answer was another repeat of his previous ones.

“We can get to know each other a little better,” added the King, then a much to himself as Josef, “Lets hope we can get some sense out of you then.”

The next thing Josef was conscious of was being back in his apartment, he had no recollection of the walk back from the Audience chamber. He changed into his work clothes and set to

work on his latest project. The day passed a little too quickly and most of it seemed to be missing on recollection. Dophin had heard the news directly from the King and came hot foot from the meeting to get Josef's angle on the story and asked so many questions that Josef thought his head was about to burst. All too quickly the Page knocked on his door to announce that supper was ready in the Royal Apartments and to follow him.

The supper, which was to be the first of many, went well and Josef found that he and the King had an affinity which grew with each meeting. The King had a great interest in arms and offered many ideas which Josef used in his workshop. On several occasions the King himself visited the workshop and actually tried his hand at making a piece of armour which had occurred to him, this was much to the annoyance of the Chancellor and Josef found out that the King had also a delight at this disapproval. The King also felt this relationship grow and started to regard Josef as a son he had never had. Never once, despite everything, did Josef forget his place in the social structure and this also was noted by the King and his daughter who appreciated this part of Josef's character. After this situation continuing for some months, even the Chancellor, Don Miguel softened towards Josef, he still didn't speak to him directly but at least he now sent him notes signed by his own hand. This was the subject of much mirth when at Cringlemass, the traditional seasonal greeting was delivered by way of a scroll from just across the Great Hall.

Life was good for the Black Smith's son and all went well with his work. His social life was hectic to say the least. When the King visited the towns and villages it was expected that the Princess Royal went along as well, but now of course Josef was also in attendance, and when the crowds turned out they turned out to see the romantic couple as much as to see the King. This was also true when foreign visits occurred and as Dophin had

promised Josef saw exotic sights that made his head spin. Egypt, Rome, Gaul, Engles to list but a few, were all enthralled with the 'Princess and the Pauper'. Life was idyllic, until that is, a communication arrived from Noctress, a Dukedom close to Basteelia.

The first effect of the letter was felt when Josef received a note from Eleanor to say that, she could not see him that night as there was something she needed to attend to. Still oblivious to the real reason for the note Josef accepted it and went to eat supper with Dophin. Dophin's face was sombre all night and due to his mood Josef took his leave to retire early. The following morning he received a visit from Eleanor, she also was sombre.

"Josef, I need to discuss something with you which you will not enjoy," she said, "I could not see you last evening because of a communication we received from The Duke de Vile of Noctress, in short I could not face you with the problem."

"What is the trouble my love ?"

"The Duke has asked Father for my hand in marriage"

"You can't seriously be considering this, are you ?"

"Just listen Josef, it's not as simple as that."

"It is to me. You just say no."

"Will you please listen to me. de Vile has threatened to invade us if I do not agree to this marriage. You know as well as any that he has had his sights set on Hamble for many years, people from your own village have fought against his troops many times and some have died in our defence."

"And we can fight him off again" Joseph countered. "He is no match for our army."

"That's the problem, he is now. Our agents tell us that he has amassed an army of almost twenty-five thousand men. We just can't repel an army of that size, we have, what, five, six thousand if we include old men and children."

“We may not have the numbers but we have the right and superior weapons,” said Josef, “see here is a new bow that we have been developing, it can fire four times the distance of the old ones and it’s more than ten times as accurate and look at this

“They are wonderful weapons Josef but they can’t compensate for twenty thousand troops. Our people will get killed and I can’t live with that on my conscience.”

“This is a dream, no not a dream, a nightmare. I can’t believe you are actually considering this, it’s madness,” said Josef trying to contain both anger and a desperate hurt, “Do you really think that succeeding to his demand will save Hambel ?”

“Yes I believe it would. The Duke is of noble birth and as such he is bound by his word.” Eleanor forced the words out, as if they were too big for her throat.

Like a hunting dog upon a hare Josef jumped upon her answer. “You are so naive, don’t judge everyone by your own standards, because they don’t play by the same rules.”

“Josef, please don’t get angry with me, I have not made any decision yet and when I do, it will be for the good of my people.”

“Does that include me?”

“Of course it does, you are the first of all my people.”

“Well it’s good to know I’m in there somewhere.”

In the end Josef limped back to his quarters to lick his wounds and test a new sword on the body block normally used to shape armour.

The discussions continued for the following three weeks, both officially and unofficially. The Chancellor, it seemed, favoured the marriage and reminded everyone that this Duke had been attacking the border lands for almost twenty years. His father before him had almost succeeded in his annexation of Hamble which would have become a part of the Duchy but for the mountain people, who managed to cut the supply line by continually switching the signposts. The family of de Vile had

never forgotten this defeat and Hamble had been the object of their desire ever since.

Of course the court had responded to the Don's reminders in a predictable way and backed the Chancellor in his bid to achieve the arranged marriage. Of all the court only Josef and Dophin openly opposed the union. Everyone fully understood Josef's stand, but few could guess Dophin's reasoning and assumed, wrongly, that he was supporting his surrogate son. It would be months before Dophin's reason for his distrust of The Duke de Vile became known. However Dophin shared his secret with Josef who, armed with this new information, rushed off to meet Eleanor.

"You cant do this thing!" shouted Josef as he burst into the Princess' apartments before she had even awoken from her slumbers.

The princess struggled to open her eyes and managed a weak "What?"

"This crazy idea of yours to save the world by marrying that snake. I have information which proves that he is a liar and a cheat."

"What are you talking about?"

"deVile, I know that he wont keep his word."

"Oh not this again," said the Princess as she realised what was going on.

"But Dophin told me how de Vile operates, he's done it before, that's how he conquered Pourto. Dophin was there."

The interruption and tiredness shortening her temper, she said, "The only thing this has anything to do with is jealousy. You can't think of anyone other than yourself, you are so selfish."

"Me, selfish? Look who calling the pot. You just can't let go of the power can you. Hamble will go on without you, you know and so will the rest of the world."

“And you’re really not interested in the power are you, go on admit it Josef, before I call the guard.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going,” and he marched out of the chamber heading back to his apartment. As he strode down the main hallway a voice stopped him in his tracks, as he stood there, he knew it to be the voice of the King, “Josef, where are you off to at this hour of the day?”

Josef slowly turned and answered the King “Back to my apartment Sire”

“Have you two been arguing again? As if I couldn’t guess.”

“Is it that obvious Sire?”

“When a person grows fond of someone, especially when that someone is the chosen love of his daughter, he can tell things just by looking at them. What’s the problem this time?”

Josef related the incident to the King who slowly shook his head and said,

“As the head of state I must do what I consider best for Hamble but as a father I must do things which I feel is best for my little girl. To-day and at this hour I am a father. Let me speak to her, I will try to make her see sense, no promises mind you.” The King walked off towards the Princess’ apartment, turned and told Josef, “Just wait out here for a few minutes will you ?”

“As you wish your Majesty, but she is so stubborn, I don’t think it will do any good”

“We will see, we will see”

As Josef watched the King disappear through the doors to the private apartments he felt like a caged Mountain Lion, trapped between the walls of heart and mind. Yes the Princess was right, he was jealous but it was more than that, his country was at risk of becoming a nation of slaves. Why would no one listen to him.

CHAPTER 3

Decisions and Disasters

During the conversation outside in the corridor, the Princess was also struggling with her emotions and her logic. Once she had finished crying her emotions turned to anger and then to desperation. Finally all of these feelings combined together and Eleanor started to pace up and down the chamber almost screaming at herself. “Why! Why! Why can’t I have been born to a lowly station instead of this, my mind tells me that it is my duty to keep my feet planted upon this mother earth.”

Eleanor crossed to the window and parted the drapes which kept out the cold night air. Outside the dawn was breaking and the last of the night’s stars were fast disappearing into the daylight. Over in the East the greatest star of them all was still shining bright, Venus the star named after the old god of love shone down as if to mock her, she thought.

“The stars that shine so bright fly free over the kingdom each night but although they are so free they keep to their allotted paths and never bump into each other. Yet every night one or two can be seen to fall to earth in a blaze of fire and then are gone forever. We each have our allotted paths through life and each lasts until our allotted time. Never can we change our path either, we can not risk the collapse of the order of the universe. Some of us are free some are not.”

Sadly she crossed to the couch and let out the heaviest sigh she had ever heard. “I feel one thing and I think something different. I should just up and run off with Josef to some distant land where we can live in peace and love and hope,” Eleanor spoke out loud to herself.

Again another sigh forced it’s way up through her body like a surge of swamp gas exploding into the open air from far below the water’s surface. As if to culminate the sigh a rap sounded through the chamber from the door hidden in the shadow of a

portico. His heart leapt, was this Josef, if it was she would break free and accept him as her husband, leave the palace and live in happiness somewhere near the sea. Again the knock shattered the silence and her thoughts.

"Come!" she heard his voice echo across the empty space. Yes if it was Josef that's what she would do, she had made up her mind. As the door opened she saw the figure of her father step forward, her heart sank and she felt once more like weeping. Josef had let her down, at least that's how she started to feel.

"It's only me my dear," announced the King as he crossed to the couch in the centre of the room, "I've been talking to young Josef, he tells me you and he had a little difference of opinion earlier."

"Yes father, it was my fault, Josef wants me to marry him and leave all my responsibilities behind me, go to live in a place called Ellestual where he grew up.

"I know it well, your mother came from there."

"Really, how strange," replied Eleanor without really thinking too much about it, "He thinks I won't go with him because I'm power mad. I'm not power mad am I Father?"

The King seated himself beside his daughter, "It's a wonderful part of the country, warm climate, green meadows and a sky so blue it looks like velvet."

"Yes I know, Josef has told me in *great* detail," she said getting a little frustrated with her father.

"Well why don't you go, you know you love the lad and there is nothing here for you but the prospect of more war with that fiend the Duke."

Eleanor ceased her pacing, crossed to her father and sat beside him on the couch, "Father why won't you answer me?"

"Answer you what, my dear?"

"Father I am not stupid, I can tell when you want to avoid something."

"I can assure you that ..."

“Assure all you wish but tell me, am I power mad. I’m not power mad am I Father?”

“It seems *sometimes* that you take on more than there is a need to, to some it may seem that you seek power. I am far from being senile Daughter, go with the lad, if I need you I can always send for you. Grab some happiness while you can.”

Eleanor jumped up again as if she had been stung by a bee, “Father, I couldn't leave you, what would happen to Hamble and your subjects.”

“We'll be all right my Dear. Hamble will survive and our people will resist the Duke as they always have done. Remember 'right' always triumphs in the end otherwise this world would have perished long ago.”

But the tide had turned and duty and responsibility had forced it's way to the surface once more “It's no good I can not ignore my duty as your daughter, I know it's always been a sadness that mother never gave you a son, so it's my responsibility to make sure that this our kingdom is safe from tyranny.”

“A son could not have been a better heir than you my little Princess, but you have your own life and happiness to think of. All I want is for you to be happy and content.”

Eleanor threw her arms around her father's neck and proclaimed, “I love you Father.”

“And I love you my dear. That's why I think you should marry Josef.”

“Father, don't start that again. allow me to do the things that I must do”

The King stood up from the couch and started to cross the chamber toward the door, as he went he drew the conversation to a close by saying, “Fine, do as you want my dear, it's your life.”

Eleanor called after him “If you see Josef, tell him I'm sorry and ask him to join me here. Only if you see him.”

“Only if I see him.” replied the King and without closing the door continued, “Her Highness says that you should go in.”

Hesitantly Josef entered the cavernous room, it had never seemed so large before or maybe he had never felt so small before. “You wanted to see me” he said more to break the awkward silence than to ask the question,

“And I suppose you were just passing by sheer coincidence,” Eleanor said with a slight wistful smile on her lips.

“As a matter of fact

“Don't take me for a fool Josef, you and my Father have been conspiring again. I sometimes wonder who he thinks more of, you or me.”

“Your father is a great and wise King and only wants what is best for you, just as I do.”

“Only because he takes your side. If he supported the Chancellor it would be a different story”

“He knows how much I love you.”

“So do I Josef but our love can never be, I have too many responsibilities to marry you and you will be hurt by some of the decisions I am going to make.”

“What do you mean by that ?” he asked, as alarm bells started to ring some where deep inside, and his heart started beating so fast it seemed that it would jump right out of his body.

“Nothing,” she lied.

“You never mean 'nothing' there is always something behind the things you say.”

“Ignore me, I shouldn't have said it.” It was a slip of the tongue,” but it was too late now, Josef had picked it up and she knew from past experience, he would not let it drop.

“You're talking about that message from de Vile aren't you?” he pursued the subject again.

“It's no concern of yours, these are affairs of state,” she tried to hide behind officialdom, but it made a poor place to hide and Josef saw right through the defence.

“As opposed to affairs of the heart ?”

Eleanor knew that it was all out in the open and there was no sense in trying to conceal it any longer. She just had to make the best of things.

"If you wish to put it that way," she replied

She saw Josef's face change, the blood drained from it and there was a swelling of his eyes concealing the reservoir of tears behind them. He turned away from her and crossed to the window, his trembling hands rose to his face to hide the first droplets of the salty water which leaked from his eyes. She heard him take a deep breath.

"You see I said you'd get hurt. I am so sorry Josef but I cannot turn my back on my kingdom or my Father, this is what I was born to do. Dear Josef, I love you with all my heart but it's my mind that dictates the course I should take."

After the deep breath he turned towards her revealing his true feelings, "How can you deny our love and even give that evil dog a second thought, it's an insult to our feelings. If you go through with this don't expect me to stay around here and watch you with him."

Eleanor found that she could not look Josef in the eyes when she answered,

"It's what may be best for Hamble not what's best for Eleanor."

What had been a possibility up until this point, suddenly became a reality which struck Josef like a bolt of lightning.

"You're going to do it aren't you, I don't believe this. Marry The Duke de Vile! Mark my words only evil can come of anything he touches."

Eleanor approached Josef to place her arm around his shoulder and appeal to his sense of patriotism and duty, but he turned away and pushed her to one side and strode towards the door.

"You can have him, he's all yours. But when it all goes wrong, and believe me it will, don't expect me to be there to pick up the

pieces.” As the door slammed shut behind him he faintly heard Eleanor’s voice cry out to him.

“Josef !”

It took all his will power to keep going but keep going he did, as he shouted back,

“No ! I need to leave.”

Eleanor stood transfixed for some seconds before turning and throwing herself upon the bed where the tears flowed without restraint, accompanied by sobs that could be heard in the next room. Suddenly a tapestry moved in the rush of air caused by the opening of a concealed door behind it. The tapestry was thrust aside and Shinaé, Eleanor’s Lady-in-Waiting and sometime governess, peeped around it’s folds. The Princess’ companion saw the state of her ward and half ran across the chamber to her side.

“Your Highness, What ever is the matter?”

Eleanor sat up from the tear sodden pillow and threw her arms around Shinaé as she had done so many times for as long as she could remember.

“Oh Shinaé he' gone.”

“Don't worry “ comforted Shinaé, “he'll be back, believe me I have a feeling for these things.”

“No, you don't understand, he's gone for ever, he hates me.”

“Hates you! Why the lad's blinded by his love for you and can't see anything else. That's why he's stormed off.”

Eleanor jumped up, indignant that Shinaé had contradicted her.

“If he loved me he would have stood by me.”

“What, and watch you commit the greatest sin his mind could imagine. Why child have a little consideration for the lad,” scolded Shinaé.

“You mean de Vile?”

“Yes, Who else ?”

“But that is not for love, it's my duty but how do you know about that?”

“These walls are not that thick and besides, I just watched your face when the messenger read the proposal from The Duke. I was there you know, or has your old Shinaé become invisible now that you have acquired power ?” This statement from Eleanor’s old nanny shocked her. Maybe she was more in love with the power than with Josef

Eleanor gave a nervous laugh and said ,“Oh, but just because you're clever enough to read my face it doesn't mean that Josef will come back to me”

Shinaé just smiled as she replied, “Your Highness, have I ever been wrong?”

Eleanor reluctantly laughed crossed the small space between them to give Sinnae a hug, “Shinaé, you are incorrigible.”

The old nurse smiled lovingly to her ward “That's better, I hate to see tear stains on that lovely little face.”

“You always know best Shinaé, but I'll hold you to your promise.”

“By the way Your Highness, some of the village children are waiting outside. If you remember you said that they could sing for you this morning, they've been rehearsing for weeks.”

Eleanor, rather brighter now at the thought of the children told Shinaé, “Yes, yes of course they must perform for me. Tell them I will be there momentary.”

In her own special way Shinaé waddled across to the door of the chamber and disappeared through it, and Eleanor heard her pattering footfalls fade into the distance. As the Princess gathered her cloak around her she suddenly stopped and spoke out loud, “Josef so enjoyed hearing the children sing, he said it was like a breath of fresh air from his beloved Ellestual.”

As if waking herself from a dream, she suddenly awoke and quickly strode out of the room and into the passage way. She could faintly hear the sounds of young voices chattering as she grew closer to the small garden that her father had created for her. The garden wasn't very big but it was hers and the memories of when, still a child, she had helped the gardeners to design and plant the flower beds.

The door to the garden had been left open and the early morning sunlight streamed through it into the cool shade of the passage. The sounds of the children were loud now and she could hear Shinaé fussing around and instructing the school mistress on how to arrange the young singers.

“Now you all must be quiet, please be quiet. You there up the tree come down this instant, you there, stop eating the flowers. Please, Oh do be still.” Shinaé was saying as the Princess passed out into the warm sun shine.

“It’s OK Shinaé, calm down, they’re children,” the Princess asserted when she saw the state Shinaé was getting in. As if by magic the children fell silent and came running towards the Princess. Any onlooker could see immediately that these children loved their Princess and would willingly do her bidding.

“What are you going to sing for me today children ?” Eleanor asked and almost like a orchestra starting up there was a cacophony of sound as every child tried to tell her the title of the songs, as they remembered them.

“Come along children get into your positions, quickly now, The Princess has important work to attend to. Yes the crown is real goldno the Princess can't kiss your frog.” Shinaé continued.

The children eventually formed themselves into a choir and stood in a semicircle some ten strides distant from the Princess. As soon as they were quiet their school mistress discretely nudged one of the children forward.

“Your Highness, as a token of our love for you, and to thank you for our pat.... patien.....” the child struggled to make the speech she had obviously rehearsed. Before the child had time to complete her speech a young boy interrupted .

“See I told you she'd make a mess of it.”

Almost immediately Shinaé jumped to the rescue. “‘Patron’, the word is ‘patron’,” she whispered, whilst to the boy she spat a, “Shhh!”

The young girl continued “Patron. We would like to sing a song for you.”

before things escalated again into chaos Eleanor interrupted “Please, go ahead.”

The children launched into their song in praise of Hamble and the royal family, and followed it with a popular love song, which as it happened, was a song which Josef was always singing. Far from upsetting Eleanor, the song seemed like a connection to her beloved Josef which calmed her heart. From that point she never heard a note the children sang, although she seemingly listened intently to the songs, the heart and consciousness was with Josef. Eleanor could almost see him as he entered the forest to the south and could feel the cool breeze as it rustled the emerald leaves above his head.

“Your Highness, your Highness” she heard Shinaé’s voice as she returned from the dream. “That was the last song”

Pulling herself together she stood and clapped her hands “Thank you so much children, you have really cheered me up. I will visit you at the school house next week and then you can sing for me again. Go now with love in your hearts.”

With that, Eleanor turned and made for the little door through which she vanished from view. Undaunted by her exit the young man who had been given the job of thanking the Princess stepped forward and in a voice twice his size he shouted “Three cheers for the Princess Eleanor, hip, hip...”

Through the still open door Eleanor heard the cheers that followed and smiled to herself in a very satisfied way, bless them she thought.

CHAPTER 4

Danger Descends

Three days after the departure of Josef things had become no easier for Eleanor, Princess Royal of Hamble. She had spent the days since the loss of her love busying herself with affairs of state, holding audiences and visiting friends, anything to keep herself occupied. The pain had not gone away or reduced in any way, every time her mind was unoccupied by a task, Josef was there. Her waking thought and the last thing on her mind as she cried herself to sleep each night was of Josef. Many times she had made the calculation of where he'd be just then and how long it would take him to realise his mistake and make the return journey. As the time approached for his calculated arrival she would run to the window overlooking the gate and each time her heart would sink as the gate stayed shut or empty except for the guards. Many times Eleanor questioned Shinaé about her prediction but without any success or more information. So for the third morning running her Princess was already up, dressed and working when Shinaé arrived with her breakfast. The light repast was eaten in silence and as on the previous mornings was followed by the same question.

“Shinaé, do you have any idea when Josef may return?”

“As I said yesterday and the day before your Highness, no I have not. It was a feeling that he'd return not a message from the spirit world”

“I know, but I was just asking what you thought”

“If you're interested in what I think, Princess you'll send the swiftest messenger after the lad and ask him to come back and if he refuses arrest him for treason. Then when he gets here lock him up until you can find some common sense and can get a wedding ceremony organised.”

“You know I can’t do that Shinaé, now let it drop.”

“Me let it drop, you brought the subject up.”

“Shinaé, just get on with your work eh.”

Shinaé mumbled to herself as she collected the feather duster from the closet and started to tidy the chamber as Eleanor continued to read and sign documents at her desk. As the nurse worked at her tasks she soon forgot about her cross words and began to hum to herself. The humming grew louder and louder and eventually changed to a whistle.

“Shinaé! I can't think with that racket,” shouted Eleanor.

“Sorry Princess, was I humming again?”

“Just a little but it was the out of tune whistling that really got to me.”

Shinaé became quiet and continued her cleaning duty and once again eventually started to to hum to herself but before the tune became too loud the princess interrupted.

“You're doing it again!”

“I'm sorry Princess, but humming makes me happy and I like to be happy.”

“I could do with some happiness right now.”

Once again Shinaé took up her cleaning and continued to hum a jolly tune but this time the Princess joined in and before long the pair burst into one of the songs that the children had sung some days before. After two final chorus' they stopped singing and laughed for what seemed like minutes and then with tears streaming down their cheeks they hugged each other.

“You know” said Eleanor “I do feel better. All I need now is for Josef to knock on that door.”

As if by some pre-arranged cue, there came rap on the door to the passageway. The two froze, afraid to breathe, “You don't think..... ,” the sentence remained unfinished.

But Shinaé, never to be phased by anything said, “You won't know if you don't answer it.”

Eleanor took a deep breath, took hold of the corner of her desk and said, “Come!”

The door handle turned and the door cracked from it's frame, slowly it opened and the head of the King popped around it's edge. Eleanor's breath exhaled with an almost audible hiss.

"Hello Father, I didn't expect you here to-day. What a pleasant surprise."

"Well it's certainly a surprise, but I don't know about it being pleasant," said the King, "You have a visitor my Dear."

The original hope that had almost stopped her heart, welled up again at the news. Her mouth had dried up completely now and her voice cracked as she asked, "A visitor, who?"

Her father didn't have time to tell her who the visitor was before the intruder appeared in the doorway.

"My Dear, may I present His Grace, The Duke de Vile."

Eleanor's face as well as her heart dropped again but this time the drop was almost bottomless. The arrogant form of the Duke de Vile seemed to almost float into the room. Eleanor felt as if her chamber had been violated, what right had this snake to slither into her personal space, as if he owned the Palace. Before her was figure dressed almost entirely in black with splashes of red where the lining of his cloak showed through the folds, and flashes of silver from buckles and studs. On his head was a thin silver coronet, fitted tight over a black velvet mantel which dropped to his shoulders. Around his waist was a belt stud-plated with a silver metal, from it hung a scimitar, whose hilt was encrusted with rubies and diamonds, and hanging to one side was a black leather pouch, which strained at the thongs that suspended it from the belt. The face was hard and his eyes, cruel and without sympathy for man or beast. A thin beard outlined the face bringing it to a point at the chin like some war hatchet. The effect was an almost instant loathing from everyone who had the misfortune to come face to face with the Arch Duke. Following the Duke were two small attendants, at first Eleanor thought they were children but on closer inspection she realised that they were dwarfs. Each was dressed in a

similar style to their master except for the crest upon both their back and chest, marking them as de Vile's property.

Suddenly the Duke seemed to change course and sailed across the floor towards the Princess "Your Royal Highness, this is indeed a honour. I have secretly admired you for many years since, and to be in your presence is for me like a flower blooming in the sunlight." He held out his hand ready to take that of the princess and plant a kiss there but the Princess turned away saying. "Really ? how very uninteresting. I cannot say that I can reciprocate that."

"Your pardon Princess, I fear my excitement has made me presumptuous. I am merely overjoyed that you would even consider my proposal," the Duke said in what could only be described as a verbal sneer.

"Let us get this one thing straight from the start," retorted Eleanor, "any marriage between you and I is purely a marriage of convenience, and for the good of our respective countries. Is that clear? And one other thing, I have not yet agreed to even consider your proposal. I am still considering whether or not to give this suggestion of yours serious consideration. Is that clear also?"

"That's right, you tell him girl," mumbled Shinaé half to herself and half to Eleanor.

Although the Duke heard Shinaé's retort he knew better than to pick it up at this point and agreed "As clear as a crystal Your Highness. I am content to merely bathe in your radiance."

Eleanor couldn't believe the audacity of the man and merely shook her head. Unabashed this satin spider continued, "When would it please you to formally concrete our union?"

"I think he means cement but setting him in concrete will do nicely," commented Shinaé again being ignored but for a well hidden smile and a,

“Shh” from Eleanor before she answered the Duke, saying, “It will be no pleasure I assure you Duke.”

“If you accept my proposal every pleasure imaginable will be yours, for my land offers wealth beyond comprehension. Palaces, servants, splendid clothes, good food and wine, golden carriages and power, all will be yours if you agree to be my bride,” the Duke continued unembarrassed.

“I have no need for such things, all I desire is here with my people and my father”

As Eleanor looked away from the Duke her attention fell upon her Father. His face was a picture of distress as he crossed to the small window all the while shaking his head. Shinaé broke her stare with a false cough, “Ha Hem,” which prompted Eleanor to continue her statement to the Duke.

“.. and my friends. If I should agree to this 'union' it will be for the sake of my Fathers Kingdom, to prevent any further wars between us.”

“Of course Princess,” persisted the Duke, “our two lands will be as one, your people will be *my* people and my subjects will be” As the Duke gestured with his hand he left the sentence unfinished, as if it were obvious to all.

Shinaé who had picked up on this said, “I hate people who don't finish their sentences.”

Eleanor ignored this comment also and continued her exchange with de Vile. “*If* I accept this alliance there will need to be a written agreement between us and a non-aggression treaty between our two countries.”

“Agreed Your Highness.”

Shinaé however continued her sniping at the Duke. “Well he gave that a lot of thought didn't he.”

This time the Princess took up the thought, “Would you not like some time to consider this?”

“Highness, I know what I want and I want what I see.”

"Really," said Eleanor in a very uninterested manner, "That's more than I can say."

By this juncture de Vile had reached the point where he could no longer ignore Shinaé and pointedly asked, "Who is this old hag?"

"Let me present the Lady.....," interrupted the King.

"*Silence!* I was speaking to my future wife," de Vile spat at the King.

Obviously shaken by the incident, the King returned to the window where his anger grew stronger than ever before. Seeing this Eleanor was determined to make a point of it.

"This Lady is my friend and 'Lady in Waiting', she has been with me since my birth. And, whilst we are speaking of people dear to me, you will never address my Father in that manner ever again, do you understand? He is a King, whereas you are merely a Duke and you will therefore afford him the respect that comes with his station."

"Allow me to apologise for my outburst, I was not thinking clearly. As for your so called, 'Lady in Waiting', I think it's time you had a slave worthy of your rank Princess, so that this old 'Lady' can be retired."

Shinaé's reaction was swift as she snapped, "Who do you think you are, you....."

"Quiet Shinaé, I will deal with this," interrupted Eleanor, as she turned back to the Duke, her eyes blazing with anger, "Let me say this, and I will only say it once. You will not interfere in the running of this household and you will not speak to the King or valued friends and servants in that manner. Is that also very clear?"

The Duke sneered as he muttered to nobody in particular, "We will see," and then to the Princess, "I understand what you are saying Princess."

"Then make sure you remember it," the cold steel of the Princess' remark cut the air between them.

The Duke's shock did not last for long as the reply was almost instantaneous, but not quite. Eleanor had noticed the minute delay.

"Oh I will remember them I promise you."

The Duke de Vile didn't have chance to take the matter further as just then the King interceded. "I think it's time you took your leave of us now de Vile, we have much to discuss and your presence seems to be aggravating everyone."

The Duke spun on his heels as if to chastise this impudent King, flame burning in his eyes, he looked as if he could breath fire, but stopped and thought better of it.

"Highness, I will retire to allow you time to consider the consequences of not accepting this most gracious offer."

Picking up the veiled threat she replied, "I do not respond to threats Duke"

"That was not a threat but an encouragement to review all that you would pass up if we did not become joined."

With a toss of his head deVile strode across the chamber closely followed by his two small attendants, on reaching the door he stopped, turned toward the group, and gave a low bow, "Until later my Princess." In a swirl of black cloak he disappeared from view, "Come you little brats," he said to his slaves, and he was gone.

"Well I never," gasped Shinaé, "You want your head feeling if you even consider a marriage to that monster."

The King placed an arm around Eleanor's sholder and said, "Shinaé is right my child. As much as I want this treaty with the Duke I must consider you and the life you will have as his wife."

"That's exactly what we must not do, it's our people that we must consider, their happiness and their future," choked the princess holding back her tears.

"Princess," comforted Shinaé, "there's not a subject in this land that would not lay their life down for you, and you know it."

But the Princess would have none of it, "Exactly, that's why I must do this for them."

"Please Eleanor," pleaded her father, "promise me you will think this thing through carefully before you commit yourself. Promise?"

"I Promise Father. Now I need to be alone to think things through."

"Very well my Dear. Come along Shinaé she needs some time." Shinaé followed her King out of the chamber, neither looked back to see the pain on their Princess' face, for none could bear the sight. The pain also showed on their faces and they did not wish to add theirs to that of their child. The Lady Shinaé silently closed the door and paused in thought for a moment.

"There is nothing to be gained waiting here Shinaé, go to your closet and pray that whatever happens it will be the right thing for us all," said the King.

"Yes Your Majesty, thank you."

"Thank me, for what?"

"For being a good and loving father and not just a King"

"The two go together Shinaé," and with that he walked away down the long passage toward the State Rooms.

Meanwhile back in the Princess' chamber Eleanor was filled with doubt and longing for her love.

"Where are you when I need you Josef? I could always talk things through with you, you were so wise in a simple sort of way, you could always see the obvious that no one else could see," murmured Eleanor. The princess dropped onto the bed and lay there for some long time, just how long she could not tell, but when she became conscious of the chill it was already late and dusk had again fallen. She arose from the bed and crossed to the window where the stars were already glittering above.

"There's our star again, I wonder if you're looking at it too Josef. It will always be my link to you my love".

CHAPTER 5

Floundering in the Forest

Things were no better for Josef as he journeyed southward, it was only the weather which improved, his mood remained black. It seemed to him that he had travelled a great distance but when he took notice of his surroundings he found that he was still in the great forest barely a day's brisk march from the summer palace. Josef sat on a nearby boulder confused by what he had discovered. How could this be, he was sure he had been on the road for three days, he had certainly eaten three days worth of food. He decided that he must have been walking around in some sort of daze, probably walking in circles. There were vague memories of passing a few people, but that was all he could remember of the past days. Well, at least he was on the right road now, so it was up to him to make up the time, pull himself together and complete the trek.

Josef was not only aware of his surroundings but also of his tiredness. Josef held out his hand and measured the distance of the sun from the horizon. By the position of the sun it was already late afternoon. He estimated that there were less than three hours of daylight left at best, so he made a mental note to look out for somewhere to make camp for the night. The next part of the forest was really quite dense, and except for the road there were few clear spaces. He felt he would be lucky to find a secure place for some leagues ahead, so he decided to step it out, despite his tiredness, and get to the first of the foothills where the forest started to thin out. Strangely he saw not another soul as he travelled and started to wonder whether or not he was really on the right road. After what seemed like two hours brisk walking, he had still not encountered the foothills, nor any sign of them. Josef now became concerned about exactly where he was. Everything looked normal, the trees

looked like they always did and the path wound it's way through the trees in the same way that it always did. So he continued on, and on, and as the sun started to set he he had still not encountered the foothills.

As the heat of the day slowly gave ground to the cool of the evening, Josef started to look for a place to make camp for the night. Within a league or so he fell upon a small dell, which seemed to be clear of trees at ground level, but roofed by a canopy of branches and leaves above. The floor was covered by a thick carpet of moss, it's undulating surface formed natural body supports and rests. To one corner, a spring rose and gently bubbled and gurgled into the light of evening. This was the best camp site he had ever found. How could he have possibly missed this spot during his numerous journeys, he puzzled, but he was too tired to worry too much about it now. He hefted his pack and dropped it to the ground with a thankful sigh. Josef had instinctively headed for a downed and hollow tree, almost in the centre of the clearing, this would hold some of the day's heat and keep him warm during the night.

"Well this looks like a good place to stop for the night, out of the wind, lots of thick moss to sleep on, almost as good as my cot back in the palace," he laughed.

Dragging his pack to him he opened it upon the hollow tree, from it's depths he pulled out half of its contents before he found the kerchief containing his food. Slowly he opened the cloth to reveal the meagre contents.

"Not much left, I shouldn't keep picking at it during the day. Well I can't get any more until I reach the next village, and that wont be until tomorrow, sometime," he thought to himself.

Never the less he set to eating what was left with gusto, enjoying every mouth full. When there was but a crust remaining he stopped.

"Best save this till morning, I'll need it then," he told himself out loud.

Josef carefully wrapped the remnant of food in his kerchief and placed it back in the pack, Josef stood and walked over to the bubbling spring. He drank deeply of the cool sweet water and then washed his face and upper body, the still warm breeze soon dried his skin. After looking around the glade he finally decided. "This is as good as it gets." he said out loud, as he unfastened his bedroll and spread it out beneath the old hollow log and laid himself upon it. Soon he yawned deeply and laid his head upon the natural pillow formed by the moss. Within minutes he was asleep and his soft snores drifted into the forest.

Inquisitive creatures lifted their heads to investigate the strange sounds, rabbits sniffed at the air, squirrels cocked their heads from side to side whilst wild deer bobbed their heads up and down. Josef saw none of this, nor did he witness the small human-like creatures who appeared in the glen to dance and play among the trees and bushes in some strange pageant. These creatures who have existed in the world's folklore since the beginning of time, are rarely seen by mortals and then only in fleeting images like wisps of smoke.

Only on very few occasions have there been interactions between these two species. The tradition exists that any human who converses with the immortal ones suddenly becomes successful and rich, consequently the fable of three wishes has been accepted by society. Was this to be one of those situations, or would Josef sleep through the commotion, never to know how close he really was to obtaining all his dreams and then some.

Soon after dark two small fiddlers entered the dell and commenced to play jigs for the dancers. Still Josef slept on so sound and still that he wasn't even noticed by the revellers. All through the long night the party continued with hundreds of dancers and merrymakers enjoying themselves when suddenly

dawn started to break in the East. Slowly the revelling stopped and as the light grew from grey to white the glen emptied until there were but two remaining. Then these too started to leave still deep in conversation, laughing and joking they made for the hollow log. Without looking where they were going the smaller of the two stumbled over something, it was Josef's leg.

"What the it's a mortal, quick get inside."

Small as they were the stumble had been felt by Josef, "Who's there?" mumbled Josef, still half asleep, "Who's there?" as the two attempted to hide, "Stop there!"

"Who us ?" asked the smaller of the two.

"Yes, who are you," and as Josef realised their small stature he amended his question in astonishment, "what are you?"

"Nothing, bye!" said the tallest as they cowered away towards the back of the log.

"Wait! Tell me who you are. Don't hide, I wont hurt you," he tried to reassure them, "My name is Josef, what's yours?"

"Bluebell," the smaller replied nervously, as she stepped back out from behind the fallen tree, "I'm called Bluebell."

"What?" said Josef

"Bluebell, that's my name, Bluebell, are you deaf or something?"

"Oh," he said looking confused, "Where did you come from, I mean where do you live?"

"Here."

"Well, where exactly? There are no villages around here."

"Here," replied Bluebell.

Josef looked around, but could see no sign of houses or cottages or even huts where anyone could live.

"Er, I don't see any house or anywhere anyone could live."

"No, you can't can you," said Bluebell's friend with just a trace of a chuckle.

"Look, I don't know why this is so important to me but can you just show me, precisely where you live or sleep for that matter."

Bluebell pointed to the hollow log beside which Josef had slept, "In there."

"Right, in there, in a log. Are you winding me up?"

"It's quite comfortable. Come in I'll show you around if you like," Bluebell offered as she turned to the opening at the end of the log.

As Bluebell turned her delicate gossamer wings flashed into view. Josef's mouth dropped open, he closed his eyes and opened them again but the wings were still there, "You're a you're a a"

"A fairy," finished Bluebell.

"Yea, you're a fairy," concluded Josef, "What am I saying, there aren't such things, you don't exist."

"Don't I, that's nice to know."

"No I mean ..." realising what he had said "I'm sorry it's just such a shock."

"*You* think it's a shock, what about us, we're in big trouble because of your big feet."

"I don't have big feet," he reacted swiftly.

"Yes you do, they almost covered my front door."

"Well I didn't know, there was no sign or anything."

"Yes we're really going to put up signs and let everyone know we exist." Bluebell countered with her famous sarcastic wit, "Beware Fairies - watch where you sleep"

"Sorry. How have I got you into trouble anyway," Josef asked.

Well you're not supposed to know about us, it's our law ..."

"Well it was you who woke me up."

"By accident," added Bluebell, "Well I suppose I had better face the music and take you to Titania."

"Titania? I've heard of her, isn't she the queen of the fairies or something?"

"Yes, every human has heard of her since that human writer, Shakespeare, found out about her. She wasn't pleased about that I can tell you, there was no living with her for almost fifty years but she's mellowed now."

"Who's Shakespeare," Josef asked.

"Oops! Oh dear I forgot, he hasn't been born yet, this gets so confusing," admitted Bluebell, "we used to live in England in your future, then this playwright found out about us and wrote a play. Then we decided to move here. Pity really England in Midsummer is a dream," she explained with a wistful look on her face. "Yes, well just stay there a minute and I'll get her."

Bluebell climbed to the top of a hillock on the edge of the clearing and called out Titania's name, "Titania! Titania!! We have a problem."

In return to the call another voice called back.

"What sort of problem, the Queen's busy."

"A human problem." replied Bluebell.

"Bluebell, there are *too* many of those for us to worry about." the disembodied voice called.

"No, I mean there is one here," insisted Bluebell, "I have a human here."

"Don't be silly Bluebell," the voice chuckled, "transplants won't be invented for another six hundred years."

But Bluebell wasn't amused, "You know some times I worry about you." she shouted, "I.....have a human standing beside me here ... in the glen."

"Well why didn't you say so; Oh, I see, Oh dear," said the voice, "that is a problem. Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"Will you fetch the Queen?" shouted Bluebell.

"Right, yes, straight away." called the disembodied voice.

"We're not as stupid as that," Bluebell apologised to Josef, "We won't keep you a moment."

After a few moments there was a sort of fanfare, blown through what sounded like panpipes. A number of fairies arrived with gossamer banners flying in the breeze, four more carried an empty chair or throne and placed it on the raised ground near the centre of the dell. However there was no sign of Titania and Josef stood looking from side to side waiting for the Fairy

Queen's entrance. Bluebell noticed Josef's confusion, turned to him and said, "Don't worry, she's making one of her grand entrances."

Suddenly the voice he had heard before called an announcement above all the clamour, this time it had a body attached.

"Behold, Titania, Queen of Fairy, Defender of the little people, bright star of the night, great....."

"Knock it off Snowdrop, nobody's impressed," shouted Bluebell. As one body everyone looked up and Josef followed suit in time to see the figure of Titania fly into the glen on wings that looked almost transparent, but caught the morning light with a million colours. As she flew the light refracted through the wings, producing rainbows all around her. With a slight hum, she landed lightly upon the raised ground in front of the throne. At once every fairy bowed, Bluebell tugged on Josef's breeches to tell him to bow also, then at Titania's signal everyone straightened themselves once more.

Titania seated herself on the ornate chair and said, with a sigh, "What's the problem Bluebell?"

Bluebell indicated Josef with her head and replied, "Need I say anything else?"

"Oh yes, I see," replied the Queen who strode down the small hill and crossed to Josef, she circled him twice, all the time inspecting every inch of him. Because of embarrassment Josef felt the the need to speak, "I....."

"Silence," commanded the Queen and turned to Bluebell, "Yes it's definitely a human."

"That' why she's a queen," commented Bluebell to Josef, "sharp as a thistle-thorn."

"Pardon," asked Titania.

"Nothing Your Majesty, but what are we going to do with this human, Your Majesty?" answered Bluebell.

"Well you know what the law says, you have to grant it's hearts desire after you have wiped it's memory of us."

"Will you please stop referring to me as *'it'*," demanded Josef.

The Queen turned to address Josef with a curious look on her face, "Why? How should we refer to you? What are you that would demand a name?"

"I'm a person, not a thing."

"A P e r s o n ?" Titania queried.

"Yes, there is someone in this mortal body. I'm not like a tree, there's a soul in here."

"You mean you're like us," asked Titania.

"Yes Your Majesty, except that I am mortal and can die."

"I always thought humans were like, well like dogs, you know like pets," interjected Bluebell.

"Well we're not," snapped Josef.

Seeing the annoyance on the mortal's face, Titania stepped in, "Well if that is true, I really don't know what to say, history will have to be re-written," she mused, "Mind you that would explain a few things."

"Like what," asked Josef.

"Like why humans do such strange things, it's because they're trying to be individuals. Why they proclaim love for each other and then continue to fight again and again. Trying to wipe each other of the face of the Earth."

"I thought they just sort of mimicked each other," interjected Bluebell.

Titania thought for a moment then asked Josef, "Yes, why do humans mimic each other."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."he replied.

Titania explained, "Well some times we see one human wearing something new, different, and before you know where you are, everyone is wearing the same item, or something very much like it. Then it starts all over again and again, on and on."

"Ah I see what you mean it's called fashion," explained Josef, "Some times some one thinks up a new style and then other people like it, and want the same because they think they look good wearing it."

"How very strange," commented Titania after listening intently, "We must talk again later huma... er Do you have a name?" she corrected her self.

"Josef, your Majesty"

"We will meet again later then Josef," turning to Bluebell she added, "Bring it, I mean Josef back here at midday, we will hear his dearest wish then.

"Yes your Majesty," answered Bluebell.

With that the Queen rose majestically into the air, followed by a circle of her attendants, and as if blown by a sudden gust of wind, they all were whisked away back over the trees and disappeared. Josef was left alone once more with the two fairies he had first met in the glen.

"Well that went well," commented Bluebell, "not a mention of my punishment."

"We'll sort that out at noon as well, "boomed the voice of Titania form somewhere off into the forest.

"Sorry," chuckled Josef.

"It's OK , I'll live." Bluebell assured Josef.

"What will they do to you," he asked.

"Oh I'll just get extra duties or something. We're not like you humans, we don't feel the need to hurt each other. What ever my punishment is, it will make me a better fairy."

"That's good, I wish people had that attitude in our world."

"Your world? Who do you think you are," asked Bluebell, getting very annoyed, "You are just one race of many who share this world, you don't own it you know. One day that attitude will get your race into real trouble and every other living thing along with you."

"How do you know that," he asked.

"Listen this may be a hard concept for you to grasp but it's like this," Interrupted Crocus, who had not spoken previously, "Our race, The Fairy, well we live backwards in relation to humans." "That's just silly" laughed Josef, "How can any thing live backwards."

"It's simple, we don't grow old, we, sort of 'youthen'," after a slight pause for thought, Crocus continued, "We're born old, in your future, and we will eventually die when other life is created on this world."

"Humans think we are magic and can see the future but in fact we just have good memories and can remember things that haven't happened better than things that have," explained Bluebell.

Josef was dumbfounded, for once in his life he was totally lost for words as he stared at the two fairies, open mouthed.

"I... I'm really having trouble with this," he stuttered.

"I knew he would," said Crocus.

"Let me get this straight, you know everything that's going to happen because it in your world, it already has, and there's no such thing as magic," he thought for a moment and continued, "OK you tell me what I'm going to say next."

"Fine," said Crocus.

"Fine, Go on then," said Josef.

"I just did," answered Crocus.

"Did what? Oh, You mean when you said 'fine' you were predicting what I was going to say next."

"No not predicting, just repeating what you were going to say," corrected Bluebell.

Josef held his head, "I can feel a headache coming on," he said.

"That's why I brought this with me," Crocus said as she held out a goblet to Josef.

"What is it?"

"A cure for headaches."

Josef took the goblet from Crocus, sniffed it and tentatively tasted the mixture. With a shudder he held the cup out as if to give it back.

"All of it," ordered Crocus as if talking to a child. Josef screwed up his face and drained the vessel, handed it back and said, "Thanks." then continued the discussion. "But surely all the stories of magic I've heard, they must have some truth to them."

"There's no such thing as magic, it's called science, and something that you do not have a word for yet but it will be called 'technology'."

"Tech-no-ogy," repeated Josef.

"Close enough," said Crocus.

"What's tech-no-ogy," he asked.

"In the distant future there will be things called machines, which will help people to do there work, or remember lots and lots of things," explained Bluebell.

Crocus then continued, "To some people technology became a religion and it took over their lives."

"Wow! my head ache has almost gone, what was that potion? It's worked really speedy, like magic."

"In the past, I mean your future, it will be called Alkaseltzer."

"Can I see some of these mac-shins?" asked Josef

"No," came an immediate response, "We're not supposed to even tell you about these things, let alone let you see them." said Bluebell emphaticly.

"I think you had better just return to thinking about them as magic," advised Crocus.

"I think I still do, because I don't understand any of this," he replied.

"Give it time" the two fairies said in unison.

"Talking of time, how long is it till mid-day? We had better not be late for your queen."

"Don't worry, there's over an hour yet, just time to get some elevenses," said Crocus.

"What's elevenses," Josef asked.

"It's what we call food eaten between breakfast and the midday meal, some people will call it 'Brunch' in a few of hundred years."

"Food eh, that sounds good to me, mine ran out last night.

"In that case, what are we waiting for.

CHAPTER 6

Friends, Faith and the Future

After his snack, which could have passed for a banquet in another person's life, Josef was feeling decidedly better as he, Bluebell and Crocus strolled into an adjacent glen, next to the one where he had first met the fairy people. There were many fairies in the glen going about their daily business. Scattered around the edges of the dell were trees which had been hollowed with doors and windows cut into them. Each window and door was cut in such a way that when shut they could not be seen unless someone looked closely. The branches on each of the trees were pruned in a way that made them into awnings. Some of the trees were shops, others were homes, there was a blacksmiths shop and two others were some sort of workshop where many fairies worked, Crocus said it was called a 'factory'.

To the far end of the glen sat the biggest oak Josef had ever seen. In the trunk he could just make out a pair of double doors, that were slightly open, and above, half hidden in the foliage, he could see what looked like a window with a balcony, not unlike the one which overlooked the courtyard in the Summer Palace. Before the doors there was a cut of tree trunk that served as a raised flat area like a dais, and upon this was the throne he had seen earlier. Josef guessed that this was the where Titania lived, a sort of the fairy version of a palace. This was confirmed when he glanced up to see how tall the oak was, at the top, some twenty times taller than a man, flew a royal standard of sorts. The flag was constructed from leaves sewn together with a design made up from different coloured ones. The thought struck him that it would need to be replaced often when the leaves died but as he looked closer he could see the answer to that. The leaves weren't sewn with any thread but held together

by roots which combined together and became a branch. What a wondrous place this is he thought. As his attention drifted back to his immediate surroundings he was startled to see that a crowd had formed around him. Partly from embarrassment, and partly from the need to seem friendly, Josef stood there grinning like the fabled Cheshire Cat. One fairy started to giggle, then another and another, the giggles turned into chuckles and then laughter, until the whole crowd was racked in joyous rapture. Instantly the tension was broken and these strange creatures became friends.

In the niche of a tree at the opposite end of the dell from the palace, rested a stone finger in which was set a sundial that required no sunlight to operate. As Josef contemplated this a bell started to chime at the same end of the glen. The chiming stopped and the bell struck a number of single beats. When at last the sound of the final bell had faded away the silence was once more shattered by the piercing sound of a thousand trumpets and the double doors in the great oak slowly swung open.

Through the doorway teemed a million tiny lights, each one fading as it was bleached out by the light of day, to reveal a flighted fairy. Josef thought that if this had been night the effect would have been spectacular. Gradually the flow of bright dots became ribbons of light and at the end, where the streamers converged flew Titania. Truly a magical vision of majesty, for all the royal splendour of Hamble could not compare to this simple spectacle. As each fairy flew into the daylight the sun caught their wings as it passed through the sunlight, producing a myriad of colours like some gigantic soap bubble descending to form a gossamer backdrop for the Fairy Queen.

For this mortal the spectacle was breathtaking and he stood transfixed by the beauty of it all. A voice brought him back to

reality, if this really was reality, as it asked him by name to come forward. Still half in a daze Josef started for the dais, where the Queen, now seated upon the throne, waited to welcome him. As he neared the dais he could see that each of the fairy attendants were hovering behind the throne, creating an almost solid semicircular wall of flapping wings. The high speed movement of this many wings caused a breeze to flow over the dais which was welcome relief from the mid-day heat.

Josef must have retired into another daze, for suddenly his arms were held in the hands of Bluebell and Crocus, who were propelling him forward.

"Bring forward the mortal Josef," Titania was repeating.

"OK, I can get there on my own thank you," he told the two. With his back as straight as he could manage and drawing himself up to his full, not inconsiderable height, he walked forward to bow before Titania.

"This mortal has penetrated our society and according to tradition is to be granted it's, I mean his, heart's desire,"

Josef saw the queen turn to the nearest attendant and strained his ears to hear her say, "Probably a pot of gold, they always want gold, or something like it." She then turned her attention back to the mortal before her, "But first, do you swear never to divulge the location of our settlement and to promote the popular illusion of all Fairy Folk?"

Josef answered, "I do."

Behind him he heard Crocus say, "What does he think this is, a wedding."

Before he could stop himself he responded to the comment. "I wish," he said and quickly continued to make the change, "I will so swear Your Majesty."

"Who partners this mortal?" bellowed the attendant.

Bluebell stepped forward and bowed before the queen, "That'll be me Majesty."

"Bluebell," announced Titania, "you will be responsible for ensuring that this mortal fulfils his oath and you will counsel him during the days of desire, protecting him from foe and dangers of friends, ensuring that all mortals duth seed....."

"Yea, yea," interrupted Bluebell, "do we really need to go through all this garbage every time someone stumbles across us?"

"Look this doesn't happen that often I just want to make the most of it. Bluebell, you always have to spoil my fun," but grudgingly the queen gave in, "OK you know what you have to do."

"Yep" replied Bluebell.

"Mortal, er Josef, what is your hearts desire," asked the queen.

"To marry my Princess Eleanor." he replied with out the slightest hesitation.

Titania looked shocked, Bluebell looked disappointed and Josef looked embarrassed, but the queen was the first to recover.

"Is this the Princess Eleanor of Hamble?" she asked.

"Why yes, do you know of her?" All around him there swelled a general murmur like the swarming of bees, then just as suddenly it ebbed as he looked around at the hundreds of faces pointed toward him.

"What's the matter," he asked.

Gently the queen spoke again, "How long is it since you left Hamble?"

"Almost a week now, but I don't know why it's taken so long to get this far."

"You have come farther than you think, Josef," and turning to the queen, Bluebell continued, "He has been sent to us Majesty."

"I knew that." snapped the queen, "Josef, much has happened in the short time since you left your lady. The evil Duke de Ville has determined to wed your princess in return for peace. Or may be the threat of another war, at least."

"Oh!" was all Josef could say as Titania continued..

"There is worse news, the Duke intends to invade and occupy Hamble and enslave the people. Neither the Princess nor her father the King realises what he intends."

It was like a sledge hammer hitting him full in the stomach, it was no longer his love at stake but the whole of his country, his family, his friends. For some time he could not speak, as thoughts whirled around inside his head. The assembled multitude looked on in silent anticipation, hardly daring to breathe. Suddenly his mind was made up.

"Majesty, I must return to warn them."

"And what do you think you can do on your own," blurted out Bluebell, "One young human against de Ville's hoards, you wouldn't get within twenty leagues of the palace before you were cut down in your prime and fed to th....".

"Yes, yes, Bluebell" interrupted Titania, "there's nothing like being positive is there."

"Anyway you'd be too late they get married in three days," added Crocus just to make the situation worse.

"Never the less something needs to be done to secure the future." insisted Titania, "This is our land too don't forget."

"Majesty, may I change my hearts desire," the mortal asked.

The queen thought for a second, "It's not normally allowed but under the circumstances I may grant your request, depending on what it is," she said.

"It's that my hearts desire now should be to set Hamble free."

"As I thought, this selfless act has redeemed humanity in our eyes. Your hearts desire is granted, both of them."

"Thank you your majesty. When can you perform this magic incantation?" he asked.

"Magic? We are forbidden to use our magic in the aid of mortals. I thought Bluebell would have explained that to you"

"Why not, it in your interests as well," pleaded Josef.

"It's because we don't know any magic" interrupted Crocus.

"Well that's nice, how can you grant anyone's wish unless you use magic, or what ever you call it," insisted Josef, "What was it called, 'Teco- golly-ge' ,"

"Teco-gol what," asked Titania.

"Its Nothing your majesty. Never said a word," said Crocus.

"A figment of his imagination whilst under stress," added Bluebell whilst she gave Josef a swift kick, whilst the queen was still glaring at Crocus.

"Nevertheless mortal, we will achieve your hearts desire," continued Titania, "to be more accurate, we will help you achieve it and then you get *all* the credit."

"I see," he said still looking distinctly confused, "but how are we to do anything in three days?"

"There we can help, one thing we *can* do is to manipulate time" explained the queen. "We will take ourselves out of the time-line until we are ready."

"Right" he said nodding vigorously, "See I knew you could work magic."

"Why do we bother," asked Bluebell to no one in particular.

"Call it what ever you wish," said Titania, giving up any thought of convincing Josef, "First we need a cunning plan."

They all stood looking into the air at nothing, eyes glazed, heads intermittently shaking after encouraging mutters.

"I have it," shouted Crocus, "I think I just may be able to help here but it's going to need some work."

The three fairies formed a huddle on the front of the dais and all Josef could hear were mutters and the occasional "That's good" or "You must be joking" followed by the odd look in his direction. Once Titania laughed quite loudly whilst the other two weighed him up, sniggering. Josef found that his face was flushing yet again, which only made matters worse.

"Do you think he could get away with it," asked the Queen.

"As I said, it'll take some work."

OK lets go for it," said the Queen forgetting her status for a moment, "I mean, you may proceed."

"Proceed with what? I don't like to be a nuisance but this does concern me you know," insisted Josef getting annoyed at his exclusion.

"Yea, we'd best let him in on this master plan before he explodes," advised Bluebell.

"Everyone, meet the Emperor," announced Crocus.

"The Emperor of where" asked one of the attendants.

"The Emperor of, of, of nowhere." announced Crocus with a flourish.

"Would someone like to tell me what is going on here."

"You, my friendly mortal, are to become the mighty conqueror of Hamble"

"What," exclaimed Josef as Crocus pushed on.

"This Great Emperor will ride into the Summer Palace and make friends with the King, and his daughter, and will gain the friendship also of the Duke de Vile while his mighty army waits on the hills, ready to invade, an army I may add ten times the size of de Ville's puny band of mercenaries."

"And what good will that do," scoffed Josef, "even if I could bluff my way into the palace, I don't have an army let alone one ten times the size of de Ville's."

"The good it will do is that when you gain the confidence of de Ville, you can arrange to befriend him and then expose him. He will then believe that Hamble has the protection of this great conqueror."

"And then I marry Ellen?" he asked.

"Yes, then you marry the princess, like in any good adventure, there's always a happy ever after ending," concluded Titania, in a very patronising manner, "But there is rather more at stake here than your love life you know."

"Yes I know, and it all sounds good, but they know me, I'll never get away with it."

"By the time we've done with you, even your own mother would have difficulty recognising you," assured Crocus.

"That would not be difficult, her eyesight is pretty poor, she tells everyone that she married Dad because he had a nice voice," he told Crocus.

"Hadn't we better get started," urged Bluebell impatiently.

"Start what?"

"We are need to turn you into an Emperor that will convince your princess," Crocus advised.

"How?"

"Training my boy. Bearing; self-defence; marksmanship; statesmanship," she continued.

"One-upmanship," added Bluebell.

"Diplomacy; ethics; speech training; the arts.....," Crocus continued not wanting to let Bluebell get the last word.

"Singing and dancing," asked Bluebell, fighting back.

"Why not," conceded Crocus giving up the impossible task of getting one over on Bluebell.

Just then the queen stepped in and made an announcement.

"In that case there's no time like the present, which it will be for the next few weeks. Well come on get going, we haven't got forever even if time has stopped for the rest of the world."

"Well where do we start?" asked Bluebell hands firmly planted on hips.

"Let's start with something simple shall we. How are you at music," asked Crocus.

"Music," responded Josef as if it were a nasty taste in his mouth, "what's that got to do with anything."

"Well you can dance," put in Bluebell.

"Yes of course I can dance, but you can't fight by dancing. Excuse me, do you mind laying down here while I dance on you until you submit. That would work, I don't think."

"I know dance seems unimportant right now but how are you going to convince your lady fair that you are a great emperor, if

you can't sweep her off of her feet at banquet or ball," explained Bluebell, "Come on let's see what you can do , just follow me."

With that Bluebell grabbed Josef, or as much of him as she could reach and threw him into a dance that bore more of a resemblance to a polka than anything known to man at that time. The tune however was a familiar one and Josef joined in when both Bluebell and Crocus commenced to sing along. It seemed that song and dance are the fairy equivalent to the moth's flame so within seconds the dell was filled with other small folk jigging and singing to the same tune. After twenty or so minutes had passed the dance finally wound to a close, leaving Josef gasping for breath and the fairy crying for more.

"Well your dancing is quite passable at least" concluded Bluebell.

"Yes, but what about my singing," Josef gasped.

"Well you'll get away with it, as long as nobody is listening."

"Thanks for nothing," he said his breath starting to return.

"Let's do it all again," a voice shouted from somewhere in the crowd.

"That's enough," came the unexpected voice of Titania, "let's get on with the important training."

"What's next," asked Crocus.

The reply from Bluebell came swiftly, and surely, everything was worked out in her little head as surely as if it were set in a book or scroll, "Self defence."

"Hey, what's the rush, I thought you said we had all the time we needed, I haven't got my second wind yet," complained Josef,

"Can't we have a break for a while or leave it until tomorrow?"

"Why not" pronounced Titania, "Although there won't actually be a tomorrow until we take ourselves back into time. It will be today for as long as we wish."

"You mean the sun will never set until all this is over with."

"Not until the hour you look upon the Summer Palace from the Western hills."

"I can't sleep with the light on, it's going to be a bit inconvenient not to mention tiring," moaned Josef.

"Not at all" interrupted Crocus, "you see you won't feel tired because you're not using up any energy, work is all linked to the time it takes to complete it and if it doesn't take any time because we aren't *in time*, you won't feel tired. Understand."

"No," said Josef.

"Oh never mind, you'll see what we mean soon enough."

"Well how do you measure time when you not in it," Josef insisted, " You can't say 'I'll meet you when we both feel like it', nothing would ever get done."

"Actually, that's a very good question," said Bluebell, "We do have a means of telling time, we call it a 'Bio-Clock'. We have a small animal which volunteers to go into a wheel and run, the wheel turns a mechanism which tells us the time elapsed of the current temporal distortion."

"The temper what," asked Josef

"It doesn't matter, I'll come and get you in an hour or so."

"That's fine by me."

The training continued for what should have been days. Slowly Josef's confidence increased and with it his bearing and authority. He already knew much about the art of combat and as the Royal Armourer his knowledge of the weapons gave him an edge (if you'll pardon the pun). Now his swordsmanship had a finesse that his old hack and chop lacked. His new friends showed him processes of sword manufacture that were as alien to him as the concept of being out of time and when all was said and done he continued to think of them as magic.

This 'Magic' sword immediately became his most prized possession, never did it leave his side. It shone like the moon and although he often cleaned it, the sword never showed the slightest need of it. The balance was perfection and although it was by far the lightest weapon he had ever handled it would cut

through almost anything as if it were made of cheese. As the weapon struck metal it would emit a ringing sound never before heard and at that instant the metal it had struck, would snap or collapse in his opponent's hand.

Of course at this point he wanted to be off to challenge the Duke to a duel, but Crocus managed to control his urge, and the training continued. The sword became a source of fascination, and he practised its use whenever he was left to his own devices. Slowly he ceased to think of the weapon as 'magic' and the armourer part of him took priority over the gullible village lad. He added one more aim to his life's list, that was to reproduce the smith's art that went into the sword's creation but that was after he had dealt with the Duke.

Josef amazed himself at the speed with which his skills developed. He had become a competent statesman, an accomplished scholar, a gentleman and a master of the sword. He could beat almost any of the Fairy at chess, except for Titania, who was, it seemed, something called a Grand Master. When dance sessions were called for there was now a queue of female Fairy offering their services. His singing, although it would not attract a queue, no one would run away either.

Tailors laboured over the creation of a wardrobe such had never been seen before, or since, depending on whose perspective you took. Waistcoats of pure gold and silver decorated with precious stones, well glass really but no one could tell the difference. Coats and cloaks of the richest twills and warmest Wooster. Breeches of such quality that Josef felt guilty wearing them. The clothes were of all the colours of the rainbow and were so soft that Josef thought he would die with the pleasure it gave him to wear them. Finally the Fairy goldsmith arrived with a coronet which looked as if it had been forged from the rays of the sun. Although the crown was not heavy it was the most

lavish design set with a multitude of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires, with golden oak leaves and fleur-de-lis topped with the double headed eagle emblem he had adopted.

At long last Josef is as ready as he will ever be, and it is decided to inform Titania that the training is at an end. The small group talk as they wait in front of the great tree that serves as the queen's palace. The mood is now one of excitement and there is almost a carnival atmosphere in the dell. Almost imperceptibly the crowd quickly swells and the murmur of conversation rises to a point where the three are suddenly conscious of the fact that they are not alone.

"Where did they come from," asked Josef of no one in particular.

"Look out," interrupted Crocus, "here comes queen bee."

"I heard that Crocus," came Titania's voice from behind them, "Is all ready Bluebell," she continued.

"As good as it's going to get Majesty," she replied with more enthusiasm than she was feeling.

"And you my human friend, do you feel that enough has been done to fool the King and his daughter," the queen asked of Josef.

"I think so your Majesty, this sword has made all the difference, it's given me a confidence that I have never felt before."

"Good" she said, "but let me warn you Josef, placing your faith in weapons is ultimately a fools faith, and if the confidence you feel is based on that alone, then it can only lead to disaster," as she turned to the assembled Fairy, she continued, "Very well, let the master plan commence."

Anything else the Queen said would have been drowned out by the cheers of the crowd and it was several minutes before she could restore enough decorum to continue.

"Bring the Emperor's new clothes," Titania commanded at the top of her voice and clapping her hands impatiently.

From the shadow of a Cypress Tree two fairies emerged weighed down with a huge bundle of cloth, the end of which dragged upon the dusty earth.

“Pick that up off of the ground,” Titania shouted, “It will look like rags before it’s worn.”

The two stopped and adjusted the bundle before continuing on their stagger across the clearing. As they approached Josef he thought that it looked like a cloth monster with human legs propelling itself in an attack upon his person. The thought was broken when the inevitable happened, the lead fairy stumbled, throwing the clothes to the ground in front of her. The second fairy, not being able to see, bumped into the first, knocking her to the ground on top of the pile of clothes. The second fairy then tripped over the first, the clothes, followed by the fairy, flew into the air alighting on top of the already prostrate fairy, covering her completely. Titania was for once lost for words and stood watching the scene open mouthed. After a few seconds six or seven of the onlookers sped forward to assist the two unhappy comrades, picking up the garments and extracting the bearers. In the mean time Titania recovered her voice and was busy reprimanding the two in a language Josef could not understand but from the tone he decided that it was possibly better that he did not.

Titania strode forward and dragged the two from the heap of formless heaving cloth. They looked dejected and crestfallen as they sorted the garments, shook the dust from them and gently hung them on convenient branch stubs. When all the clothes had been suitably beaten free of dust Josef was called forward and each item was tried on for size. The majority fitted well, and the few that needed alterations were amended there and then. Josef was then escorted to the Tree Palace where he was formally dressed in all his finery with gold chains, ruby rings and of course his ‘magic’ sword. Finally the crown of his realm was placed upon his head. The result was astounding, gone was the

artisan commoner and in his place a high born monarch with breeding and the bearing of a king, some one who was used to being obeyed without question.

“There’s a sight to behold” rang the dulcet tones of Titania from somewhere behind Josef.

Josef turned to see The Queen with Bluebell and Crocus, surrounded by as many of the village that could fit in the miniature grand hall. Spontaneously the assembled fairy broke into applause and Josef played along by acknowledging the ovation with a regal wave of the hand. “However,” said Josef, “both the King and the Princess are more than familiar with this face, and despite all the finery, I am bound to be recognised immediately.”

“Did either of you two think about that, Bluebell, Crocus,” Titania asked, a little frustrated by this last minute hitch.

“Your Majesty, we thought that humans recognised each other by their clothes, as almost everyone dresses differently,” explained Crocus.

“Well,” fumed Titania, yo had better go and fetch Camellia, *quickly*.”

Crocus ran out of the hall, then flew across the dell and disappeared into the forest.

“Who is Camellia,” asked Josef.

“Camellia, is our expert in disguises, we often have need to disguise ourselves when we must interact with humans or some other race of beings, that you would consider to be legends,” explained Titania, “You would not believe the things that Camellia can do with goose fat and some goat hair, and such, very talented.”

Within a few uneasy minutes they saw four individuals appear out of the forest, Crocus was in the lead with the other three carrying bags, and following behind. They all four flew to the

door and landed with a run into the hall, nearly bumping into their Queen.

“Camellia, has crocus explained what is required,” Titania asked the older of the three.

“Yes Majesty, but I have never worked on a human before,” said Camellia.

“I’m sure you will manage,” encouraged Titania.

The five bags were opened and various jars and materials were extracted from within. Josef was told to sit on a polished log that served as a stool, which meant that his chin was almost resting on his knees, and Camellia and his helpers went to work. First a foul smelling paste was ladled onto his mane of black hair, Josef thought it smelled like his mother’s fish pie after it had lasted six days. Drops were dripped into his eyes, which made them sting and stopped him seeing what else was happening to him, Liquid was painted onto his chin and upper-lip then hogs-hair was affixed to where the liquid had been painted, the same thing happened to his eyebrows and his face started to feel as if it were stiff. Someone started to comb his hair and that certainly was painful, fairy combs are very small and the teeth very fine, so it was hard work. In the end the task broke five combs, and blunted several fairy pairs of scissors.

After what seemed like ages Camellia pronounced that the work was complete.

“Let us see the result,” said Titania as Camellia stepped away, “well done Camellia, you have surpassed yourself.” Titania ordered a mirror to be brought, so that Josef could see the results.

The mirror was produced and placed in front of Josef, who, after blinking away the drops finally focused on the image before him. His first reaction was one of fright, the image was as clear as looking through a window, not like the polished copper plates he had been used to. Josef crept forward and touched the mirror as the image in the mirror did the same, he tapped the glass and

then looked around its back. “What is this, more magic,” he asked, “who is this stranger that mimics my movements?”

“It is just glass with a special coating on the back,” Bluebell tried to explain, “and that stranger is just your image, reflected.”

However the explanation did not totally quell Josef’s slight fear of the device, but at last he managed to look in the mirror, “Is this really me,” he asked. His hair was the colour of straw, and his eyes now shone with a pale blue glow, and on his face there was a fully grown beard that matched his hair, even his skin was a lighter shade.

“Yes it really is you,” assured Titania.

“Then I really am ready,” stated Josef as he drew his wonderful sword from its jewelled scabbard, and pointed it to the image in the mirror.

“Let’s take him outside so that everyone can see him,” said Crocus excitedly.

“Who is this ‘*him*’ you speak of wench,” retorted Josef in a haughty tone, “You will address me by my rightful title, Majesty or Highness or even My Lord Emperor.”

“OK don’t let it go to your head,” interrupted Titania, “you’re still Josef the Armourer.”

“And believe me I have no wish to change,” he answered with a laugh.

“Good, now let’s go outside before Crocus bursts a blood vessel.”

“Right,” Josef, said, as he brushed past the group and back into the perpetual sunshine.

As he stepped out onto the dais there rose a chorus of gasps and cheers from the remainder of the community and again he assumed the part of the Emperor, acknowledging the cheers in a most royal mode.

“Behold, The Emperor of Nowhere,” announced Bluebell.

Again the crowd cheered and cheered until Titania quelled them with a wave of her hand. “Let’s not forget we have a kingdom to

rescue,” she announced. “Are we all ready to march upon the Kingdom of Hambel and take it back from the evil which has overtaken her?”

As one the whole Fairy nation answered with a tumultuous ‘Yes’ and Titania continued.

“Go to your homes and collect whatever you need, we march out of here in one bio-hour” she turned, held her hands up to the sky as if in prayer and shouted “Thanks be to the one and only.”

She paused again for some seconds and pronounced. “The Emperor is ready! Release the time core.”

There was a roar as if from a thousand winds, then light poured into the glen from every direction bleaching out all detail and shadow then it was gone as if someone had extinguished a lamp. Suddenly everything was back to normal, the trees waved their branches again, and the breeze stroked the faces of people as they went about their business and the birdsong replaced the sound of silence. Time was flowing once more and it felt so good to Josef.

An hour later everyone was ready and assembled with his or her luggage strapped to his or her backs in a variety of receptacles. The crowd parted as a golden coach drove into the clearing, on the drive seat sat Crocus and Bluebell dressed in livery.

“Don’t just stand there, get in” called Crocus “you didn’t think you would have to walk did you?”

“No” said Josef as he climbed into the coach as seated himself on the plush seat. “Drive on minions.”

The coach moved off as smoothly as water flowing from a spring and seemed to float along with the merest hint of the ruts beneath the wheels. Within seconds Josef was hanging over the side, examining the mechanism that caused this coach to act like a boat.

“Its called ‘Suspension’ and if you copy it you will be in such trouble, as will we,” Bluebell called back.

Dejected he climbed back up into his seat. However he passed most of the journey by making sketches which he thought were improvements upon the system used by the coach. The remainder of the time he spent trying to imagine just what was happening in the Summer Palace and in what state would he find his true love. Well he would soon find out.

CHAPTER 7

Power Play in the Palace

All was quiet in the Summer Palace, oppressively quiet. There was a solemn mood now that the wedding was so close and although the place was alive with activity with the preparations, no one was putting their heart into the tasks, and no one smiled. The caterer was not doing his best, the royal dressmaker would admit that the royal wedding dress was second rate and although the Great Hall smelled of polish, it was not as clean as it normally was. What was more, nobody cared, even the King didn't notice the dust brushed into the corners of the room. The King had more pressing concerns on his mind, how could he get his daughter out of this marriage and without a full-scale war. The puzzle occupied his mind to such an extent that he did not hear the guard opening the throne room door.

"Your Majesty? Sire.....," Called the guard for the umpteenth time.

"Huh, what?" stammered the King, "What do you want," he snapped, sharper than was meant it to sound.

"Sire the guard on the Northern tower reports another army is taking up position upon the hills above us," reported the guard.

"No not someone else making a bid to capture the kingdom, what more can go wrong," the King exclaimed with more than a hint of anguish in his voice.

By the time the guard realised what was happening the King was disappearing out of the door. Quickly the guard lifted the heavy pikestaff he was carrying and strode after his Lord, "Sire, I don't think they mean us ill, it is said that they fly the flag of friendship."

The King stopped dead in his tracks, "Why didn't you tell me that before."

"I.. " was all the guard could get out before the King disappeared down another corridor and was gone.

The whole palace heard the King knocking on his daughter's bedchamber and the excited message he shouted through the thick oaken door. "Eleanor, come quickly, there is a large army approaching, a friendly army, they may be coming to our aid," he excitedly called.

"I'm coming Father," came the returning voice, "is it Josef," she asked.

The door suddenly flew open to reveal the happy face of his daughter.

"I don't know my Dear, I suppose it could be," said the King, doubtfully. "Come let's go up to the North Tower and see for ourselves," his daughter urged.

The two hurried through the palace and up to the tower. The view was, as always stunning but there high on the hills an army amassed. Long lines of troops dressed in armour, their breastplates and shields reflecting the sunlight in a continuous string of glittering tinsel. For over an hour they stood atop the tower hoping for some sight of the commander of such a great army, but they were disappointed. Just as they were leaving and climbing onto the stair landing, a clattering sound caught their attention. The King turned as a guard picked up something from the floor.

"What is that you have there," asked the King.

"An arrow Sire, it looks to have a message attached to it," replied the guard.

"Bring it here my good fellow," the King commanded. He took the parchment and unrolled it urgently and read to himself.

"Greetings My friend and fellow Monarch. Your plight has reached the far corner of your kingdom and as my army and I were passing your borders, I thought that there might be a

way for us to come to some agreement in regard to a mutual advantage. Prepare to meet with me later today."

"What does it say Father, who is it from," the Princess asked as she took the parchment from her father.

"You know as much as I my dear but it seems we will soon find out. Guard, keep a keen lookout for any movement, and inform me the instant anyone starts in this direction."

"Yes your majesty, the minute I see anything"

It was early afternoon when the word came from the North Tower that a party had set out from the hilltop and started in the direction of the palace. The King was in the throne room, still trying to figure out who it was that had written the message. He was startled when the door burst open to reveal the breathless figure of the guard. In any other situation the King would have insisted upon a reprimand for this breach of protocol but he let it pass.

"Sire, they're on their way", he gasped.

"Thank you guard," he replied, "return to your post and keep us informed."

"Yes Sire" replied the guard and left.

The King walked to the window where there was a reasonable view of the courtyard and some of the distant hills. He almost counted silently to himself, as right on cue the Princess hurled herself into the room.

"Can you see him yet father? Who is he, what does he look like," she asked breathlessly.

"Child, child, all I can see is a small group of figures coming this way and a hoard of solders waiting on the hills in the distance."

The princess paced up and down for almost three minutes before asking “How about now, do you recognise him, is it Josef?”

“Not unless he's discovered a way to make himself into a Prince or a King,” replied the King, who was still at the window, “This man is obviously someone of very high standing my dear. No it's not Josef, I regret to say.”

“But who can it be then?”

“Probably some crony of the Duke's, more intimidation I suppose”, said the King obviously disappointed and crestfallen.

Eleanor actually looked distraught, “Oh it cant be, I can't take much more, I should just give up and accept my fate in good grace and make the best of a bad job, how bad could it be.”

The King turned to his daughter and the pain was obvious, “I am afraid to even guess”.

Eleanor crossed to join her father at the window, she put her arms around him and the King slipped his around her shoulders. They watched the approaching group for some time until they disappeared into the entrance below them Eleanor asked, “But why has he surrounded us like this? Who is he?”

After a silence, few minutes later a servant knocked upon the open door and hurried over to the King, bowing deeply.

“I don't know,” said the King, “but I've a feeling we're about to find out. Speak up girl.”

The Servant straightened from her bow; “Your Majesty there is a Lord outside who demands an audience immediately.”

“Demands,” exclaimed the King and added resignedly, “Bid him welcome and give him access.”

“At once your Majesty”, the servant said as she backed away”.

“Today,” called the King. And the servant left the chamber at a run, “Whoever he is he seems to have authority”, said the King as soon as they were alone.

“The question is who's authority,” added Eleanor.

Her voice was drowned out by the fanfare which heralded the visitor's entry, when the trumpet strains had finally died away the servant reappeared to make the announcement.

"Your Majesty", she called with a quivering voice, "an audience is requested by The Emperor Magnum of the Great Keeble Empire, shall I show him I.....", she never finished as the visitor charged into the room directly to the King.

"Ah King Korbin at last we meet. Yes I know what you thinking, who is this who marches his army into another kingdom and demands to see their King. Well let me put you at your ease, I come in peace on a journey of exploration."

"You travel with a large enough bodyguard for someone who comes in peace," interrupted Eleanor with just a slight edge to her voice, "and just where is this great Keeble Empire anyway," she asked.

"The Keeble Empire, why any body knows the great and powerful Keeble Empire," interjected the King sensing a rebuff. But the attention of the visitor had been taken by the Princesses interruption as he asked, "And who is this beautiful creature, no, don't tell me, this is the Princess Eleanor is it not. I am so pleased to make your acquaintance Princess." Josef dropped to one knee and took the Princess' hand, with which he touched his forehead, "at your service my Lady,"

"Do I know you, my lord?" she questioned.

"I think not but I have certainly heard much of you," the Emperor said finding it difficult to contain a smile.

"From whom may I ask?" she pressed.

"Let me think, Ah yes, there was a lad I met upon the road to the south who painted masterpieces in the air with the pigments of your beauty," '*That was good*' Josef thought to himself.

Eleanor's attitude toward the visitor changed perceptibly as she eagerly volunteered his name, "Josef, was his name Josef?" she asked.

“Yes I think he did go by some common name such as that you speak.”

That did it, this stranger suddenly became a friend and the Princess pressed for more news.

“Oh how is he, is he well, did he give you a message for me,” she asked.

“Yes he is well, and bade me tell you that his love for you is as strong as ever.”

“When was this that you met my Josef, where was he?”

“Some weeks ago, we met upon the road to the south.”

Suddenly things were not right and Eleanor knew it, “This cannot be, he has been gone but a few days. Do you dare to lie to me or maybe you mock this royal person,”

“No, no,” replied Josef knowing that a slip like that would ruin everything, “So much has happened it just seems like months. In reality it must be but five, six days at most, I swear Princess, I tell the truth. I would not mock you for the world, this Josef was a friend to me and I respect him.”

“If only.....,” the Princess sighed wistfully.

“Don’t worry Princess, Your Josef gave me another message for you, he was most insistent that I speak it word for word.”

“What is it,” Eleanor questioned eagerly, all doubts forgotten.

“Let me see,” Josef paused to obtain maximum effect, “how did it go, Oh my memory is failing me.”

“Please try to remember, it is so important that you remember it,” Eleanor cried; almost pleadingly.

“Ah yes, I have it now,” The Emperor replied holding back the giggle that seemed to be bursting in his chest, “I think it was this, ‘Do not give up hope, for I have a cunning plan. Do not submit to any demands but hold fast to the desert rock that is steadfast whilst everything around is in turmoil’ Yes that was your message from the young commoner.”

“Thank you my lord, you do not realise what that message means to me.”

“You think not?” Josef mumbled thinking that Eleanor would not hear but.

“What did you say ?” came the voice of his loved one.

“I was just agreeing that I did not know what the message meant to you.”

As the two talked of messages and feelings of love a shadowy figure slipped unseen into the chamber and concealed himself in the drapes that covered the outside wall of the room. There the figure stood, silently listening to the conversation that ensued. He knew that he must learn the identity of this interloper, his arrival was not a good omen. Another conquering commander could ruin everything at this delicate stage. Was he after the Princess or the kingdom, could he be an ally or an enemy, he needed to know. The conversation was continuing, it was the Emperor’s voice, what was being said?

“It is remarkable to me as one of royal descent how a high born Princess, of great beauty, comes to be drawn to a peasant such as this Josef who has little breeding and such coarse manners.”

Eleanor turned like a whip-top and threw a glare at this Emperor which would have frozen another person on the spot.

Before Eleanor could open her mouth the King interjected, “I would be very careful with your words sir.”

“I mean no offence liege brother,” said Josef who had almost forgotten that the King was in the room, “for I took a liking to the lad myself. I was merely interested how this relationship took root and blossomed.”

“It took root as you put it, because I look beyond the wrappings of a gift to the substance concealed inside,” Eleanor almost spat the words at the Emperor.

“That is all very well Princess, but what of your responsibilities as heir to this royal throne, this jewel in a emerald sea, this land, this kingdom?”

“You do like to talk don't you,” Offered the King

Josef knew that he was over acting and made a mental note to play the role down a little.

“I have learned of late that when an opportunity for happiness presents it's self, you should grasp it with both hands, as it may be that the destiny of all of us may be sealed in ones own contentment,” the Princess offered.

The sound of hand-claps broke the uneasy silence which followed the outburst as the King stepped into the centre of the chamber saying, “Well said my dear”.

“That will be a matter of ‘proof in the pudding’ I think,” answered Josef.

“Think what you like sir,” the Princess said haughtily, “My servant will be along shortly to show you to your quarters.” Eleanor turned on her heels and headed for the door, “Come Father we have civic duties yet to perform.”

The two royal icons left the chamber leaving Josef staring numbly at the wall, he felt stunned and completely confused.

The chamber was now so silent that the figure concealed in the drapes was almost afraid to breathe. He was sure that he would be discovered at any second, he therefore must take the initiative. He decided to reveal himself before someone obtained the upper hand by finding the powerful Duke de Vile skulking around like a common sneak-thief. Silently the Duke slid out of his hiding place, drew himself up to his full height and strode on light feet toward Josef. As strategic cough alerted Josef to the fact that he was no longer alone. Turning quickly with one hand reaching instinctively for his sword he came face to face with the dreaded Duke. Josef managed to stand firm but the sight of the Duke standing there right in front of him made his legs turn to jelly.

“Allow me to introduce myself my Lord, I am the Arch Duke de Vile at your service,” he said with a short bow and the click of his heels.

“And what service exactly do you think you can perform for me,” asked Josef after a deep breath which he hoped this Duke had not noticed.

“I meant no disrespect Sir, I meant it as a offering of friendship.”

“Friendships are earned not offered. Do you think you can earn mine,” replied Josef feeling quite pleased with the remark.

“Possibly Sir, we can win each others friendship,” came the answer as smooth as silk.

The verbal volleys continued for some minutes during which Eleanor returned to the chamber intending to apologise for her attitude earlier. Seeing the two men seemingly engrossed in a conversation and oblivious to her presence Eleanor also decided to hide herself, curious as to what they were talking about, seeing that they had supposedly never before met.

As Josef parried remark for remark with the Duke he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A imperceptible movement of his head improved his view in time to see Eleanor creeping through the door and concealing herself behind the open door. Josef smiled to himself in satisfaction at the situation which now presented itself. The Duke detecting the smile took it for a sneer and reacted accordingly.

“Sneering at my overtures is not the best way to win my friendship my unknown Lord,” de Vile verbalised with what seamed like slime.

This was even better, the Duke was playing right into his hands thought Josef and repositioning himself so as to have his back to the door and his beloved Eleanor produced an appropriate speech “I doubt that there is anything that you do that will warrant my friendship de Vile. Now be gone from my presence, your demeanour offends me.”

The Duke was visibly taken back at this sudden rebuff but managed to hold on to his composure saying “I would not be so hasty in dismissing me if you value your life sir, for this kingdom

will soon be in my power. I am soon to marry the lovely Eleanor and this take this land.”

“You are mistaken Duke, you do not seem to have the power to push a cart.”

“How dare you insult me so, I have a good mind to teach you a lesson.”

“So you are a school teacher now are you, well I suggest you return to your kindergarten, where you can exorcise your power to teach lessons”, retorted Josef with more confidence than he felt.

The Duke, who had begun to walk away in contempt, could not let this last insult go unpunished, stopped, turned towards Josef, drew his sword and lunged forward. Josef, acting as a well-oiled machine drew his own sword and parried the thrust with a well-practised movement. As Joseph spun with the parry he heard a shrill gasp from behind the door. The Duke also heard the sound and was distracted for a fraction of a second, which was all Josef needed to breach his opponent’s guard and draw first blood from a cut on the de Vile’s cheek. The sting of the cut served to focus the Duke’s attention and he jumped back with seething anger burning in his eyes, he had locked his sights on an enemy and would not let go until the kill. With a howl de Vile thrust forward again narrowly missing his adversary’s ear. Josef heard the blade sing past and a chill ran through his body, this was the noise that the King’s solders had called ‘The Music of Death’.

This Duke was circling him, looking for a chink in his defence, Josef knew that a mistake now would mean certain death and what was worse, the kingdom would be lost. All the lessons learned in the woodland village came flooding back to him. As quick as a dart he thrust his sword downward at an angle, the blade passed between de Vile’s legs as he crabbed sideways. The Duke’s legs gripped the silver tong of steel before he

realised what had happened Josef pushed the sword around in its radius toppling the evil conqueror on to his rump. He somehow looked a ridiculous figure sat there trying to regain his legs, sword in hand. The blind fury welled up in the Duke and Josef knew that he had him; no man can fight and win under the spell of the anger fever. Now de Vile was waving his sword wildly, lashing out with all his strength and leaving none of his energy for the regaining of his balance. The black clothed figure staggered around, crossing the room time and again while Josef toyed with him. After a few minutes Josef decided that the fight had gone on long enough, this was no challenge, with the skill of a master swordsman he advanced toward de Vile and with a quick twist of his sword easily and efficiently disarmed him. De Vile's sword slipped from his hand and flew into the air, Josef took his chance and struck out at the airborne weapon with all his strength. The swords clashed with that singing sound that Josef had heard back in the glen, and the Duke's sword shattered into a hundred pieces, that fell like steel rain on the prostrate evil Duke. The Duke had collapsed onto the floor gasping for breath and trying to escape from the shower of metal fragments. Finally escaping the rain of terror he sat on the floor looking up at Josef who had barely broken a sweat.

Purposely and with cold precision Josef placed the tip of his sword at de Vile's throat and stood over him in silence.

"Enough Sir, spare me I submit," stammered the Duke a hand raised in the air and shaking like one of cooks sweet-jellies. In response Josef withdrew the sword and took one step back. "Thank you my Lord, you are truly gracious in victory," de Vile choked as he attempted to regain his composure.

"Get out of my sight before you really feel the heat of my wrath," pronounced Josef.

The Duke needed no second invitation, now on his feet he bowed to Josef, turned and almost ran from the room. Feeling pleased with himself and full of self-confidence he replaced his

sword into its jewelled scabbard and crossed to the window, waiting to see what Eleanor will do.

“Very impressive my Lord,” came a voice from behind him.

Josef turned with feigned surprise, “My Lady, You startled me.”

“Sorry sir, but I like the way you just handled the Duke, he had that coming to him.”

“My apologies My Lady, I did not intend to embarrass your future husband in front of you.”

“Think nothing of it, as I said he had it coming,” Eleanor assured Josef with sincerity.

After a small bow and a shorter pause he asked, “Beg your pardon my Lady but are you sure you want to marry that man.”

“I must, for the sake of peace and my kingdom. It is expected of me.”

“Would your people expect so much of you?”

“No, but I would. It is the only chance of peace and so happiness for our subjects.”

“How can you be so sure that that evil toad will stick to his side of the bargain?”

With a tear in her eye Eleanor’s reply was from the heart, “There are no guarantees, but I believe that he will keep his word. I must believe. I will believe, if I do not what hope is left for any of us.”

“I pray that your faith in human nature does not let you down but I fear that, in a few days this fair kingdom will owe allegiance to a new ruler,” Josef paused to allow his words to sink in, “Why not yield your kingdom to me, for out of the two I would be, by far the lesser evil.”

The offer did not have the effect that was intended

“So that’s your little game is it my Lord? Annexation by stealth,” Eleanor said as she pulled herself away from the Emperor next to whom she had been standing quite close. She had in one act found a saviour and lost him, her mind was again in turmoil.

Josef knew he needed to reassure Eleanor or all would be lost, “Far from it Princess, I have no need to increase my empire by any means. The Great Keeble Empire is great enough already without this puny land; I have responsibilities enough.”

“I will never abandon my people to a strange house, however nice or noble the conqueror,” the Princess said still on the defensive.

“As you wish Princess,” he said trying to be as casual as he could, “but I will say this and no more, by dusk tomorrow this country's fate will be sealed forever.”

Eleanor was almost in tears as she said, “I have had enough of your threats, will you please leave.”

“Leave I will Princess but grant me one boon, and I will not trouble again,” persisted the fake Emperor.

“If it will end this struggle for power, and it is within my sphere of influence, for Josef's sake I owe you that sir. What is it?”

“Meet me tomorrow at dawn in that small room that adjoins the west cloister, you know it do you not?”

The look of astonishment on Eleanor's face was plain and a little shiver ran down her back, “Yes I know it, but how do you know of that room?”

Josef had learned his lines well and answered, “Your young friend told me about it, how you used to meet there in secret before the king found out about your love for him.”

Now the princess surprise turned to cold anger, “I think that Josef tells too much to too many people.”

Again Josef needed to calm that anger and reassured her, “Fear not, he has told no-one but me, the boy needed a confidant. He was very distressed, remember he had recently left the woman he loved and his heart was breaking.”

“Yes I can see that,” she agreed.

Quickly pressing his advantage Josef asked, “You will join me there then?”

“Yes, but be gone now. I wish to be alone.”

A slight smile spread across Josef's face as he turned to leave, "Till tomorrow then."

Eleanor gazed after the stranger for long after he had disappeared, there was just one thought on her mind "Who is that man?" When all was quiet and the footfalls of the Emperor has faded away she seated herself on the window seat and ventured to speak out aloud to herself, "He is so strange, and yet he seems so familiar. Some of his gestures, I can almost predict what he will say by his demeanour. I am sure I have met him before, somewhere, some time, I wish I could remember." As if in a trance she crossed the room to the door behind the large drape. "Shinaé! Shinaé! Can you come in here please," she called and strolled back to the seat by the window.

Within a few breaths the devoted Shinaé appeared through the doorway, a worried look crossed her face when she saw her princess seated by the window. "What ever is the matter Princess?"

"Shinaé, I need to be abroad before dawn tomorrow, please rouse me in time," commanded Eleanor, ignoring her nurse's question.

"What ever for my Lady," she persisted.

"We, have an appointment Shinaé."

"We?" the nurse repeated.

"Yes, we. I need you with me when I meet The Emperor Magna at the morrow's dawn."

"Tut" came the response. Determined to get to the bottom of the current problem the old nurse pressed on, "Seems a strange time to meet someone, especially an emperor. No good will come of this mark my words. Anyone who arranges a meeting before dawn is up to no good."

A smile crossed the princess' lips, "Shinaé, dear Shinaé, sweet kind Shinaé. Shut up!"

Yes Your Highness, sorry highness," Shinaé acted contrite, "I was only saying...."

“Shinaé!”

“Highness?”

“What do you think of him?”

Still not having the faintest clue as to what was happening Shinaé asked, “Think of who?”

“You can be so slow at times Shinaé, the Emperor Magna.”

“I try not to think of him.”

“Seriously I'm asking your opinion,” the Princess scolded.

The nurse thought hard for a few seconds and offered her opinion, “I can't quite figure him out, he's a strange one right enough. Sometimes he's pleasant and friendly and at other times he seems frightening and menacing.”

“Yes I have noticed, she paused before continuing. “Have we ever met him before Shinaé?”

“I don't think so Princess, I am sure I would remember if I ever met a powerful man like the Emperor before. Yet I know what you are getting at, there is something very familiar about him,” she also paused as another thought crossed her mind, “and he seems to know his way around the palace almost by instinct.”

“That's another thing, he asked me to meet him in our secret meeting place but never asked me how he should find it.”

The nurse gasped and asked the princess to confirm what she already knew, “You mean where you used to meet with Josef?”

“Yes. He says that Josef told him about it.”

Shinaé thought for a second and her face lit up, “I think I've figured it out. Do you know what I think, I think he has come here in disguise.”

“Yes!” said the princess quickly hoping for a revelation.

“Yes,” Shinaé repeated, “I think that he has been here before as a spy, to reconnoitre the palace without our knowing.”

Slightly disappointed Eleanor agreed, “You could be right but wouldn't an emperor have someone else to do things like that, in case he got caught I mean.”

“Possibly, but there's something not quite right about him anyway. Maybe he does it for kicks,” Shinaé persisted.

"Anyway we will see what happens in the morn. I must get some rest now or I will look ghastly tomorrow. You may get my night gown now Shinaé and a goblet of warm milk"

The nurse scurried about, going and coming for some quarter part of an hour until finally producing the required goblet of steaming white liquid.

"Shall I disrobe you my lady?"

"No thank you Shinaé, get yourself to bed. Do not forget to rouse me in time."

"I won't Highness, she called over her shoulder, and then added to herself, "But who's going to rouse me!"

The saddened Eleanor took the goblet and crossed again to the window, gazing out into the now darkened courtyard a great sigh struggled from her slight body making it shake from it's depth. Slowly her gaze lifted upward from the camp fires of two armies, to those small points of light which were the heavens, and a tear slowly formed in her eye.

"How is it that when I look upon these stars I feel you are so close to me Josef. It is as if you are right here in this palace." She turned suddenly towards the entrance to the chamber, "Oh how I wish that it were not just my imagination."

Quietly Eleanor, Princess of Hambel, started to hum to herself the strains of a Nursery Song that Shinaé had taught her when she had been no more than a handful of years old. Slowly she crossed from the window to the bed and climbed in. As a after thought she leant over to snub the candle, which Shinaé had placed beside the bed. The young woman snuggled down under the covers whilst the tuneful words of 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' gradually faded away and Eleanor sang herself to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

Deception in the Dark

The Palace was quiet, most of the inhabitants were tucked up in their beds sound asleep. The appointed guards were awake at their posts and chatted to each other between the security calls and changes. The Palace torches glowed lowly and cast soft shadows along the passageways like slim fingers reaching out for the dawn. Each footfall, each movement, echoed like a marble in a drain. The sound of the smallest grit between foot and floor crunched as if timbers crumbled in some far off ship, encountering rocks on an intimate level.

It was therefore surprising that the lone figure dressed in black was not seen, or at least heard, as he crept along the corridors and passageways heading for the throne room. His breathing was almost laboured as he tried to muffle it's sound. As he passed the guard posts the figure held his breath, gasping a minute later when he felt it was safe. Covering his boots were sections of black fleece especially stitched for him by some far off cobbler. At long last he found himself at the door to the throne room, the figure stopped, totally still for over two minutes before venturing to turn the handle. Again, another pause before opening the door and then the merest of pushes cracked the door from the post. There was no light leaking through the crack, which would have alerted any watcher so the black shadow of a man pressed on into the room. A low red glow emanated from around the throne, enough to turn the darkness into twilight. There was enough light to allow the figure to see his way around the room and at first he skirted the dais upon which the royal throne was set by following the audience rail. He moved to the Councillors Chairs, examining them in detail. He sat for a while and seemed to contemplate the throne in deepest thought. No watcher could have spotted him there unless the low red glow had reflected in his eyes, then what a

vision that would have been, enough to send a God fearing person into a blind panic.

Some minutes later the figure stirred and walked slowly over to the throne and as he approached the light grew so that his identity could be seen. Now any watcher could clearly see the Duke de Vile standing by the seat of power. He stopped with his hand on the arm of the ornate seat and a smile crept across his face. The hand ran down the arm to the seat and over the thick soft material, he patted the cushion and the smile broke into a low chuckle. Suddenly he stood back and with a flourish he turned and seated himself upon the throne, clapping his hands he whispered, "It fits". He immediately clasped a hand over his mouth to stifle any sound, but he was clearly too excited.

"All this will be mine soon enough my subjects, there are here, in this kingdom, as many slaves as I could ever need. Today Hamble, tomorrow the world, and maybe even Spain herself," another chuckle escaped from his throat.

His revelry was short lived, as a voice pierced the gloom like a dagger through the heart.

"Something humorous I can share in, De Vile," Came the voice of Josef.

The Duke jumped up from the throne and swung himself down from the dais. His hand was immediately upon the hilt of his replacement sword, though he knew it would do no good to draw it until the adversary could be seen.

"Come back to continue the fight Magna," the Duke called into the darkness.

"Come now Duke, that was all for the benefit of the Princess, I thought you realised that and were going along with it," Josef said as calmly as he could not wanting a rematch at this point.

"What nonsense is this, are you trying to make me look a fool?"

"If you don't realise what's going on here, you need no help from me on that score. I thought you were an intelligent man but

maybe I was mistaken,” retorted Josef, “I’ll bid you goodnight sir.”

“Hold! Show yourself Sir,” the Duke demanded as his eyes strained to see through the inky blackness at the edge of the room. “What is this master plan or what ever idea you have.”

Deciding to reveal himself Josef stepped into the ring of red light that surrounded the throne, “You still don’t see do you,” Josef, acting with supreme self-confidence lodged himself upon the arm of the throne, “Look, the Princess trusts me now, more than she trusts you anyway. She thinks we are enemies and would not expect us to be allies.”

“Is that what we are, Allies,” asked the Duke.

“That’s up to you de Vile,” came the reply.

“I chose my allies with care and I know nothing about you, other than you are a near competent swordsman.”

Josef’s hand hovered above the 'magic' sword at his hip as he asked, “You wish to test my competency again De Vile “

“You would not be so lucky a second time I can assure you,“ prompted de Vile

Josef noted the thinly veiled threat and decided not to go down that road, and so continued in another direction. “If you think you can conquer this Kingdom without my help so be it, I will offer my services to The King,” he said as he disappeared into the darkness.

Immediately the Duke’s demeanour changed, “One moment, did I say that I didn’t want to collaborate with you,” he called and after a short pause added, “I just ask myself what your help will cost me.”

Josef knew that his adversary had taken the bait, ‘*This is like taking coco beans from an infant*’ he thought. “Ah! At last you speak my language. What I require from you are some assurances that will take effect when you rule this fair land.”

“And what might these assurances be,” de Vile asked.

Josef slipped easily into a dramatic routine which had developed in his imagination, “Well for a start”, he said as he quickly crossed to the door, opened it and looked out then returned with a puzzled expression on his face after closing the door once more.

With a look of frustration the Duke asked, “What's the matter now,”

“I thought I heard someone outside”.

“I heard nothing,” dismissed the Duke.

“That doesn't surprise me, you are hardly the most sensitive person I have ever met,” retorted Josef.

“Enough of this rhetoric, just get on with what you were saying will you.”

“Not now, it's not safe.”

“There is not a soul around at this hour,” the Duke almost screamed (in a whispering sort of way).

“That's where you are wrong, again. There is no way I am going to compromise myself at this point. I am alive today because I do not take chances,” concluded Josef almost bursting with the laughter he contained within himself. The Duke was steaming inside, he could almost see his eyes glowing with fury and frustration in the darkness.

Finally the Duke calmed down enough to speak and he spluttered, “So just when will you get around to giving me you terms?”

“At dawn,” Josef dropped in quickly.

That was just too much for the Duke to bear and his next word was almost an explosion. “Dawn! But it's after two now and sun rise is a little after five.”

“What's the matter de Vile worried that you'll lose your beauty sleep?”

“Pah!” spluttered the Duke, “Just tell me where we will meet”.

“I noticed that the East Cloister looks as if no one ever uses it,” Josef suggested, “there is an alcove about half way along. We

meet there at ten cock-crows after dawn. Do you know of it?" de Vile nodded and grunted somewhere in the darkness. "Now go, before we are discovered."

In the pitch of night Josef heard the Duke cross the room and stop close to the door, "You had better not double-cross me My Lord. I have some very original methods of dealing with those who betray me. Be warned," came his parting words followed by the rasp of the hinge and the clack of the door's catch, and he was gone.

"I can be quite inventive myself," Called Josef feeling that his words had been wasted, then added, "Mainly in my imagination." Another great sigh forced it's way up through Josef's chest and almost stuck in his throat before expelling itself into the still air of the chamber. Almost as if in a dream he crossed to where he knew the dais hid in the dark, finding it with his shin he sat down heavily upon it" rich covering of tapestry. "I can just imagine what you will do if this goes wrong, he spoke out loud to himself, "Stop it Josef, fear is your greatest enemy and your imagination is just feeding that fear. Think positively, think of the rewards. You're saving a whole kingdom from a fate worse than death. You will be a hero and Ellen will be so grateful that she will swoon in your presense. The King will grant you any boon you chose and of course you will ask for the hand of the Princess. And everyone will live happily ever after. At this time I'd settle just to live. No nothing will go wrong, Titania is close and she will not allow me to fail. I must get to bed, bed, I can't sleep at a time like this. If I have your love, I could walk on air. I think I'll just sit here quietly until dawn."

CHAPTER 9

Plans and Patriotism

A cold pale glow gradually appeared behind the eastern hills, a grey misty light, the sort that makes you shiver even though you're not cold. No light yet found it's way into the cloister or into the audience chamber where Josef slept upon the dais. There were at least fifteen minutes left before the true dawn and the cock that would wake our hero from his fitful slumber.

Josef had slept uneasily for the last two hours. The periods of sleep had been filled with dream images of almost all possible conclusions to the current situation and he had woken in a cold sweat more than once. Slowly the sun climbed up the far side of the horizon and at the moment when the first weak ray streamed from its upper edge, a cock crowed like an alarm warning the world of another day. Josef awoke with a start, instantly wide-awake, he checked his disguise and adjusted his garb, partly unsheathed his sword and returned it to it's scabbard, then walked briskly out of the room.

The passageways remained dark as Josef strode down them, the dull thump, thump of his footfalls echoing from the walls. As he neared the cloister a light mist hung around his shins hugging the floor like the Earth's own blanket. The air became fresh and sweet smelling, with the perfumes of forest and dew-covered meadow grass. Josef drew in a large lung-full and savoured its flavour. This was the kind of breakfast he enjoyed, better even than the hot oat-cakes that his mother made.

In the little room off the East Cloister there was already activity. In the darkness the door opened and the slim figure of the Princess squeezed through the opening, followed by her faithful nurse and Lady in Waiting. The door closed silently and the figure walked across the room rubbing her upper arms with the

opposing hand, whilst a shiver ran down her back. She stood and stared at the tiny window high in the wall without really seeing it, or the grey sky beyond, and yawned stretching her arms above her head,

“What an unearthly time to request a meeting,” she said beneath her breath and then as she answered her own question said a little louder and now in anger, “I really don’t know why I agreed to his request, I’m the Princess, I don’t need to do these things.”

“Well I did warn you my Lady,” whispered Shinaé

In the distance a cock crowed but went unnoticed by the feminine forms in the room’s shadow. The second crow broke the thought train and registered itself on Eleanor’s mind.

“Well we’re here now so we may as well wait,” she muttered.

A low rustle made the princess jump, as a precaution she slipped behind the drapes, which covered a small door to the garden outside. The cock crowed again just as Josef jumped back as he saw his beloved already in the meeting-place.

“*Good Ellen’s here already,*” he said to himself, “*but she must not see me until de Vile gets here.*”

Again the cock crowed and Josef looked worriedly down the passage for signs of his foe.

“*I just hope she stays hidden or I’m in trouble,*” again he said to himself as that cock made yet another announcement of the day. “*Ah good here he comes now,*” he waited in the doorway until de Vile was upon him and said loudly, “De Vile, so you managed to get out of your cot I see.”

“Just skip the sarcasm and give my your terms before I loose my patience and call my personal guard to you,” de Vile retorted.

“You will need to deal with my troops first and I would not recommend that,” and then in a louder voice, “But let us discuss the occupation of this blighted kingdom. What do *you* intend my friend.”

“I need to hear your terms first ‘*friend*’,” De Vile almost sneered.

“All I ask,” Josef replied, “is a permanent barrack for my army as a staging post for future conquest to the West.”

“Ah so that is your game, now I see your method, you are a man after my own image.”

“I hope not,” Josef whispered but replied to Vile by saying, “We have a deal ?”

“Most certainly and a good deal it is,” the Duke agreed.

The relief almost showed on Josef's face but he managed to keep his mind focused on the role he was playing, “Now tell me, what are your plans and how can my army assist you?”

The Duke's demeanour had also changed and he was almost friendly as he revealed what was in his mind.

“My plan is brilliance it's self, by the time the King and his precious daughter realise what is happening it will be too late and the people themselves will welcome my army as saviours. My first objective will be to marry the Princess, in this way the people will accept me as a part of the royal family.”

As de Vile shared and waxed lyrical over his plans, a movement to his right caught Josef's eye, moving slightly he saw his Princess slip from her hiding place behind the drape. Fearful that de Vile would see her he closed upon his position, placed a hand on the Duke's shoulder and moved him to a position where the Duke was between him and the princess with his back to her hiding place.

Behind the drape the Princess persuaded Shinaé to go and fetch the captain of the guard. The drape moves again as the door opened and then closed behind Shinaé.

“But surely, Josef continued, “as soon as the King or the Princess see that you are taking over they will deal with you, and believe me if I know nothing else I know that the people of this kingdom are solidly behind their King.”

“Ah, but that is just one part of my plan.”

Josef knew he had to draw out more information so encouraged the Duke to elaborate he asked, “Tell me, I am fascinated.”

The Duke was in full flow now as he explained, “All around this kingdom I have covert detachments of my army waiting for the news that the marriage has taken place. That will be the signal for my men to commence the pillage of Hambel in small raids across the land.”

“That's all very well but”,

“I have not finished yet,” snapped de Vile, “At the same time my agents will start to rouse the common people of Hambel to demonstrate against the King, who will be powerless to deal with the situation.”

“But the King will just send his own army to seek out and capture these raiders and the people will support him,” objected the Emperor.

“Yes I have done much thinking about that since last night and I think this is where you come in,” said the Duke thoughtfully.

“If you think I can restrain the Kings Royal Guard forget it, the people would tear my men to pieces.”

“I know that”, said de Vile impatiently, “but if your army was to pose a threat at the borders of Hamble in shall we say three fronts, the King's army would be bound to respond. This would leave my men free to raid whichever village they choose; they would be so vulnerable to me. Do you not appreciate the brilliance of my plan, simple but so cunning.”

Feeling now pleased with his subterfuge Josef replied “Yes I can see the poetry of it. You then walk in and take over the land with no resistance while the people are demoralised.”

De Vile looked at his new ally with muted annoyance.

“You miss the point, both the people and the King will come to me and plead for my help to protect the King's subjects from the raiders. We will be welcomed with open arms.”

“And when the time is right,” Josef let the sentence fade away rather than finish it, leaving the Duke to finish it for him.

“.... I will crush the King and make his daughter my servant and all the good inhabitants of Hamble I will force into slavery. This

Kingdom will be annexed as a summer residence for myself," feeling pleased with his own cunning he closed the statement with a peel of laughter slapping his leg as if he had just heard the funniest jest in the world.

During this tirade of mirth Eleanor took the opportunity to slip silently from their hiding place, and out of the room. As he had been keeping his eye on the drape where his love was hidden, Josef was the only one to see her go. He heaved a sigh of relief at her going, and being out of danger, his job was done, he had led the Duke to condemn himself by his own words. But he needed to get some idea of how much time he had and so asked, "What is your timetable for all of this."

The Duke was in his stride now and immediately gave the information into the hands of his enemy. "Phase one of my plan nears completion for tomorrow I am to marry the Princess." A thought struck him and unfolded in his mind, "You are invited Lord Magna, in fact you shall be my best man, a fitting way to seal our alliance do you not think?"

"I would be most happy to be the best man De Vile," said Josef now playing for time and an opportunity to escape the Duke. "It is settled then," agreed the Duke, pleased with his deal, "I feel you will be a fitting ally. I must say that I quite admire you, no one has had the audacity to challenge me before, you have a fearlessness which is rare in this age."

"Well thank you De Vile, coming from you that is praise indeed," Our Emperor replied feeling almost insulted and flattered at the same time.

Suddenly they were not alone; the passageway outside was filled with the sound of running feet, murmured orders and the sounds of arms clattering against armour. In a flash the Duke reacted and urgently said, "Someone comes, quick before we

are discovered draw you sword and challenge me again as you did yesterday.”

Before Josef had time to get his sword from its scabbard the Royal Guard had burst into the cloister and were heading straight for the two allies. Behind the guard followed Eleanor who had taken command of the detachment.

“Arrest them,” the Princess ordered.

“But my Lady,” objected the captain, “it is the Duke and the Emperor, we have no authority

“You have my authority,” the Princess snapped cutting the captain off in mid-sentence, “Arrest them for plotting to invade Hample and place it's people into slavery.”

“My dear,” pleaded the Duke turning on every charm he possessed, “this is no way to treat your husband to be.”

“You will never be my husband Duke the only marriage there will be in this palace is yours to the executioners axe.”

“There was no plotting taking place here,” pleaded the Duke now worried, “this pompous fool has challenged me to a duel, why you were present when he made the challenge. We were just settling the matter in private, or so we thought.”

“Save your lies De Vile, you can explain your plans to the court. I was present and overheard your schemes.”

The princess spun and addressed Josef while the guard restrained the Duke. “I am really disappointed in you, I thought that if my Josef had befriended you, and trusted you, then I could do the same. There was always something strange about you that I could not fathom,” she turned from him and spat another order to the captain, “Take them away.”

Without hesitation Josef surrendered his sword to the guard who approached him. The look of surprise on the guard's face made Josef smile, which in turn confused the already startled guard. Seeing that this Emperor presented no challenge to his authority the Captain started towards the Duke but unlike his co-conspirator de Vile did not surrender. The Duke in fact

defended himself against the Captain, threatening him with his sword. The Captain took up the challenge and strode in ready to fight. Josef knew that the Captain was no match for the Duke and in vindication it seemed that no sooner had the fight started than it was over with the Captain lying injured on the ground. Like a flash one of the Captains guard jumped over him and attempted to arrest the Duke. If the Captain was no match for de Vile it was almost suicide for a raw recruit to challenge the seasoned warrior. As easily as a farm hand cuts corn the Duke had his sword across the guard's throat.

"Make a move and your friend here dies," shouted the Duke as he moved towards the door. Josef's thoughts were ahead of the Duke and knew that his advisory would possible kill the guard anyway when his usefulness was over, he had to make a move quickly before de Vile could get to the door.

Surprising the guard once more Josef freed himself from his grasp and at the same instant rescued his 'Magic sword' from the guard's custodianship. The startled guard made to move against Josef, but his reactions were far too slow. It seemed that time was standing still around him as Josef dashed across the room toward the Duke, and likewise to those watching, all they perceived was a blur passing between them. As if in a blink of an eye, Josef was behind the Duke and in the same instant had inserted his arm through de Vile's crooked sword arm wrenching it away from the threatened guard. de Vile's mouth dropped almost to the stone floor at this sudden appearance and Josef took full advantage of the surprise attack. The stun effect allowed the guard to escape his captor, but didn't last long enough for Josef to disarm the Duke and the he found himself at the pointed end of the sword instead. Slowly the two circled each other, each knew that the other would be no pushover. Behind them Josef saw the guards make a move to close in on them but at a command from the Princess they retreated. As they circled again he saw the confused expression on Eleanor's

face as she watched the initial stages of what could be a fight to the death.

After what seemed an age of the hypnotic circling Josef's sword suddenly flashed and came down on the Duke's sword with all the power that he could muster. Sparks flew off of the swords as they connected and a shock ran along the Duke's weapon numbing his hands. Josef's sword drew back and cut a circle in the air coming back to its target a fraction of a second later cutting a gash in the Duke's leg. De Vile hardly flinched at the cut; the mark of the battle hardened warrior. A faint red hue spread down the blade as it again cut the air homing in on its victim once more, but this time the Duke parried the blow with his own weapon. Unknown to him the parry had done more damage than the cut to the leg; a crack was forming in the sword's mid-section. The two blades ground against each other as they each tried to pull out of the stalemate. Suddenly the Duke was on the attack and it was his sword that came whistling out of the air. Once more Josef moved like a flash, and the edge cut into the empty space that he had, a tenth of a second before, occupied. de Vile's blade smashed into the stone floor with a sickening dull 'thwack'. Realising that Josef was now behind him the Duke recovered and whirled around, wheeling his sword towards his enemy now in temper. Josef moved with cool precision, standing back his sword met the Duke's weapon, a forearm from its target. There was a crash of steel followed by a tinkling sound, and as the Duke lifted the sword to thrust it at the stationary Josef he froze in mid-lunge. The uppermost two-thirds of the blade lay shimmering on the floor between them. Josef slowly lifted his sword to de Vile's throat and calmly asked. "Do you yield, my Lord Duke?"

De Vile could not believe what had happened for the second time in less than a day, and stood staring at the stub of his weapon for what seemed like minutes, finally nodding silently and dropping the hilt onto the same floor that held the remainder

of the blade. There followed a period of utter silence, no one really knew what to do. After a minute one of the guards shouted out.

“Three cheers for the Emperor”

The tableaux of Josef and the Duke seemed like a statue, neither person daring to move. As the last half-hearted cheer died away the Princess moved across the room to where Josef still held the Duke at the end of his sword.

“I do not know why you have betrayed your partner in this conspiracy but Hamble is grateful to you,” she said.

“I did it” Josef tried to respond, but Eleanor carried on ignoring his attempt to speak. The Princess turned to the guard and issued orders, “Take them away. Instead of a wedding tomorrow we will have a trial, in the mean time lock them up.”

The two were marched from the room without further ceremony, guards surrounding them with swords and pikes hemming them in like a giant collar of spikes. As he left the room Josef looked back to glance at the Princess who had a pained expression on her face, talking to some unseen person. Then the door slammed shut, and view was cut off.

The two were lead away down a myriad of passageways, many of which Josef had never seen before. These must be the Guard-ways’ he mused as they travelled on. Eventually they came to the dungeons and each was locked up in his own cell. They were clean a least but with minimal facilities, a cot, a stool, a jar of fresh water and a bucket. In the wall there was a small window but little light filtered through. Through the window kitchen noises could be heard together with the feint aroma of food, breakfast was being prepared for the court. However this was the closest these prisoners would get to the strip pork, eggs and hot bread which would soon be served. Their feast would consist of gruel, stale bread, water and if they were really lucky, may get the fat back from some boar or sheep. The cell smelled

of damp and sweat but Josef was used to that from the hut where he grew up. He considered himself luckier than the Duke who had possibly grown up in palatial surroundings and would not be used to such rough surroundings. He wondered what his Princess was doing now as he heard the bolt and key being operated behind him.

In fact the princess was on her own in her chamber and at that exact moment was actually thinking of him, Josef that is, not the Emperor.

“Blast you Josef if only you were here you would know what to do,” she called out loud, “What a pickle. We have imprisoned two heads of state in our dungeons and both of their armies are at the gates, and could attack at any hour.” Wringing her hands she rose from the bed and approached the window. Gazing out into the early morning light she tried to make out the encamped armies of the two statesmen. She could make out the camp of the Duke and the sentries moving against the skyline but although she could see the Emperor’s camp there was little or no movement. “If ever we needed God’s help it’s now,” she said as her gaze lifted towards heaven, “If you can hear me, tell me what I should do,” she shouted, “Can’t you just send Josef back to me, I’ve been such a fool. If only I could turn back time, I would handle things so differently. I didn’t know when I was well off. Oh how I’ve ruined everything.”

The tears rolled down her face and choked her words and it was some seconds before she recommenced the prayer. “Are you really there at all? Or are you just another fable like the fairies. I’ve never seen you, heard you or felt your presence. How do I know you exist at all. Or were you there and have abandoned us, gone to pastures new to create new civilisations that will be ruined by people who are too proud for their own good. God if you are there prove yourself for me, show me your power, come to our aid and let us believe in you again.”

Believe in you, how I want to believe in you,
Bring your blessings to your people
Let them see you and your power
Let us see those armies cower,
Let us to celebrate our belief in you.

CHAPTER 10

Cunning in Court

She didn't remember falling into that deep sleep, all she could remember was the tears and an unfinished prayer. The prayer unfinished because her thoughts had wandered back to her one true love. How she had admonished herself for letting him go, where was her duty now? Josef would have known what to do, he would have had some plan. She remembered blaming God for everything that had happened, including the loss of Josef, but it was her who had sent him away, nothing to do with any God. The tears started to well up inside her again, so before they commenced to flood once more she stretched and slipped out of her bed, her feet finding the lambs wool slippers below the bed. She grabbed the gown from the chair and slipped it around her shoulders. Crossing the chamber to the window she threw open the shutters letting the golden rays of the early morning sun stream into the shaded room. It was a beautiful morning and everything should have been right with the world but it wasn't.

There was a court case to attend and she knew that things could turn out badly if the wrong decision was made. With two armies on the doorstep and their leaders locked up in the dungeon below, who knew what could happen. What orders had the two commanders left should anything go wrong? As these thoughts flowed through her mind and the sun warmed her face she fell into a dream-like state that was shattered by her maid knocking upon the door.

"Come your Majesty you're going to be late if you don't start moving and get dressed," the maid scolded.

"It's one of the privileges of being who I am, it's every one else who's early, never me who's late," the Princes answered, "but you are right we have a court to preside over, let's go!"

In the Royal Courts of Justice everyone had taken their places really early. The public gallery to the left, was packed, with still others waiting outside to take the places of those forced to relinquish their seats for commitment or convenience. The courtiers gallery to the right was also full to capacity with almost everyone engaged in fervent discussion on matters of state and the law. The Public gallery was also a-buzz but with the heady business of wager and scandal. In the centre of the court, where tables had been set out were the Law-Lords, the distinguished group of learned men who's job it was to interpret the laws made by the King. If the King made a law banning the hunting of dogs, the Law-Lords then interpreted how it affected society, not less how it affected the dogs. In this case their skills were to be tested to the extreme and the Lords were huddled in groups, of threes and fours, across the court.

"The law is clear," said one, "it is illegal to leave unattended armies on Hamblen soil."

"But," said the eldest and wisest, "It is we who have caused the armies to be unattended, depriving the regiments of their commander-in-chief."

"So what is the offence," asked another, "and what is the penalty?"

"Are they in a Royal Park?"

"What, is that a Parking offence?" scoffed the first Lord. So the discussions continued unabated during the wait for the King and Princess Eleanor.

In the Royal Apartments the King and his daughter were finishing their breakfast of quail's eggs, fresh baked bread and a locally produced preserve made with whole oranges. They did not hurry and savoured every mouth-full as if it were their last. The breakfast had the air of a last supper rather than a Royal feast.

"Father, what do you think will happen to us?"

“Daughter, I have no idea, all we can do is hold fast to our principles of right and honour, then trust in our God to protect our kingdom and our people.”

“That’s easier to say than to do, Father. I have little faith in any god at this time.”

My Princess, Hambel has existed for over a thousand years, we have faced many catastrophes and always we have survived. Nine hundred and twenty years ago did our ancestors not face the end of our dynasty when the population was divided down the middle. The dwarf members of our society felt segregated and abused by those who they called the giants, us. There resulted a civil war, which continued on for three generations, it threatened the very fabric of our kingdom. Do we not live in peace now with the dwarfs located in their own enclaves, but still under our protection and law?”

“Father I don’t need a history lesson, I need Josef right now.”

“I know my child, I have been praying for his return myself, between us we could have found a solution I am sure.”

“Save your words Father, prayer does not work, believe me I have tried.”

“Prayer or no, we have to make a start, come on let’s get this over with.”

In the courtroom the general murmur of sound was pierced by the searing sound of twenty horns blasting out the fanfare which heralded the arrival of the royal party. The doors behind the dais opened serenely as the King and his daughter sweep in, both looking as though they had not a worry in the world. They took their place on the two thrones situated on the dais and signalled for the proceeds to commence. The presence of the King and the Princess completed the colourful scene. Dressed in their ceremonial robes of blue and gold, the light reflected from the crowns caught the banners of red, blue, silver and gold that hung behind the dais, this created the most wondrous scene that the kingdom had seen for many a year. There were by now a

number of palace guards placed around the room, two each side of the dais and one at each end of the galleries. Each door was guarded by two burly uniformed men and one guard stood on his own in the centre of the court. As the royal party seated itself each guard adopted the alert pose of the watchman.

The King came to his feet as silence fell over the court, "Lords of the Law how stand you?"

Immediately the Law Lords were on their feet to answer as one voice, "We stand for right and justice and the law."

The Law-Lords resumed their seats as the King spoke again, this time addressing himself to the courtiers. "Lords of the realm, how stand you?"

As by one mind the Lords stood and in perfect unison spoke the words, "We stand for the state, the constitution and the King."

"Please be seated my lords, By the Royal right of justice this court is in session. Let justice be done. Bring in the prisoners."

The guard, who had been standing in the only unoccupied space in the room, sprang into action. A trapdoor in the floor revealed a lever, which the guard operated, immediately the unoccupied floor next to the lever folded itself downwards and disappeared. There was a whirring and a clicking noise as a vertical wall grew around the hole, as soon as the wall was seven feet high it stopped and almost simultaneously the heads of Josef and de Vile appeared above it. The heads were followed by their shoulders and then their chests and then stopped. The Duke looked sullen and crestfallen as he surveyed the scene before him. There was a general murmur of disapproval as the two appeared and the atmosphere was one of fear and loathing towards them. The Emperor seemed unconcerned and at first glance seemed more interested in the mechanism by which they had appeared in the court. This fact was not lost on the Princes and she quietly noted this in her mind, her Josef was also taken by machines, indeed had designed and built this very mechanism.

The King interrupted the murmurs by banging on the floor of the dais with his sceptre, "My Lord Chief Justice please continue with this trial," he commanded.

A stately figure appeared from within the rows of Lords and approached the dock where the prisoners were held.

"Prisoners at the court, do you wish to throw your self on the mercy of the law or do you deny the charges brought against you by the Princess Royal? How do you so plead?"

The Duke spoke first with a confidence he obviously did not feel, "I plead my innocence as a true friend of the Kingdom of Hamble. I was acting in the best interests of the state in a matter of National Security."

"He is trying to pull the wool over our eyes once again," shouted the Princes Eleanor, her father attempting to re-seat her by placing a downward pressure on her arm.

"Calm yourself my dear this is a court of law, and justice will be done and be seen to me done," said the King softly, "Continue my Lord."

"Thank you Your Majesty," The Chief Justice said as he turned to Josef, "My Lord Magna, what say you, are you innocent of these charges against you or do you call for mercy?"

"I plead my innocence sire but reserve my defence," stated Josef.

"In that case," continued the Chief Justice, "as is the tradition, the crown will unfold its case and allow the accused the privilege of the last word. The Princess Royal brings the case for the crown and is the principle witness. Princess please give the court your evidence."

The Princes Eleanor rose from her throne and made her way across the court to the dock where she turned to address the assembled lords.

"My Lords of the Law and Lords of the State, the evidence I give is of my own knowledge. As I was waiting to keep an

appointment I overheard a discussion and the making of an alliance between the two accused before this court.” She turned to indicate the two prisoners but her eye caught Josef’s and something deep inside her stirred as she recognised something from the past. “The alliance in question was a devious plan to annex this kingdom . First by the marriage to this princess and then by deception and the cruel suffering of our subjects. Our army was to be employed on a false threat whilst the Duke de Vile, acting as the great liberator seized control of the land. The result was the subjection and slavery of subjects and nobles alike. That is my evidence my Lords.”

The Princess paused for a second before retracing her steps to resume her seat by her Father’s side. Should she have told the court about the actions of the mysterious emperor in helping the palace guard to subdue the Duke, for without him things would have surely turned out differently? There again, he was conspiring against the crown. This was a real dilemma for the Princess but, she thought, she could always make a plea for leniency at the end of this trial, after all it was her prerogative as Princess Royal. Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of the Lord Chief Justice.

“Do the Lords have any questions ?”

Immediately one of the elderly Lords rose unsteadily to his feet and leaned heavily on the wooden balustrade before him.

“Lord Moore, the court recognises you Sir,” the Chief Justice called.

“Your Highness, who was the instigator of this devilish plan?”

Ellen came to her feet as gracefully as she could, to answer, “It was The Duke de Vile who obviously had the plan, this other stranger was merely assisting for some unfathomable reason.”

“Assisting, you say Your Highness, was he assisting by choice or by being forced into it by this black hearted villain, the Duke?” persisted Lord Moore.

This was a wise old man indeed the Princess thought, '*he has verbalised my very thoughts*', "I know not my Lord, " the Princess continued, "I can only say that without this stranger's help we may not have been here today to bring the Duke to justice."

Again the Lord Chief Justice called to the court, "Are there any more questions from the Lords?"

After a short pause and just as the Chief Justice was about to call an end to the Lords question time, another voice broke the heavy, uneasy silence.

"I have a question My Lord."

"Lord Quince, the court recognises you Sir."

"One thing I need to get straight in this poor addled brain of mine," Lord Quince asked, a shrewd look on his noble face, "How did your Highness come to be in that chamber, as far as I know it has not been used for many a long year, other than for a meeting place for the assignments of young courtiers? Who was this appointment with, if I may be so bold as to ask," There was a twinkle in Lord Quince's eye and a the hint of a kindly smile on his face. He had in his day been a powerful man both in physical stature and in political sway, and much of that power remained with him and gave him a presence that few did not feel.

"Lord Quince, it was no assignation that drew me to that place but an invitation from the Emperor who stands accused before you this day," her Highness announced to the court. "I assumed that he wished to make some sort of deal for himself when it came to divide our kingdom."

"Thank you Majesty," answered Quince, "but it does make me wonder how the three of you ended up in that chamber at the right time to thwart de Vile's plan, if that is, it was not orchestrated in some way."

After a short pause the Chief Justice invited more questions and there being no other Lord wishing to ask one he continued. "No more questions? In that case, Duke de Vile, do you wish to examine the witness?"

The Duke sneered at the Princess as if the look were a threat, "I Most certainly I do," he spat.

"Please proceed", replied the Lord Chief Justice, as if he had just ridden his mouth of a bitter taste.

The Duke rose from his chair, forgetting for one moment that he was manacled. He stumble but regained his balance within half a second, however the damage to his pride was done as a murmur of giggles ran around the court. "Princess," continued the red-faced Duke, "Have I not treated you with the utmost courtesy and respect?"

Her Highness was forced to concede a, "Yes"

"...and have I not pledged my all to you, including my throne " the Duke continued as if he had not heard the Princess' reply.

"Yes, but", came the reply cut short by the Duke as he pressed on with his speech.

"But, you are too ready to believe what others say about me, including that young pup of a commoner who says he loves you."

"He does love me," snapped the Princess.

"Do you think he would have left you if he truly loved you," asked the Duke once again with the sneer upon his face.

The Duke's co-accused looked decidedly disturbed after the last remark and but for Eleanor's reply, may have jumped up and seized the Duke.

"He left for the noblest of reasons," she shouted, the pain in her heart being reflected by the pain in her voice.

De Ville sensed that he had this girl on the defensive and so pressed on, "He left because he could not face me, for he knew that I would realise *his* ambition to become King".

"That's not true," shouted Eleanor.

“It is the total truth and it is because he poisoned your mind against me before he went. Why, now I think about it, this traitorous dog”, he swung and pointed at Josef, “could be in on the plot. Did he not say that he spent some time with your precious pet gutter rat”.

The Princess rose from her throne and faced the court. She had obviously regained her composure and her hatred of de Ville, “This is but a tissue of lies and is serving to divert this court from the matter to hand. The fact remains that I caught him plotting to overthrow the lawful Monarch of this realm.”

“With respect your Majesty,” interjected the Lord Chief Justice, “it is the Duke's word against yours. Although we all know you to be a truthful and honourable member of the Royal House, that alone bears no weight in this court. Were there no witnesses at all Majesty?”

“Sadly not my Lord”, she confessed.

Being unable to contain himself any longer Josef rose and interrupted his true love, “There was one witness my Lord.”

“And just who was this phantom witness,” asked the Chief Justice.

“Why it was I My lord.”

This Emperor's statement immediately caused a ripple in the calm surroundings of the court and a murmur sped across the scene.

The Lord Chief Justice looked puzzled for a moment, “May I remind you that it is you who is the accused here as well as this Duke. How can you be a witness against your self, are you turning King's Evidence.”

“Is there anything in your law that says an accused man can not give evidence against himself?”

The Justice searched for a look of knowledge from his Law Lords and found none, “Well ... I don't think there is, but it is the right of every accused to remain silent in case it is used against them,” he gave one more appealing look toward the King, this time and seeing nothing but a shrug continued, “but it is most

irregular, I need to consult my scrolls of the law. May I have a ten minute recess Your Majesty?”

The King rose from his throne and agreed to the recess saying, “I think we could all do with some fresh air sirs, we will reconvene in a half hour. The Court is released.”

As one body, with the exception of the Duke, the court rose while the King and his daughter left the hall. Immediately the noise level rose to almost a crescendo as the proceedings were discussed between each other. People in the public enclosure raced out to tell their friends outside not lucky enough to get a seat, what had happened. The Law Lords conferred in animated conversations. Messengers raced to and fro with papers and scrolls. Laughter echoed from corners and people stared at the two accused whilst exchanging comments to each other. The Lord Chief Justice was seen hurrying from the court, his two servants following carrying piles of paper and books. Outside an enterprising vendor had set up a stall opposite the entrance, selling wine and fruit juice, whilst another in the side street loudly announced that his pies and tarts were oven fresh. The whole proceedings had suddenly taken on the air of a carnival. In what seemed like a very short time the trumpet sounded summoning the court back from it’s recess and as everyone either wanted to preserve the seat that they already had or gain one with a better view, there was a scrabble to get back inside as quickly as possible.

The King announced that the court was again in session and the Chief Justice resumed from the point where the recess was requested.

“It seems that our law allows an accused person who can, upon a full confession, become a Witness for the Crown at the consent of the King or Queen”.

“In that case My Lord, please regard me as a witness for the crown.”

The Princess conferred with her father and the King nodded his agreement, leaving it to his daughter to speak the consent. “Very well, but I think something is amiss here.”

A surprised look flashed across Josef’s face, followed by a moment of panic, it was too soon for his true identity to be revealed to the court, or the world. He quickly pulled himself together and responded, “Why do you say this your Majesty?”

Princes Ellen sat without expression for a long moment before answering, “First you join the fight and help to capture the Duke de Vile and now you give evidence against yourself, and then you ask why I feel that something is not right.”

Our Emperor drew himself up to his full height, mustering as much imperial dignity as he could, he flicked the back of his hand at the Royals and in his best dismissing tone replied, “In time you will understand my Lady.”

This Princes Royal was not used to being dismissed in such a manner and the hackles at the back of her neck bristled, “As you wish. Now my Lord Emperor, were you and the Duke de Vile, plotting to capture and occupy this kingdom?”

“We were,” Josef answered emphatically.

Immediately the courtroom exploded with murmurs and gasps from the officials and Law Lords.

“Silence” shouted the Lord Chancellor, “bring this court to order or I will have it cleared,” the Chancellor noticed his King and quickly added, “with your permission Sire.”

Slowly the court resumed it’s demeanour, the Princess waited until a total silence fell over them, so complete was the silence that someone shushed a caterpillar that was crunching its way through a salad leaf at the buffet table. In the silence there echoed a rustle of fine fabric and a delicate cough jarred everyone’s ear. Immediately the court’s attention was focused once more on Her Royal Highness.

“Would you tell the court what you and the Duke were planning to do?”

“Certainly. We,” started Josef but was interrupted before more than a few syllables were uttered.

“What are you some kind of moron,” screamed the Duke.

Whilst Josef continued de Vile crouched on his stool shaking his head in disbelief.

“We were planning to create a situation whereby the King and the people of Hamble would invite the Duke's army to takeover the government.”

“How was this to be effected,” asked the Princess.

Josef leaned forward slightly and looked directly at his love, “Scattered around the country there are small bands of the Duke's men who will raid and pillage the country villages, whilst I was to make a mock attack with my army in several places along your borders. That was to keep your army busy in the defence of the realm.”

“Thank you my Lord, that is exactly what I overheard, and precisely what is in my deposition.” Ellenor looked pleased with her questioning and returned to her seat next to her father.

Meantime the Duke's face had turned a pale green, almost in tears, he shouted at his ally, “You fool.”

Totally ignoring the outburst the Lord Chancellor turned to de Vile and asked, “Duke de Vile do you have anything to add to this confession of your co-conspirator?”

The Duke took less than a second to think before replying in a fanatical tone, “Only that I will hunt you down and kill you by the most foul method I can devise, I will have the dogs half eat you and then I will have you bathe in Lemon Juice, you snake in the grass.....”

By this time two of the royal guard had restrained the Duke and forced him to his knees.

“Enough,” commanded the Chancellor, “or I will have the guards gag you.” Turning towards their Majesties and then to the Law lords he asked, “Has the court heard enough?”

The sounds of assent rumbled around the courtroom accompanied by nods and shaking fists mixed in with verbal accusations, aimed at the Duke. There was no need for a jury, the people had made their opinion known and there was little doubt of the verdict.

“Then all that is left to do is to consider our verdict and if you are found guilty, sentence you for your crimes against this state.”

The court rose as one body and many started for the exits, the background murmur began to rise again, as a lone voice rose above it. The court had almost forgotten this Emperor from a distant land but that was not in Josef’s plan.

It was Josef’s voice that commanded the attention “One moment my Lord Chief Justice,” he almost ordered, “have you not forgotten something?”

The Lord Chief Justice, who had already started to pack his papers and scrolls into a velvet bag, was taken back and stuttered, “ I, I don’t think so.”

Josef persisted, “Did I not say earlier that I would reserve my defence?”

“Did you Sir, I really can’t bring it to mind and in any case I think we have heard enough, we do have other matters to attend to you know, busy, busy, busy.”

Always one for fair play, and particularly for someone who had turned Kings Evidence the Chancellor stepped in to Josef’s aid, “Yes you did my Lord, I am sorry, it seems to have slipped the court’s mind in our haste to close the case. Pray proceed.”

As he had turned King’s witness, Josef was released from the dock and allowed to approach the assembled Lords, then proceeded to speak. “Your Majesties, My Lords, friends. Yes friends. It may seem strange that I should call you my friends after admitting that I have plotted against you.”

“A little bit of grovelling never hurts does it,” commented de Vile sneeringly.

With one steely look from Josef, de Vile was quickly silenced whilst he continued his address to the court.

“Well there was no plot against you from this quarter, oh yes, there most certainly was on this Duke's part. My part in this great conspiracy does not actually exist. The great army I brought with me, the one that you thought you saw outside your gates does not exist either.

“What trickery is this?”, interrupted the King.

“Please you Majesty, go to the window and see for your self.” The King seemed hesitant to move from his throne, “Please sire check for the army at your gate.”

Hesitantly the King rose and crossed to the window, glanced out and turned away. A second later he stopped and did a double take, and looked again. Turning again to the court he announced, “He' speaks the truth, they were there not an hour ago, how could a whole army leave in so short a time?”

“And so silently too, your Majesty. I heard nothing”, added the Chancellor.

“The Great Empire of Keeble is also a figment of both our imaginations, and not only that but in truth, I am no Emperor either.”

“I suspected that he was an impostor from the beginning,” shrugged the Princess.

“Really Dear?” added the King sarcastically. “Not that I will probably understand but what's going on here, but who exactly are you?”

“I am someone who could not leave his beloved country in the hands of an evil tyrant like the Duke de Vile here.”

“You are the scum-bag I first thou.....,” the Duke's comments were muffled by a meaty hand of one royal guard.

Whilst Josef continued, he quickly stripped away the disguise he had assumed for so long, “And someone who could not leave his beloved Princess in the hands of a cruel and evil warlord.”

The dawn of recognition broke over the Princess’ face as she slowly saw her beloved Josef appear in front of her eyes, “Josef,” she cried.

A minute later the truth also dawned upon the King and the greeting came by way of a delayed reaction, “My boy, are we glad to see you, you wouldn’t believe what’s been going on here since you left.”

“Actually, I would Sire,” stated Josef.

“Just one moment, I'm confused,” stated the Lord Chancellor

“Aren’t we all,” answered the King, and added, “but who cares! I hope you are going to marry him this time !

“Father!” the Princess shouted.

“Never mind 'Father', I want a Son-in-law who is good, honest, decent and brave. Besides one who plays a mean game of chess, and I think I have the ideal candidate in mind.”

Ellen suddenly flew across the hall and threw her arms around Josef’s neck,

“I’m so proud of you my darling. You have proved yourself worthy of this

kingdom and the responsibilities she imposes.”

“So,” asked the King, “when are you going to marry the lad.”

“Father !” the Princess repeated.

“Never mind going all coy on us, said her father, “you know that’s what you want.”

“Well,” asked Ellen, “Are you going to ask me, or not. Of course if you have changed your mind you can always join the Duke in the cells.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Er...”

“Properly,” warned Ellen, “I want a proper proposal.

Josef, in the centre of the Hall of Justice, dropped to one knee and took his love's hand in his and said, “My Princess, will you

do me the honour of accepting my proposal of marriage and becoming my wife?

Ellen had a wicked look on her face and asked, "Do you have my father's permission."

"Stop teasing the lad, of course he has my permission, just get on with it and say yes.

"Well," said Josef, "This is a limited offer."

Ellen smiled and retorted, "Cheek! for that I've half a mind to say no."

"Will you marry me, for love of Hambel, announced Josef.

"Yes! I will."

"Thank goodness for that," said the King, "I thought we were going to be here all day. All you need to do now is, just do it."

"Yes, come on Josef, we have a great deal of planning to do," said Ellen as she grabbed his arm.

"Just a minute," said the King, "Planning, what planning? All the arrangements are made, the guests are all here, the bishop arrived from Arness yesterday and is really grumpy at having had a wasted journey. Why even the banquet is ready and waiting for us in the great hall. What's to plan?"

"It does seem a shame to waste the opportunity," said the Princess, "how do you feel about it Josef ?

"Well it's a bit sudden but why not, let's do it, there is a certain ironic justice about taking the Duke's place."

The King clapped his hands with joy, "At last." he shouted, "My Lords, Ladies and all our friends you are all invited to my daughters wedding."

The whole court erupted into cheers and people in the public gallery started dancing for joy, not just because of their invitation to a wedding but because their favourite couple were back together again. Of course there was also the fact that the kingdom was safe and the Duke was now on his way to his incarceration. So much of the joy was from pure relief.

“Sire, I have a few friends that I would like to invite to my wedding,” asked Josef

“By all means my boy, but will they make it in time,” the King asked.

“I somehow think they might,” answered Josef, “time is something they know a lot about.”

“Very well then,” the King said, they only have an hour, the wedding will commence at mid-day.” The King turned to the assembled populace and announced, “I proclaim that there will be a public holiday for two days. Let all Hamble rejoice!

Chapter 11

Happiness in Hamble

The Banqueting Hall of the Summer Palace had already been prepared for a wedding, but the attitudes of the servants and suppliers had changed. Now those finishing touches that make or break a function were being quickly added. The dust in the corners was efficiently removed and the mediocre dishes of food were being replaced by the very best fare available. New flowers were freshly picked and brought to replace the cheap wild ones that had adorned the hall. Table coverings were added to the bare wood tables and the second rate rough wine was replaced by the very best vintage. In short, happiness had returned.

Titania had sent a messenger to Josef's village and had invited them to their son's wedding two days before Josef had left the glen. His parents had arrived at the Fairy army's camp the night before and had been accommodated in a luxurious tent over night along with all of Josef's villagers that wished to attend. Titania was at that very moment ordering the Duke's army to surrender before they were locked in a time bubble, which she demonstrated with great effect, they immediately followed her orders and laid down their arms. Most of them were now starting the long trek home whilst others had decided that they liked Hamble and had decided to stay.

Despite all his previous bravado, Josef is feeling nervous, he has doubts about being, by marriage, a royal personage, What would his life be like, would he be able to cope, would there be any time to spend in simple pleasures, or to spend with his wife? All of these questions and more were charging through his mind as he paced up and down the Banqueting Hall. Suddenly Josef is startled by a familiar voice from behind him.

"Is there anything we can do to help," asks Bluebell.

"Eh, Oh it's you two. Why do you ask, I thought you knew everything," asked Josef.

"We do," answered Titania, "but it's only manners to ask."

Unknown to Josef his future father-in-law had entered from the kitchen entrance behind the three.

"Yeh."said Bluebell, "it makes people nervous when we just do things."

"You make me nervous when you don't do anything," said Josef.

Both fairies replied in unison, "We've noticed."

"Well if you want to, you could,"

"OK no problem,"said Bluebell as she started to walk away.

"You could at least have the decency to wait until I've finished speaking," Josef called after her.

"Save your breath,"advised Titania , "By the way get ready for a shock." Titania also walked off following Bluebell.

"What?" said Josef.

Just then the Chancellor, who had been standing behind Josef tapped him on the shoulder.

"Ah!" exclaimed Josef in shock, "What is it my Lord Chancellor?"

"Sir," said the Chancellor, "His Majesty would like to speak to you."

"Of course, where is he?" responded Josef.

"At the the dais Sir."

"Ah, yes, I didn't notice," said Josef as he started towards his King. On way he encountered Titania and Bluebell coming in the opposite direction, as they passed he said, "I suppose you thought that was funny."

"No, that's not the.....," was as far as Titania got before Josef was out of earshot.

Josef arrived at the dais and bowed to the King, who wore a very serious expression, "Sire, you wanted to speak to me."

King asked Josef to sit on the steps of the dais and then joined him as he said, "Yes my boy," as he placed a fatherly arm over Josef's shoulder, "I have been doing some thinking. I am not sure how to put this to you. You see, I have just realised that you are a commoner, I never gave it a thought earlier, you have always seemed like part of the family. Anyhow," the King continued, "I am afraid that it would be unseemly for the Princess to marry a commoner, we can't break with tradition so easily you know."

Josef was crest-fallen, he felt total devastation, after everything he had been through over the past week or so, '*week? It seems like months*', he thought. After everything, was his love to be snatched away at the very last moment? Through the lump in his throat he said, "I, ... I see."

"So," said the King, "you see, the Princess can not possibly marry Josef the Armour's Squire. I am so sorry my boy."

"It's OK, I never thought of myself as worthy to marry the Princess, that's one of the reasons that I left the the palace in the first place. I will tell everyone to go home and then, I'll leave, for good this time."

"What !" said the King , "You are not going anywhere."

"As you wish Sire," said Josef, whilst immediately planning to steal away at the first opportunity.

"My boy, kneel before me," ordered the King, who now had a wicked smile on his face, as if a joke were just about to be revealed.

Josef did as his Majesty had ordered, wondering why this was happening, '*Does he want me to swear allegiance again*' he wondered, not really seeing the obvious.

Seeing the look on Josef's face the King continued, "If the Princess can not marry a commoner then we must make you into a nobleman. Josef, give me loan of that wonderful sword of yours."

Josef drew the sword from its scabbard, and the two palace guards who had been watching everything, instinctively started to react, their sword hands grabbing their own swords. However it only took a wave from their Lord to cancel out their action, and return them to their positions.

“But ... how ...,” stammered Josef.

“Why don't you just shut up and let His Majesty get on with it,” came the voice of Bluebell who had been watching from very close at hand.

Josef looked to his right to see Bluebell standing waiting there, “Was this what you meant,” he asked.

Behind Bluebell, Titania just nodded, in a very self-satisfied way. The King called his Chamberlain and the other Lords to witness and continued, “Let it be here known, before these Knights and kins-persons, that in reward for services to the crown, above and beyond the call of duty and without heed for personal safety, a Knighthood and Baronetcy is granted as a boon.” The King, using Josef's sword touches each shoulder with the weapon, “By King and country, I dub thee Sir Josef, First Baron of Keeble. May he live forever.”

During the time it took to knight Josef, the hall had almost filled with palace workers and Lords, and as the King pronounced, Arise Sir Josef of Keeble,” the assembled mass of people and fairies, broke into a spontaneous cheer, which seemed to continue for minutes.

As the cheering at last died away and gave way to happy chatter, Josef asked the king, “Sire ?.”

“Yes my boy, or should I say, Yes my *Lord*,”

“Where is Keeble, Josef asked.

The King smiled and told Josef, “It's where ever you want it to be my boy, I mean my Lord.”

“You mean, like an imaginary place.”

“Oh no, you chose a county of this kingdom, and I will rename it and give it to

you as a wedding gift,” answered the King.

“I ... I don't know what to say, Sire.”

“That makes a change,” ventured Bluebell.

“Why don't you say 'Thank you Sire', I will try to make your daughter very,very happy, suggested His Royal Majesty.”

Josef took a deep breath and started to form his answer, “Thank you Sire,”

OK, enough,” the King said holding up his right hand, “let's get this Marriage out of the way, I'm hungry and we have all this food to eat; *after* the Marriage ceremony,” he said looking at Bluebell who was eating something. “Chancellor call everyone to order and let's get on with it.”

The Chancellor struck the floor with his staff three times and shouted, “My Lords... Please be in attendance for the Royal Marriage.

“That's includes you now ...,” said Bluebell as she elbowed Josef in the thigh.

The Chancellor continued “Ladies, Great Noblemen, Gentlemen and of course, Fairy Folk. Please be upstanding for the entrance of Her Royal Majesty the Princess Royal.”

As if by some unspoken cue, the great ornate doors at the far end of the Great hall, opened silently, revealing Her Highness, dressed in a gown that flickered with a million colours and seemed to flow like the water of a mountain stream. There was a glow about the Princess that seemed other-worldly, that actually illuminated the arch of the doorway. From high up in the minstrels gallery music started to leak into the air, not the usual mix of fiddle and harp and drum, but a music that sounded like a thousand pan-pipes carried on the summer breeze.

The vision of the Princess started forward as if floating on air, and behind her, holding a train of pure shot-silk flew six fairies, all dressed in the same multicoloured material that made up Ellen's gown. From her head dropped a gossamer veil that

looked as if it were made of pure spun gold, and keeping it in place around her head was a garland of forest flowers. It was easy for Josef to guess the origin of his love's wedding gown, and he thanked, for once, the way those new friends lived backwards and were always prepared for what happened next. The music continued to drift around the hall and Josef heard it gradually change into a song he recognised, one that Ellen had often sung after their night in the corn-field so many years ago. The strains of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, floated down from the gallery, making Josef look up to where the musicians were playing. He nodded as he saw that the human musicians had been replaced by fairy musicians.

After what seemed like a lifetime Ellen arrived at Josef's side, he turned and smiled at his bride, but something over his shoulder caught his eye. Sat on the front row next to Dophan was his parents. Josef waved an acknowledgement to them, and thought to himself, *'This is the happiest day of my entire life, I have here everyone that I love in one place.'*

Josef was brought out of his thoughts by the Chancellor who announced, "Let the ceremony commence."

Suddenly Josef was aware that standing in front of him was now the Bishop, who commenced, "Is there any person here, noble or common who objects to this union?" There being not one objection objection, the Bishop cleared his throat and said, "To continue. Do you both solemnly promise to be faithful to each other for as long as thee both shall live, stay true to the Crown of Hambel and serve it's people until ye both shall die?"

Ellen and Josef looked at each other and answered as if they were one, "We do."

"Do you both promise to each look after the other, defending both the person and the crown, providing for the others needs above the needs of self?"

"We do!"

“Then In the name God, the church and the state and kingdom of Hambel, I pronounce you one, under heaven, and man and wife under the law. God save the King, and bless this union.”

The hall exploded with cheers and applause, as Titania took off from her seat and flew to a position above the Bishop. She held up her hands and waited for silence to descend upon the hall, from somewhere she produced a scroll and proceeded to read,

*“At last dear folk, we reach the end of our tale,
The marriage, we know, can not fail,
We've had tears and drama, action and laughter,
And now as they say 'they live happily ever after'.*

*Our job is done and so farewell,
As we return to fairy dell,
As you travel through the woods, do not
look our way,
For if you find us, a forfeit we will have to pay.*

*Join with us in song now, to celebrate,
And we all hope it leaves you, well feeling,
well, just great.”*

The End?

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