

Royal Wedding



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Royal Wedding – Peregrine Rap

“Ooh, gosh, where on earth are we ? What time is it ? Who am I ? What the hell did we have to drink last night ?”

Hmm, Wally reflected, the royal wedding wasn't exactly getting off to the best possible start this morning. Admittedly, as attendant to Prince Peregrine, well known for his capacity as an upper-class dimwit whose major achievement in life to date had been to transform an assignment to join the navy into a drunken booze cruise, Wally had seen a few shambolic and dangerously violent weddings in his time. The last one had supposedly seen the second daughter of the King of Fizzland marrying the only son of the Duke of Wizomia, though nobody could really recall if the marrying bit had actually happened by the end of it or not. It had been less like a royal wedding and more like a cross between the Last Supper, a pitch invasion, and all the failed auditions for the Kingdom Next Door's Got Talent. The official wedding painting seemed to be a training picture for special forces. Still, it was business as usual at the sort of weddings Peregrine and Wally tended to go to.

What made this one different was that it hadn't even started yet but you knew things were going badly already when the bridegroom was asking questions about where he was, who he was and what he'd been getting drunk on last night. It didn't help much that he had woken up outside the palace gates, face-first in a gutter full of his own spewed up budgie curry (don't ask). Nor that he looked less like the heir to the throne and more like someone who was sleeping rough because he couldn't pay the rent on his own cardboard box.

That's right though – Prince Peregrine was supposed to be getting married that day. It was testament to the overwhelming power of love that the virtually brain-dead, irresponsible idiot who was Prince Peregrine Maltravers, heir to the throne of the Kingdom Next Door, had indeed fallen in love with the Fairy Princess Caroline. He had met her while cruising the local oceans for pirates (and a good time), and had stayed sober long enough to agree to marry her. It proved even more the ability of love to achieve things beyond what should have been possible that Caroline, a sensible and pretty girl with the magic powers which went with being a Fairy, felt much the same way and really wanted to marry him.

Caroline had even managed to reform him to an extent. Peregrine no longer went chasing girls just because they were pretty. This was, all in all, quite an achievement for Caroline. Fair enough, he and Wally still consumed enough alcohol each day to float a couple of battleships but it wasn't as if Peregrine's mental capacity was so great as for most people to notice much difference anyway. People had to realise that just because you had access to magic, it didn't mean you could just do anything anyhow.

Whatever, Caroline wasn't there right now – she would presumably be inside the palace with the King and Queen, getting all ready for the wedding ceremony in the Royal Cathedral next door, and the sumptuous feast which would be the reception afterwards. As his brain slowly started functioning again, it occurred to Wally that one of the main questions all those people would be asking right now would be what had happened to Prince Peregrine ?

All of which meant they had a major problem.

Palace security was pretty tight when something like a royal wedding was meant to be going ahead. You couldn't just walk in the door unless you had the paperwork showing you were meant to be there. The only people for whom any sort of exception might be made were people who were clearly meant to be there like heirs to the throne and royal attendants.

So far so good. The major problem element was that none of the security guards were going to recognize a couple of bozos who had spent the last few hours asleep in the public street with their heads covered in vomit, vaguely recognizable as having once upon a time been budgie curry (or possibly a parrot kebab – this was still the 1600s so nobody was going to be bothering with a DNA analysis at this point, remember). What was clear was that Peregrine's stag night had been quite a memorable event. Or at least, it would have been if everybody there hadn't been too drunk to remember which way gravity worked by the end of it.

"Waah !" Peregrine and Wally screamed together as they looked at each other for the first time since waking up. Each looked like a zombie who'd just come back from the dead mainly because the next world had deemed them too ugly and scary to stay there any longer.

Having recovered from the initial shock, Wally filled Peregrine in on a few, critical facts, such as his what his name was, that he was supposed to be next in line to rule this country, and that he was supposed to be getting married today. Even Peregrine was able to realise that this made things a shade difficult.

"As you'll maybe remember," Wally spelled out, "We sure as hell won't get past the main gate without being cleaned up. However, we haven't got anywhere to get cleaned up until we reach the royal quarters inside the palace grounds. So we can't solve one problem until we've solved the other but we have to solve the other before we can solve the first one."

"Couldn't Caroline wave us in with a magic spell ?" asked Peregrine in a fairly impressive bit of free-thinking for someone whose IQ was suspected of being in single figures only.

“She probably could,” Wally responded, trying to remove a glob of solidified curry vom from his right ear, “But she’s in there as well so it’s another solution we can’t use without getting into the palace grounds first.”

In the days before mobile phones, getting messages that quickly to people was not very easy. Plus, Fairy Princess Caroline was well known for her easy-going approach regarding Prince Peregrine’s exciting behaviour (she thought it was a laugh, really) but even she might like to see her future husband turn up for the wedding looking more like a bridegroom and less like the contents of the toilet bucket outside the local chip shop.

This was a bit of a pity because if mobile phones had existed and they had been able to call Caroline and her magic wand to the rescue, it might have avoided the lunatic break-in plan which Peregrine and Wally felt forced to try out instead.

“Hey ! You ! This is the royal palace and it’s a special event today ! You can’t do something like that !”

The couple of guards at what was known as Gate J of the palace complex were not pleased by what they saw. Some waster was standing a few feet down the wall, reaching into the mass of goodness knows what which somehow constituted his breeches. It just got worse from them as he pulled out the part of his body necessary for him to have a wee up the wall.

In actual fact, this was Peregrine. None of the guards recognized him for a moment but Gate J was a fairly minor entrance and only patrolled by three guards. Peregrine and Wally had watched until one of them disappeared to go to the loo for five minutes and then Peregrine had gone up to the wall, a few feet away from the guardhouse. He was banking on the guards being too distracted by what he was doing for them to stop Wally taking the next, critical action.

On the other side of the wall from the guardhouse, about the same distance away, the wall was overshadowed by a magic oak tree. Ultimately, it grew up within the palace grounds, but a few branches hung over the wall over the outside where Peregrine and Wally were. However, the branches were too high up for anyone to be able to reach.

Among its other, magic capabilities, the tree was surprisingly elastic. What this meant was that if you pulled a branch downwards, it would spring back upwards, much like a catapult.

So it was, that as the two, horrified guards rushed towards where Peregrine stood, weeing his name up the wall, Wally rushed into the doorframe of the guardhouse and grabbed a spare pike. He then sprinted over to where the magic oak stood over the wall

and reached up with the pike, looping it over a sturdy branch and pulling it down to where he stood.

Seeing Wally taking his planned action, Peregrine turned around and assaulted the closing guards with a jet of foul-smelling urine.

The guards backed up in horror, long enough for Peregrine to finish the necessary and pack his privates back into his breeches without being arrested for being a total ned. To keep the guards at a sufficient distance, he looked over his shoulder and shouted at them, "Hey, guys ? Is that a girl with no clothes on asking if you're free on Saturday evening ?"

Predictably enough, the two guards whirled around for a moment, before realising that Peregrine was talking complete rubbish but in that short moment, he rushed over to the nearest guard and booted him as hard as he could up the bum. This sent the unfortunate guard flying into his colleague and the two of them tumbled together into a nearby rose bush. Peregrine ran as quickly as he could towards Wally who was holding down the branch for as long as he could.

Peregrine joined him and Wally released the pressure on the branch. The magic oak catapulted the two of them high into the air and over the wall.

"Nice work !" grinned Peregrine to his faithful attendant as they flew through the air.

"Thanks," Wally started to mention before realising that while they had successfully flown over the oak tree itself, they were heading towards a huge building which looked kind of like the main palace, and they seemed to lack any way of avoiding it.

"We may have a new problem," he gasped to Peregrine.

"Yeah," Peregrine agreed as he looked around. "They don't seem to have a bar up here."

"I don't believe this !" the King shrieked to his wife and his soon-to-be daughter-in-law, together with various royal staff. "That useless moron we call a son can't even attend his own wedding without disgracing my kingdom !"

"Well," said the Queen, who had always had a soft spot for "Her Little Perry", much to her husband's chagrin, "that's not strictly true. I mean, he's only disgraced the kingdom by virtue of not turning up. He hasn't actually done anything bad while being here !"

Amazingly enough, this didn't seem to make the King feel a whole lot better. He wished he could whack the Queen almost as hard as he wished he could whack Peregrine

right now but he figured this wouldn't do much to improve things. Instead he turned on Caroline with his following outburst:

"I thought you could do magic or something ! Why can't you let us know where your future husband has got to ?"

Caroline took a sharp breath. She was getting rather fed up explaining to almost every human she met why it was that magic didn't simply mean you could do anything humans couldn't. After all, if that were true, no human would ever win the lottery, would they ? Besides, even she was starting to get a bit concerned that the royal wedding was supposed to begin in about thirty minutes and nobody at all seemed to know where Peregrine (or Wally, for that matter) actually was.

The King decided it was time to face up to what everyone knew was likely but nobody so far had dared to say in front of him.

"All right. I'm going to order the Royal Guard, the local police and every bar owner within ten miles of here to find him. I just want to know one thing – where is Prince Peregrine ?"

It was precisely at this point that there was a huge thump against the tall, parade window which stood next to the King's throne in the palace hall. Everybody jumped as what looked like two zombies, dressed in torn clothes for an evening out but encrusted in old curry and kebabs, smacked into the top of the window. The taller one proceeded to throw up what looked like half a beer before they both slid down the glass, trailing something revolting above them. Caroline smiled in relief as they both came to a halt in the balcony overlooking the Royal Cathedral.

"I think the one who threw up just then was Peregrine !" she remarked brightly.

Overall, the wedding ceremony perhaps could have been even more chaotic but it was still pretty exciting in the end. It certainly didn't start off too well in all honesty. There had been something of a security crackdown by the Royal Guard, following a bizarre incident around Gate J where two guards had been assaulted by some vagrant who had promptly disappeared with a friend into space by all accounts. Nobody had yet found the two vagrants involved but there were a few people who noted that Peregrine and Wally were playing it uncharacteristically quietly on the subject. Also, the actual incident had been more or less round about the point in time when they had splatted into the window of the palace hall.

Peregrine and Wally had been otherwise engaged meanwhile anyhow. Using a couple of bottles of some chemical normally used to unblock the drains, they had finally got the crud cleaned off their faces and become recognizable again. This was quite a relief

for Caroline in particular who hadn't really been looking to spending her wedding night with what had looked like a cross between a partying zombie and a chip shop manager who had recently died with his face in his frying pan. The fact that it had also been pretty hard to tell the difference between which pile of walking vomit was meant to be the one she was going to marry (Peregrine) and which was the best man (Wally) was also a worry as she didn't want to get the wrong one by accident when they all got into the Royal Cathedral.

Having cleaned all the rubbish off their faces and otherwise washed themselves more or less clean, the next job for Peregrine and Wally had been to rush off to the local charity shop to get something they could actually wear for the wedding. Unfortunately, the planned outfits now looked too much like the cloths which would have been used to mop up a school canteen after a serious fit of food poisoning at the annual Christmas party. The King would only allow them out of sight with close supervision by the Royal Guard but the local charity shop was no more than five minutes down the road so while they looked a bit cheap (Wally's shoes were of different colours while Peregrine's breeches were neon pink but at least they more or less fitted) at least they were dressed and present at the Cathedral only an hour or so late. Given how the day had started, this was a reasonable achievement.

The wedding was taking place in the Royal Cathedral of the Kingdom Next Door and not anywhere in the Fairy Kingdom which was Caroline's original home, not because of any particular disrespect for the tradition that the bride's family would host a wedding but because the Fairy Kingdom was located in the clouds above. Getting all the guests from the groom's side up there in the days before anyone invented air travel, budget or otherwise, was going to be tricky, and by agreeing simply that the Kingdom Next Door would host it, it spared the unpleasant discussion which would have been inspired by most Fairies being convinced that humans were a bunch of drunken wasters. This obviously didn't apply to Caroline herself but unfortunately, the behaviour of the bridegroom and best man so far hadn't exactly done a great deal to give the other Fairy guests a very new impression.

Nonetheless, Peregrine still wasn't a bad person. Nor did he have a problem with getting married in the Royal Cathedral. He was glad that according to the Church itself, you didn't need to be that bright to believe in God and that their own teachings said that it didn't matter if you were a stupid layabout, often too drunk to string more than two, logical thoughts together at once, you could still be forgiven and saved. He was nice enough to appreciate that if you tried not to hold anything against others, then most people wouldn't hold too much against you (quite what the King made of all this was open to question but he was seriously annoyed). What would have helped might have been if Peregrine had realised that a little more respect for religious services would help them flow a bit more smoothly. But you couldn't have everything.

Fairy Princess Caroline walked up the main aisle looking stunningly beautiful. She wore a charming dress which let her wings extend behind her without overshadowing the rest of the cut, which was otherwise traditional and yet sensational.

Her father, walking by her side, reflected that it was thus a slight pity that the bridegroom and best man, up at the altar ahead, looked as though they'd just failed an audition to be the original Batman and Robin owing to colour-blindness but that was humans for you. At least they'd somehow got to the ceremony at all and were able to stand upright. Even if the whole thing was an hour late.

The King and Queen of the Kingdom Next Door stood at the side of the altar and watched as the bride progressed up the aisle. Admittedly, she did look like a wonderful daughter-in-law whom they were about to get. What the King wondered, however, was just how even Peregrine could make a mess of this.

He was about to find out.

Strangely enough, the initial ceremony progressed without too many hiccups. Peregrine was doing what Caroline had told him to do, which was essentially nothing other than to sing along when they played a hymn, sit down when everyone else did, and stand up when everyone else did. These were instructions which even Peregrine and Wally could pretty much follow.

Or so you would have imagined.

Things started going off the record with a combination of Peregrine's lack of respect for religious institutions and the fact that he and Wally noticed a large bottle full of Communion wine at the side of the altar.

"Why's that here?" Peregrine whispered to Wally. "I thought nobody started boozing until we got to the reception."

"Dunno," responded Wally. He was perhaps marginally smarter than Peregrine although given that the average ham sandwich was smarter than Peregrine, this was no great achievement. Even so, he didn't work out that the wine bottle had been left over by mistake by the Arch Bishop after the last service involving a Communion. Peregrine and Wally would actually go to Church if they could get up on Sunday morning without being too drunk, hungover or otherwise wasted following Saturday night. However, this meant most dedicated atheists tended to attend more frequently than they did so neither was very familiar with Church procedures.

The Arch Bishop was busy reciting some complicated passage to the assembled masses so it didn't look like they'd be needed for a couple of minutes.

"Let's have a little tippie each," suggested Peregrine in his best, upper-class idiot accent.

"Might as well," Wally agreed.

A couple of minutes later, they were still next to the altar, each of them on their fourth "little tippie" and feeling quite pleased with themselves. Caroline was looking daggers at them, or at least she would have liked to have done so, only the Arch Bishop was in the way. Overweight individual that he was.

The Arch Bishop himself was moving into a slightly more critical passage than the one Peregrine and Wally had bailed out on at this point, reading from his notes, "Do you, Prince Peregrine Maltravers, Heir to the Throne of the Kingdom Next Door, take Fairy Princess Caroline to be your loving wife and future queen?"

A loud burp followed from somewhere next to the altar. This was followed by a horrified silence from across the expanse of the Cathedral as all present waited for Peregrine's response.

With nothing other than the burp ensuing, the Arch Bishop turned around, glared at Peregrine and asked him testily, "Well, do you?"

Peregrine looked up from his glass and asked in blank surprise, "Do I what?"

"Do you take Fairy Princess Caroline to be your loving wife and future queen?" asked the exasperated Arch Bishop.

"Well, of course I do!" grinned Peregrine, looking at the Arch Bishop as if he had the IQ of a donkey's butt. "Why on earth do you think I'm here?"

It was at this point that the Queen, usually a bit of a brainless attachment to the proceedings and quite likely the source from where Peregrine had inherited much of his brainlessness, for once managed to save the day. Or at least delay the complete catastrophe which was soon to follow.

She strode over to Peregrine, grasped his arm and gently but firmly ordered into his ear, "Look, dear, I think it's just part of the Church ceremony. Just say, "I do", and it'll all move on as it should, OK?"

Noting that Caroline was starting look less as though she wanted to hold him tight in her loving embrace so much as she wanted to strangle him to death with his own armpit hair, Peregrine figured it might be time to start playing along. He remarked quickly to the Arch Bishop, "I do", figuring that someone would tell him what had been going on a bit later anyway.

Wally came over at this point and gave him the ring he was meant to present to Caroline.

“Cheers,” said Peregrine. “Can you remind which finger I’m meant to put this on again ? Hope it’s not this one,” he giggled, jokingly giving Wally the middle finger.

“No !” said Wally in horror. “It’s for Caroline, remember ? You’ve just married her officially.”

“Oh yeah,” Peregrine remarked distractedly. “Sorry.”

He turned round, stuck the ring on Caroline’s first finger by mistake, and gave her a big kiss to show her how much he loved her.

“Go Peregrine ! Wooh-hooh ! You are the man !” chanted his rowdier friends among those attending the ceremony.

Caroline was impressed that so far, despite all the screw-ups occasioned by her now husband and his best man, she had still managed to get married, which was quite impressive. If she could just stop Peregrine snogging her at the front of the Royal Cathedral before the King called in the Royal Guard, she might even be able to have the whole wedding ceremony completed which would be little short of a miracle at this rate. Nonetheless, they were in a place of religious wonders so anything was possible.

Hence she somehow managed to detach herself temporarily and re-positioned the ring on her third finger. Unfortunately, it was a pretty, gold and diamond ring but it did have the ability to reflect the strong sunlight which was coming in through the Cathedral windows at this juncture. A beam of hot light was instantly projected through one of the candles alight at the side of the altar where the Fairy royal family was standing, and set fire to Caroline’s mum’s dress. If nothing else, she now inarguably had the hottest boobs in the Cathedral, even if not for quite the right reasons.

The Arch Bishop looked on in horror as the Royal Guard charged up the aisle and threw buckets of water over all the Fairies they could see. He had taken some persuasion to run the wedding service of Prince Peregrine but he had never imagined it could get this bad. This was less like a Church service and more like a pitch invasion. He turned to the organist and yelled, “Cut to the final hymn ! Fast ! Let’s just get this over with – once they all get out of here to the reception, it’s not our problem any more !”

They weren’t actually that far from the end at this point. Besides, the Fairies weren’t familiar enough with standard Church procedures to realise that a small amount of the service had been deliberately skipped. Especially those who had been a bit too much on fire to be overly concerned about it.

The only issue now was that the final hymn was a triumphant march of praise with wording along the lines of, "Glory ! Glory ! Glory to our great Creator," which was fairly neutral on trickier elements of which religion people followed (Fairies and humans could be problematic that way if it got too detailed) and yet quite a good finale for a royal wedding. It also had the same tune as the fan song for the local football team.

Peregrine and Wally for once were paying attention to the fact that there was a hymn going on. They also noted that they had forgotten to pick up hymn books on their way in.

"That's weird," remarked Peregrine to his best man. "Why are they playing the KND United anthem ? I didn't think it was a Church hymn."

"Hard to say," Wally agreed, "but at least it solves the problem of how we can join in without having a hymn book to tell us the words."

"Good point," noted Peregrine.

Hence things were just settling down a little bit after the transformation of Caroline's mum's front into a used barbecue, with the Fairies and humans joining in to sing a remarkably happy, loud and joyful song of praise to conclude the ceremony. When everyone else paused for breath, however, the Cathedral reverberated to Peregrine and Wally singing,

"Go, KND United Go !

Get another brilliant, winning goal !

Bring our scoreboard right the way up,

Make sure that it's us who win the cup !"

As the organist stopped at this point too, another look of horrified silence filled the Cathedral. Indeed, there hadn't been quite such a look of combined horror across so many faces in the Kingdom Next Door since about fifteen years ago when KND United had managed lose the regional cup by something like eighteen goals to nil.

All the same, somehow Peregrine and Caroline had become husband and wife, Caroline's mother was still alive, they'd reached the end of the service (even if they'd taken the odd shortcut to get there) and much of it had pretty much gone all right. If you knew Peregrine well enough, you could hardly have expected much more. Granted, it had been a bit, well, colourful, in places but maybe they could all now just settle down and enjoy the reception.

So Caroline thought as she strode to the front. As the new second in line to the throne (technically anyway), she thanked the Arch Bishop for a lovely service and invited

all the aristocracy and other guests to join them all in the domed tent erected in the palace grounds for the feast to follow.

After all, she thought, the ceremony might have been a bit of a mess in places, but it wasn't as if the reception could get any worse.

The forthcoming events just showed that like the King, even she still had a bit to learn where her beloved Peregrine was concerned.

This was annoying. Caroline couldn't work out where the hell Peregrine had got to now but sitting up here, at the top table, with her parents, his parents, Wally, and most of the aristocracy from the Kingdom Next Door and her own homeland, you'd think her new husband would have the decency to be sitting next to her. Even worse, thanks to Wally persuading the King and the Lord Viscount, the nobleman responsible for running the reception, that everything was all right, nobody seemed to care and they were just getting on with running the party, starting with the entertainments.

She had never felt like quite such a pratt in her life. Sitting up there without her beloved husband and no idea where he'd got to, she must look like a completely clueless addition to the royal family. Wally had come over to reassure her that it all would make sense in a couple of minutes when all would be revealed. She had felt like caustically reminding him that this was her wedding, not the Kingdom Next Door's Got Talent, but she rather liked Wally and didn't want to insult him. Besides, it wasn't as if Peregrine had any performance talent, was it ?

Suddenly, she froze in horror. No, she reassured herself, he wouldn't be, he couldn't be. Surely not even Peregrine could attempt to be part of the entertainment. He had once written her a poem to show his undying love and what it had really demonstrated was that Prince Peregrine Maltravers was the worst poet who had ever existed. He would write total rubbish just to make things rhyme, and his idea of a poem which had a consistent idea to it was non-existent.

No, she thought, and looked up at the stage, where presently a quartet of string players was entralling the gathered assembly with a moving adagio performance. Surely even Peregrine wouldn't go up there and read one of his dreadful poems, she wondered.

Of course he wouldn't. When it came to making an impression, Peregrine could always horrify better than anyone else imagined.

The string quartet completed the adagio and the Lord Viscount directed them off to the stage door. There was a brief pause in the performances as a couple of drums took to

the stage at the back, together with two cornet players. They parked themselves in front of the curved screens which ensured that whatever was played on the stage would be projected across all the audience. In the days before projection speakers, this was quite effective. The question was, what was the act which would be coming up ?

All of a sudden, the lights dimmed for a moment, and a series of lanterns, some bathed in blue, green and red, were projected at cross-angles onto the stage. The drums started up a loud, consistent, thumping beat, and the cornets blasted out a cheesy theme which you would usually hear in the sort of disco bar where the front door would be blocked by people who had already fallen over.

Ten seconds in, half the audience nearly went blind as Peregrine bounded onto the stage among the beams of a bright yellow lamp, his neon pink breeches flashing straight into the eyes of the guests sitting at the front twenty tables.

He started to dance badly and rap.

“Hey, Everyone, I know you’re here for a good time,

And that’s why I’ve written you this brilliant rhyme !”

He began.

“I know you’ve had enough of the old string movement.

So that’s why I’ve come up with a massive improvement !

Say Peregrine Rap !

It is not crap !

Put your hands in your pants and your elbows in the air,

And party like a chicken who just doesn’t care !”

Granted, most of this didn’t really seem to mean anything much at all, but, as Wally noted, you could actually quite enjoy it if you made the effort. Even Caroline had managed to overcome her previous inhibitions and reflected that at least Peregrine was clearly making an effort to contribute positively to the wedding. Now she took a huge drink of something unsuitable, and settled down to forget the embarrassment and just enjoy Peregrine for who he was and what he was doing.

Most of the rest of the top table was in something which could be described more as a state of shock.

Peregrine had just got back to what turned out to be the chorus.

“Say Peregrine Rap !”

"Peregrine Rap !" responded all the upper-class dimwits who were Peregrine's mates and drinking buddies.

"It is not crap !"

"It is not crap !" they chanted back joyfully.

It should be remembered at this point that not only was the quality of the lyrics unlikely to win any awards but that Peregrine and his friends were rapping away in what would later come to be recognized as a rather posh accent. Although Peregrine might otherwise have been recognized for a considerably earlier contribution to rapping than most performers of a later, west of the Atlantic background, the combination of the sheer awfulness of his rap and his performance was likely what caused rap to disappear from cultural awareness for close to another three hundred years after this.

Still, it wasn't as if nobody at the top table, other than Wally and Caroline, was able to enjoy the event. Predictably enough, the Queen was inclined to overlook some of the more glaring bits of awfulness (though even she had to admit the pink breeches could have been improved), and was nodding her head along to the beat.

"Ooh," she remarked to the King, "isn't it wonderful how much our little Perry has improved himself recently ? He joined the navy, he's married that lovely Fairy girl, and now he's become a musician !"

The King looked at his wife with a look of horrified disbelief on his face. It would probably be easier to work out the origins of the universe than to answer the question, who was stupider, the woman he had married or the son they had had together ? Peregrine's joining the navy, as far as he could tell, had meant little more than that the military was now paying for Peregrine and Wallys' annual booze cruise. All right, so the King had to admit he quite liked Caroline too, though he wasn't so sure about the other Fairies. He hoped she would be able to transform her husband from an upper-class twit into a credible heir to the throne though she would clearly have her work cut out, going by what was happening on the stage right now. The King looked down to where Peregrine was presently thrusting his groin back and forth towards the audience and chanting some dire lyric along the lines of, "Say Wooh-hooh-hooh ! It's good for you !"

At this juncture, Peregrine proceeded to twirl around and fart loudly at the audience.

"Oops !" he rapped, a sheepish grin on his face. "That wasn't entirely meant !"

Hope it doesn't wreck the whole smell of the tent !"

"Honestly !" the King snarled. "There's about as much chance of that bozo becoming a proper musician as there is of me being a male stripper !"

“Really, dear ?” replied the Queen, a delighted grin on her face. “I can’t wait for your act now – this is going to be a fabulous evening !”

The King felt he could do little more than simply bury his face in his hands for the moment as the next iteration of the chorus blasted across the tent.

“Say Peregrine Rap !

It is not crap !”

At least he’s right on something, the King mused. It wasn’t crap. On a scale of good to bad, this was about five hundred miles north of crap. It was sheer garbage.

Meanwhile Peregrine finally demonstrated at least an intention to say something meaningful with his rap. He moved into what had been intended as a love song devoted to Caroline but effectively started off sounding more like an elephant with constipation, as the backing group moved into a slightly slower rap beat and a more romantic tone.

“I want to dedicate this bit of the song to the beautiful Fairy,

Whose total loveliness persuaded me to get married !”

This being the 1600s it was not someone with an American gangster style but a Crown Prince with an exceptionally posh accent, and already kind of drunk, performing the rap. As a result, the last two lines actually rhymed a little better than might be thought. All the same, it was still some shockingly bad poetry.

“I can see she’s absolutely gorgeous even though I’m slightly short-sighted,

And I love her even more than KND United !

She’s even more important to me than getting totally drunk.

I want to be her loving Crown Prince and her gorgeous hunk !”

The King wanted to cry. If anyone made a cultural comparison between the Kingdom Next Door and pretty much any other realm, chances were his domain was going to look marginally behind the last caveman painting anyone had discovered. When it came to places like England, it seemed that other poets like some guy called Shakespeare certainly weren’t going to be immediately worried about the competition from the Kingdom Next Door at this rate.

Nonetheless, it went on, and as usual with Peregrine, it just got worse.

“But it’s not just her prettiness which is the only really great thing,

She helps me to think, so I can become a really great King.

She's going to be with me, so I can do a truly good job,

And not just spend all my life as a curry-spewing drunk yob !

"Say Peregrine Rap !"

"Peregrine Rap !" responded the few guests who were actually quite enjoying this trash.

"It is not crap !"

"It is not crap !"

Caroline, strangely enough, was actually quite taken with this all of a sudden. She fluttered her wings with a sense of shy delight that Peregrine would have made such an effort as to produce something like this, effectively to show his adoration for her. Fair enough, from an artistic or musical point of view it wasn't exactly brilliant. In fact, it was even worse than she had first imagined it could be. Still, in order to get this whole act together, Peregrine must have had to avoid being drunk for the equivalent of at least a whole week and that was extremely impressive. Once she had got over the shock of something this unlikely being actually presented as a surprise, and had resigned herself to the musical lack of talent on display, she felt she could forgive him for the initial worry and give him a big hug on the dance floor once the reception moved on to that.

It was a pity for Peregrine in this respect that not everyone had fallen in love with him and was quite so prepared to admire his effort as a rap artist. The Arch Bishop sat at the religious buffers' table with a look of bemused horror written all over his face and wondered if this was ever going to end ?. He was busy wondering if he should just insult God and be done with it. According to religious teaching in the 1600s, if you did that, you'd be committed to hell for the rest of eternity. But if you stopped to think about it, how bad was that if the alternative was listening to this terrible Peregrine Rap for another twenty minutes ? The Arch Bishop's main worry was simply that the Church might be wrong and maybe God was more merciful than that, in which case all he'd achieve would be to lose his job while listening to Peregrine anyway.

It seemed God worked in extra-mysterious ways, however, because the King was about to take action himself.

He turned to the Lord Viscount and roared at him, "Find Princess Maybelle now and get her group ready to perform immediately !"

"I thought you didn't like Princess Maybelle's group," protested the Lord Viscount confusedly. Princess Maybelle was Peregrine's first cousin, the daughter of the King's younger brother. She had her own rock group, The Rotten Breeches, whose dodgy songs

were not wholly to the King's taste. Nonetheless, given her royal status, she had been booked to perform at Peregrine's wedding.

The King considered this for a short moment. Did he really want to listen to Maybelle singing those trashy lyrics like, "I love your shoulders, I love your grip/ I love to feel the suction of your gorgeous lips" ? Then he glanced at the stage and saw Peregrine giving a thumbs up as he rapped on,

"You look just as beautiful, up north or down south,

Even if you've got a toilet brush stuck in your mouth."

The King's eyes widened. There was seriously no limit to just how much more ghastly this could get.

That was it, as far as he was concerned. This simply had to finish one way or another.

"Don't question my orders !" he yelled back at the Lord Viscount. "Have Maybelle ready to go on stage so we can clear Prince Peregrine off within the next minute at the latest ! Use the Royal Guard if you have to !"

Being heir to the throne on the one hand, and yet thrown off the stage by the Royal Guard at his own wedding would have been quite a unique experience, even by Peregrine's admittedly low-level standards. However, his own standards were about to save him from this.

The Lord Viscount was liaising with the Colonel in charge of the Royal Guard to work things out as Peregrine took a powerful stride to the front of the stage and rapped,

"I think you'd be totally adorable, even if you were a walrus"

What on earth this was supposed to mean and just how Peregrine intended to make it rhyme with anything coherent or otherwise, remained a mystery to everyone except him forever afterwards, because it was at this point that he went into a twirl on the edge of the stage as part of the dancing which made up his rap act. He twirled about halfway round, then promptly fell off the edge of the stage. He landed on the nearest table, rolled across it and off the side, then landed on the wife of the Lord Marshall, who happened to be chief of the army. This lady had the physique of a bouncy castle, which was why Peregrine immediately bounced off her, up into the air and amazingly enough, landed on his feet.

Turning around, slightly unsteadily, to see quite where he had landed, Peregrine failed to look at where the bottom of his waistcoat, which flared out over his breeches, was going. As a result, one of the flares swept over the table he was now next to and knocked over a glass filled with beer.

As even Peregrine and Wally knew, you should never knock over someone's drink at a wedding. Especially not when it had been going on long enough already for most of the badly behaved yobbos there to have drunk more alcohol into their bodies than was contained in the average bottle of wine.

The previous owner of this drink, a rugby player with the body of someone who wrestled rhinoceroses, and the brainpower of someone who probably couldn't spell IQ correctly, rose from his seat and eyed Peregrine in a suspicious manner. It was a pity that this guy was actually a Fairy rugby player too.

"Oh, so you're the heir to the throne in this Kingdom Next Door, are you?" he asked Peregrine, clearly looking for the best place to give him a good smack.

Peregrine knew from experience when a fight was brewing. He tried to defuse things.

"Well," he grinned, burping accidentally at the same time, "I was last time I checked!"

Clearly the Fairy wasn't impressed.

"And that gives you the right just to go around, knocking people's drinks over as you feel like it, does it?"

Since Peregrine was too thick to come up with a second, reasonably diplomatic and fast response twice in a row, an awkward silence filled the dome for a moment.

The other Fairies at the rugby player's table quickly circled their friend, readying themselves for what they could all see coming.

It wasn't as if the human side was exactly unprepared either, though. After all, the Royal Guard had been just getting mobilized to escort Peregrine off the stage when he had gone and fallen off it, starting this confrontation in the first place. If anyone, Fairy or human, was going to threaten a member of the Royal Family, their first priority was to get in there and protect them.

All of the above was why, if Peregrine had been slightly more intelligent, he would have tried to do something like say sorry, and get the Fairy another drink, thus avoiding any use of violence. However, at the sort of weddings Peregrine had been to for the last few years, this was rarely the sort of solution employed.

Instead, Peregrine went for his regular, close-in combat solution. You only had to distract the threat for a moment, and then get moving in order to escape. A version had already worked once today in the break-in at Gate J after all.

"Hey!" he smiled at the Fairy and glancing sideways. "Is that your auntie taking her clothes off over there?"

In the brief moment when the shocked Fairy glanced over his shoulder towards where Peregrine had indicated, Peregrine grabbed a chair, shot forwards and used the chair to sweep the guy's feet from under him. He then swept the chair up and knocked him backwards with it, pushing with all the force he could muster.

Normally, at the average pub fight or badly behaved wedding, this would have sent the assailant flying backwards just a tiny distance until they fell on their back., Peregrine would have gained enough time and space to leg it, but wouldn't overall do that much more damage (if you didn't count the broken chair, at least).

But this guy was a Fairy and rather than fall flat on his back, he beat his wings a couple of times and stayed airborne. The problem was that Peregrine had shoved him with the chair for all he was worth. By staying off the ground, the Fairy rugby player accidentally flew through the air, gathering speed until he crashed headfirst into the table which was hosting mainly human princesses who had been invited to the wedding.

The table and several chairs cartwheeled over and splintered like a wooden cluster bomb. Plates, cutlery and glasses shot out from where the Fairy had landed, otherwise disintegrating at random. A crowd of good-looking, if boozed up, princesses fell over each other, fell out of their dresses and fell into each other's dinner. It looked like an explosion driven by shopping bags on a nudist beach.

Unfortunately, many of these physically pretty, and pretty thick, princesses were the girlfriends of a bunch of hefty, human princes, many of them rugby players themselves, sitting a couple of tables away in a state of general sloshedness. Even if the girls weren't actually their girlfriends, many of the princes quite fancied getting to know them a bit better later on and felt unusually protective towards them. Hence they rushed in to defend the girls and beat up the Fairy who had crashed into their table.

The other Fairies, who had been at the rugby player's table, split into two groups at this point. They were a large crowd so half of them went at the human princes while the other half tried to chase Peregrine, who had used the earlier opportunity to make a dash for the relative safety of the top table. Seeing this group of Fairies chasing Prince Peregrine, however, the Royal Guard sprang forward, dashing along the stage and leaping off to form a squad which could block the approaching Fairies. After all, most of them were too drunk to fly at this point so it wasn't as flawed a strategy as it might have seemed.

It was at this point that all hell seemed to break loose. Although so far, the fight had been restricted mainly to humans versus Fairies and the relatively small groups of idiots who had had too much to drink, the complete wedding itself had actually encouraged humans and Fairies to set aside their differences and become friends. In theory, this should have been a good thing.

The problem now was mainly the Peregrine Rap. This had been so planet-shatteringly dreadful that there were now hundreds of individuals, both human and Fairy, who were quite pleased to see that the start of a proper fight meant they might actually have a chance to give Peregrine a good slap. There were plenty of people who were quite happy to become friends with either the nearest humans or Fairies, so long as they started fighting their way through to where Peregrine was, near to the top table. With the most senior royalty of both families still up on that top table, and the most senior nobility just next to them, however, there were still some military personnel from either side who saw their duty as being to prevent the anti-Peregrine groups moving forwards. Add to these the few individuals who were either wasted enough or had bad enough taste actually to have enjoyed the Peregrine Rap, and the stage was set for a wedding fight which looked more like a full-on, military battle being fought in a department store having its spring sale.

Tables flew through the air. Bowls of soup were launched as if they were some sort of gunfire. Projectile vomit became a new model of artillery support. People got their arms and legs twisted together as they tried to hit each other at the same time, and realised that formal dress in the 1600s didn't support this level of conflict quite as well as a soldier's camouflage outfit would. Things got so chaotic that some people couldn't even remember whose side they were meant to be on and so just got on with beating up anyone who wasn't their mum or dad, or whom they didn't hope to be able to kiss romantically after the event. Nobody below the top table dared sit down, either in case they got hit by someone behind the chair, or in case it was already covered in colourful strains of chunder. Both were possible at this stage.

True to form, Peregrine's wedding was probably not going to go down in history as the most romantic of occasions at this rate. Nonetheless, this was just the start of the fight.

Peregrine himself had just been joined by Wally, a short distance from the top table. Wally had made it over to him by leaping off the top table itself and grabbing onto one of the chandeliers hanging from the top of the dome. He had swung hard a few times then yelled loudly at the crowd fighting in front of him, "Ooh, err, I think I need to shed my load, lads!"

This had not been true but the combatants below him had looked up and believed what he was threatening. Truly scared of this possibility, they had split long enough to produce a small gap where Wally could land, and then sprint over to Peregrine.

The Royal Guard had not actually succeeded in getting all that close to Peregrine in the initial confrontation with the Fairy lads. Now, with the chaos of the fight going on all around them, they might as well have been at the other end of the dome for all the practical sense it was going to do in defending Peregrine.

Peregrine stood in a small corner, his back covered by two sturdy tables which hadn't yet been knocked over, and fighting his corner from individuals who wanted to come over and persuade him not to follow a career in rap. That and assault him with the odd chair to make themselves feel better.

Having attended several weddings where there had been a little bit of violence before, Peregrine was reasonably experienced enough to hold his corner. This, though, was turning more into something which should have required a formal declaration of war to start with, so Peregrine was quite overjoyed to have Wally make it over and double his firepower, so to speak.

Caroline, meanwhile, looked on in horror from the top table. Fair enough, in accepting a wedding proposal from Peregrine it wasn't like she had ever expected to have a wedding which would be remembered in world history for its level of sophistication, culture or style. But this was more likely to be remembered for the world record in furniture destruction, throwing up, and accident and emergency cases. Still, she smiled to herself briefly, that was why she loved Peregrine really. He wasn't a bad guy at all. He was just an idiot who tried far too hard.

Anyway, she reflected, bringing herself back to a focus on the present situation, she was scared just now as to whether her beloved Peregrine was about to end up as the next accident and emergency case. He and Wally were so badly and colourfully dressed that they made the easiest target in the dome for anyone to spot. Given how many people had hated the Peregrine Rap, that meant there was no shortage of people almost queuing up to fight their way through to give him a solid thrashing. The two of them were holding their own for now but it couldn't last forever.

But what could she do ? She didn't dare use magic. There were Fairies everywhere and what side anyone was on was hopelessly unclear to everybody. She had seen one Fairy tying up another in a table cloth and sticking the other into a handy dustbin, while there was certainly no shortage of humans willing to give each other a new hairstyle with a bowl of soup. In these situations, Fairies knew extremely well that you didn't use magic because there might be someone you were fighting against who had stronger magic than you did.

Humans, being kind of dumb, all seemed to think that if you had access to magic, you could do whatever you wanted with it, but that had never been true. Like human strength, there was only so much any Fairy could with his or her magic, and there was also a good chance that there was someone with stronger magic around. Hence you would be really stupid to try and provoke a fight based on magic unless you were something like a wizard who had really strong powers. The absolute shambles of her wedding based on physical

strength alone was enough, thank you very much, without bringing in the extra mess which magic would add to it.

That was all very well, but then what could she do to help out poor Peregrine ? Should she try to fly and maybe launch something nasty at the groups lining up to attack him and Wally ?

For a moment she hesitated. Flying wasn't really magic. All Fairies knew that. It was just a type of science. However, if she did achieve something with it, would the humans be too thick to realise that ? One day, even they would probably learn to fly, even if intellectual and scientific development weren't exactly the order of the day today.

Her mind was made up for her, however, by a bowl of soup which some thug chucked at the place where she was sitting. Whether he or she had meant it, whether it had been intended to hit Fairy Princess Caroline or was just a missed shot meant to green up the Lord Viscount, Caroline was never going to know.

Nor was she ever going to care. A split second before the bowl impacted her seat, she leapt straight out of it and with two beats of her wings, took off into the air above her. Hovering for a moment, she ignored whoever had thrown the soup and looked over to where Peregrine and Wally had picked up a particularly wasted attacker – Peregrine held his outstretched arms and Wally his outstretched feet. Between them, they were using the bloke as a kind of horizontal battering ram, swinging him three times between them to gain momentum, then directing the fourth swing straight into the oncoming drunkards and knocking them backwards into a spot where a cooking trolley stood with a load of roast chickens on board. As roast chickens and drunk royalty rolled around amid puddles of whatever they'd had to eat the previous evening, Caroline saw her chance.

Leaning forwards, she flew forwards at low level, skimming the heads of the generally moronic crowds beneath her. As he reached the spot where the cooking trolley had stood, she looked for the single, most over-fried and vommed-on chicken she could find, grabbed a grim example, then took off again into the air above her.

Caroline shot upwards, her wings beating as strongly as possible and the rest of her body pointing straight up like a perfectly directed arrow. She was going to have to get this manoeuvre right she noted, looking left for a moment where she saw another Fairy, someone who had been one her friends at school, in fact, who had clearly tried flight and screwed up. Now she hung from one of the rafters by her knickers, picking her nose with a glazed expression on her face.

But Caroline had no time to stop and help right now. The ceiling of the dome was approaching fast. Just before she was about to hit it, Caroline jack-knifed the top half of her body over until she was looking down at the ground. She kicked out her legs to their full length and extended her feet directly behind her, towards the roof until she was

pointing straight downwards in a perfect dive towards the floor of the dome. She beat her wings as hard as she could and since this combined with her previous speed and gravity as well at this point, she was travelling now at a shattering speed.

Aimed at a piece of the floor slightly removed from the spot where Peregrine and Wally were fighting, Caroline shot out of the sky. She became even faster with every second until she was about to splat straight into a table and probably break her neck. At this stage, she looked up to see that Peregrine and Wally were a short distance away from her and directly behind her back.

Caroline was an excellent flier but even she couldn't pull off the jack-knife manoeuvre, bending herself backwards. So she pulled off a perfect 180 degree roll until she was looking straight at Peregrine and Wally. Then she jack-knifed round until her head was pointing at them and brought her legs down behind her.

She accelerated out of the sky on her back, zooming across the heads of the groups fighting just underneath her. She spun over again instantly, and came back onto her front, facing ahead, just in time to see Peregrine and Wally and a huge group of upper-class twits moving in on them. This was her moment.

Caroline screeched across the chaotic jumble at a truly vicious speed and launched her chicken at the twits. Since she was flying far too fast to be able to stop directly over Peregrine and Wally, she broke off to the left and hurtled around the side of the dome until she could decelerate enough to hover again and see what her dive had achieved.

Even in the days before anyone invented surface-to-air missiles, low level air support was not an easy job but when you got it right, you got it right for sure. Being hit by a roast chicken, covered in cooking fat and vom, and launched at a speed which wouldn't be seen again until somebody invented the jet fighter is not an experience most people have known. However, it is certainly not something most people would ever want to experience. The chicken blew up in a momentary hurricane of globules of fat, roast chicken skin, bones, and various other, unpleasant elements made up of stuff which nobody knew what it was, and wanted to know even less, thank you.

As intended, Caroline's help gave Peregrine and Wally the breather they needed and she flew over to join them.

"How did you lose your boot?" she asked Wally, now wearing only one element of footwear.

"Well, I was kicking someone up the butt when I lost it in his pants," Wally started to explain.

Sheesh, she thought. This display of combined Fairy and human behaviour at its worst just seemed to use every new record set as an excuse to produce something even more vulgar and/or idiotic every time.

Still, there were things to like too. Peregrine came over, kissed her firmly on the lips and said, "Thank you, darling ! Without you, Wally and I would probably be in the back of an ambulance by now !"

Romantic way of putting it perhaps, she thought, though it still sounded better than some of the Peregrine Rap had. She kissed him back.

Wally tapped Peregrine on the shoulder and coughed gently.

"I hate to interrupt the loving tenderness and all that," he began, "but while Princess Caroline may have saved us for the moment, we still have a problem that it's going to take more than one chicken supper to solve."

"I could quite do with a good chicken and chips," Peregrine noted, completely failing to register what Wally had really meant.

Fortunately, Caroline didn't.

"I think what Wally means," she explained, "is that we're going to have to up the firepower beyond launching a few roast chickens if we're going to get out of here in one piece."

Wally and Caroline were right. She had bought them a moment's break by splatting their attackers with the world's fastest ever flying chicken, but there were just too many of them. They needed something bigger and better.

Amazingly enough, it was the stupidest member of the team who came up with the solution. Or perhaps, that was why the solution proved to be so brainless, as things were about to turn out.

"Got it !" said Peregrine suddenly. "Our friends in the navy can help us !"

"What do you mean ?" Wally asked confusedly. Together with Peregrine, he was technically in the navy of the Kingdom Next Door but he didn't see how it could help.

"Well, they have really big guns, don't they ?" Peregrine explained.

"Yeah, but so what ?" Wally asked, still failing to see where this was going, though he wasn't sure he liked the sound of it.

"Well, here's the plan," Peregrine grinned. "You know how there's a load of ships parked out in the bay to protect this wedding in case anyone tries to attack from the sea ?

And you know how you can send different messages to ships from the land by waving coloured flags at them ?”

Caroline was impressed at this point. She wasn’t sure she could tell where this plan was going but the fact that Peregrine had managed to learn anything in the navy apart from how to get to the next pub on the beach was not something she would have expected. Maybe he really was starting to improve after all as the King had originally hoped when he got him to join up.

Unfortunately though, few things are as harmful as a little knowledge in the hands of a true idiot.

“So,” Peregrine began authoritatively, “Caroline needs to fly up to the roof of the dome with a candle and a bottle of some really strong booze.”

He turned to Wally. “You know,” he explained, “that stuff that you can unblock toilets with and you can get drunk on just by breathing it ? What’s its name again – Whampagne ?”

“Surely there aren’t any bottles of that at the royal wedding ?” Wally gasped in horror. “I mean, wouldn’t the Lord Viscount have forbidden that ?”

“Yeah, I know,” Peregrine told him, “but I saw that some of those rugby player types had smuggled in a few bottles in the top of their breeches. Maybe they were worried the booze on offer wouldn’t be strong enough.”

“Or perhaps they just wanted to melt a couple of soup bowls,” Wally responded. “That stuff is lethal, you know ?”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” Peregrine sighed impatiently. “I’m not asking Caroline to try drinking it, just to chuck a bottle of it all over the tent ceiling then set fire to it and fly out of the way.

“Meanwhile, you and I can find a couple of people who have passed out on the floor, either boozed up or beaten up, and get their breeches off them.”

“Why ? I don’t want to look at a drunk yob’s bum and pants !”

“No, no,” Peregrine glossed over this. “We’ll leave them to get spewed over or something. We just need to get a few breeches which are yellow and blue. Then we can make two flags which are yellow and blue out of them. As soon as Caroline has burned a way out of the tent, we show her the signal to send to the flagship, telling it to send a warning shot. A big cannon shot will then fly into the tent and everyone will think to themselves, ‘Oh no, Peregrine and Wally are in the navy and if the navy is going to back them up with cannon-fire, we’d better call it off and get out of here.’ Great plan or what ?”

Wally wasn't sure, but Caroline thought to herself, by Peregrine's standards it certainly wasn't such a bad plan. Besides, if the only alternative was chucking a few roast chickens at hundreds of neds who were probably too sloshed to remember their own names at this point, then they might as well go with it.

"OK," she replied. "I'll do it. I'll go and burn the hole in the dome. You two put the flags together."

Five minutes later, with Peregrine and Wally back to defending their corner for the moment, Caroline took off and headed upwards. She approached the hole she had just burned in the tent and worked her way through it as quickly as she could, partly to put the plan into action as soon as possible, and partly because she had used Whampagne to burn it. Hence it stank like an out-of-control barbecue being held in the household cleaner section of the local store.

She flew upwards another couple of hundred feet or so until she could see the navy fleet quite clearly, sitting out in the bay. Without any pirates or other seaborne villains closing in, they were probably having one of the most boring missions ever today but that was about to change, if only a little.

Caroline waved the two flags in the way Peregrine had shown her and hovered to check that the result was correct. There ought to be one cannon ball which came in directly from the flagship and crashed into the tent. This was maybe a bit of a gamble since it might hit somewhere like the top table but the dome was so big that it seemed like a pretty minor risk.

Such a thought was not going through Caroline's head a moment later though when a cannon-ball rocketed out of the flagship and almost blew her out of the sky as part of its trajectory. It was only by folding her wings and dropping downwards without flying for fifty feet that she dodged the cannon-ball and just saved herself. Fortunately, there was still enough sky for her to start flying again before she would have crashed into the dome.

Or rather, what was left of the dome. When Caroline had dropped downwards, she had still been holding the two flags and had, without realising it, moved in such a way that the flags sent a new message out, which was broadcast as if aimed at the whole fleet. Put crudely, those who knew what it meant read it as saying something along the lines of, "Give 'em hell, lads ! I'm getting out of here as fast as possible !" Bored out of their skulls so far, the navy was certainly glad to have something to do finally.

Down in the dome, a few of the less chronically wasted guests were reflecting that it was a shame that this wedding had got so bad. Few guests had seen such a level of mass combat apart from some who had once served in the marines. For the less boozed-up,

there had been a really little amount of the nicer elements they had wanted to see, romantic dancing, tender love songs, and all that sort of thing. Even if it was a bit cheesy, one of the great classics would have been so lovely, something like that wonderful song always associated with situations of love – what was it, again ? “Let It Go” ?

The navy certainly did.

Nobody was reflecting on much other than self-survival as the entire squadron out in the bay opened fire with everything they had. The sky darkened as a cloud of cannon-balls shot across much of the Kingdom Next Door, including the dome. The tent roof promptly gave way and the rafters caved in as the devastating barrage of naval artillery support demolished all the structure in front of it.

“What on earth have we done ?” Caroline asked Peregrine as she landed back next to where he and Wally stood, looking even stupider than they normally managed to do.

“Well,” Peregrine grinned. “I did say it would be a bit heavier than one roast chicken, you know.”

A cascade of cannon-balls rained explosions, destruction and ear-shattering bangs all around them. Conversation, even at the level it tended to stay at with Peregrine and Wally, wasn’t easy, but it went on. Somehow.

“If we give you the flag message to stop it, do you think you could wave that at them ?” Wally asked.

“You must be joking !” Caroline retorted. “I’m not flying up there again just now ! The air’s so thick with cannon-balls I’d be knocked out of the sky sooner than you two can knock back a pint !”

And then, all of a sudden, it stopped. Out in the bay, someone in the navy, demonstrating a level of intelligence which clearly surpassed that of Prince Peregrine, wondered if the order for its own navy to destroy the Kingdom Next Door hadn’t been some sort of mistake. The Admiral in charge had ordered a ceasefire and sent a couple of officers up to what was left of the royal complex to work out what had been going on.

An eerie quiet set in up where the reception party had been supposedly going on, even if not exactly as planned. Amazingly, nobody had been killed but almost everyone who could still walk had run for their lives when the naval gunfire had started, and the fight had finally fizzled out.

The King got up from where he had been hiding under the table and looked out over what was left of the Kingdom Next Door.

It was total wreckage. Nobody had invented heavy bombers at this stage, of course, but if they had, chances are the King would have reflected that it looked as though an entire squadron had just shed its load and scooted off. He had always had his reservations about what would come of letting so many Fairies into his beloved kingdom at first but even he had to admit that it had been mainly his own son and his own navy who had been responsible for this mess.

Something had to be done about Peregrine. He was supposed to be having a honeymoon just now, was he, the King asked himself. Well, he'd give him one to remember.

He turned to the Lord Viscount, currently trying to prise out a bread roll which had somehow got stuck in the back of his breeches and was giving him one of the most embarrassing wedgies in history. The King decided not to ask for details.

"Find Prince Peregrine and have him report to me now !" he ordered simply, then stormed off to his throne.

A few minutes later, Peregrine turned up, looking surprisingly cheerful. He was accompanied by Wally and Caroline, both of whom at least had the good sense not to provoke the King by looking as if this had been the most fun day of their entire lives.

The King was fairly sure that if nothing else, Peregrine should stop looking quite so cheery by the end of this discussion.

"So," the King snarled sarcastically. "Had a good wedding day, Prince Peregrine ?"

"Well," Peregrine began, demonstrating yet again a new level of meaning for whoever had invented the term, 'cretin', "I'm not sure it went totally to plan."

The King was clearly not impressed by this reply.

"What !" he roared, almost louder than the roar of the cannon-balls which had been pummelling the Kingdom Next Door a short while earlier. "That's nice to know, I suppose ! At least you didn't actually plan to turn up only half an hour before the wedding started, looking like a zombie who'd gone swimming in a sewage plant ! To turn a royal wedding into some sort of stand-up comedy act in front of the world's most important Fairies who probably think humans are even more moronic now than they even imagined before ! To perform what can only be considered the worst ever poetry written as some sort of music act to make us all envious of the truly deaf ! To celebrate your wedding with a reception for which the guests had to be cleared for front-line military service ! And to have our own

navy turn the Kingdom Next Door into such a burned-out wreck that the rest of the world will wonder if we only just noticed that's there an active volcano next to the local kebab shop when it erupted this afternoon ! Have I missed any other achievements in this summary ?”

“I just found out that Peregrine Rap has reached number 4 in the charts !” Peregrine beamed.

The King almost threw up himself in sheer disgust. How could he be ruling a kingdom of neds with such a complete lack of taste, culture or anything else requiring a higher number of brain cells than what they could count on one hand ?

Peregrine was not quite finished at this point though.

“I thought –“ he started but it was too much.

“Amazing !” erupted the King, glaring straight at the world's least intelligent numpty, whom the universe seemed intent on punishing him, by forcing him to call his son. “You mean it's actually possible that now and again a thought does somehow manage to get through your head ?

“Well, if you're such an intellectual, maybe you can come up with an idea to repair the Kingdom Next Door ?”

Caroline and Wally had been conspicuously silent up to this point. It didn't really seem like the best time to start a chat with Caroline's new father-in-law for reasons obvious to most people smarter than Peregrine. And being smarter than Peregrine wasn't particularly difficult as long as you were technically alive. However, Caroline did have an idea which might help and just maybe, she could help to repair the family rifts which Peregrine was clearly doing nothing to improve at all.

“There might actually be something we can do,” she started, quite courageously in fact, given that the King seemed to be displaying the general attitude of a lion or tiger who had just been kneed in the crotch by a very cheeky monkey who also knew how to give the big cat the finger.

The King turned around, wondering whether to scream her into silence while he continued to lambast Peregrine, or see if somehow Peregrine had really brought someone smart into the family at last.

He bit his lip and eyed her suspiciously.

“Go on,” he mumbled at last.

“We could try using magic,” Caroline began.

“Oh, give me a break !” the King shot back. Was this is it ? Of course, she was still a Fairy after all so she was bound to think of using her magic wand but this was worth nothing. Unlike most humans, the King actually knew that there were serious limits to what magic could do. Half the Kingdom Next Door needing serious re-building, so a couple of Fairies with their wands who could only vaguely repair half a garden shed at best would hardly be the solution.

However, Caroline came back quickly.

“I don’t mean regular magic, you see. I’m talking about something in line with the amount of energy which you humans unleashed today when your navy let it go.”

“Spare me the jokes – just get to the point,” moaned the King.

“What I’m talking about is the Rhinestone of the Rivers, if you’re familiar with that,” Caroline continued, somewhat mysteriously.

“I think we went to a pub called that on one of our navy trips, didn’t we ?” Peregrine asked Wally.

“I think you’re right,” Wally agreed, “but I can’t quite remember which cruise that was now.”

“You can’t have forgotten that one !” Peregrine grinned. “It was the same cruise where that Petty Officer got so wasted he ate that seagull sandwich with the head and the feet still sticking out of either end of it !”

“Oh yeah !” Wally perked up. “That was one of the most disgusting things I think we’ve ever seen in the navy ! It wasn’t so much fowl with a W as foul with a U !”

“That was just so revolting ! The guy was totally wrecked – even more than that pirate ship we saw on the beach ! Just shows what Whampagne can do if you actually try to drink it, doesn’t it ?”

Never mind the Rhinestone of the Rivers or whatever it was called, Peregrine was getting into his stride now.

“You are so right !” Wally chimed back. “And we have seen some pretty gross things in the navy, haven’t we ? What about that Midshipman who got the octopus tentacle stuck up his bum ? And it was still totally alive, wasn’t it ?”

“What ?” Peregrine smirked. “The octopus or his bum ?”

They both laughed uproariously at this display of educated humour. The King might have stopped this unnecessary and inappropriate exchange at this point, if he hadn’t been choking with anger. As a result, it didn’t stop there.

"It was hardly a surprise, mind you," Peregrine added. "That guy was so plastered that he tried to chat up a dolphin too, didn't he?"

Wally nodded. "Yeah – that was hilarious ! He saw the rear end of the dolphin and thought it was a beautiful mermaid or something. I hate to think what would have happened if we'd run into a whale !"

"He probably would have thought it was one of those overweight elf princesses we ran into on the beach near the maintenance base; you know, like the really hefty one that daft Captain invited on-board but who guzzled so many burgers first that she capsized his ship !" Peregrine responded happily. He did miss the navy when he was away too long sometimes. A career in the military had certainly proven to be a lot more fun and funnier than he had first imagined it would be.

Caroline sighed. This was why she loved Peregrine after all. He was a complete idiot and he could be infuriating at times, but when it came down to it, he was so delightfully royal but vulgar at the same time, and he was a genuinely nice guy. He didn't wish anyone real harm, he just saw hilarity and reasons to enjoy the world everywhere he went.

That wasn't entirely how the King was viewing things, however. Recovering his voice, he finally cut off Peregrine and Wally, shortly but venomously, "Will you two just be quiet ? Another word from either of you and I'll consider re-introducing public executions which you can try out for me ! And I don't mean in the role of executioner ! So spare us any more of your 'heroic war stories', will you ?

"Maybe you'd like to get on with what matters," he seethed, glaring at Caroline who, he hoped, would get to the point some time soon without encouraging the other two any further.

Thankfully, she ignored the stupidity of the last exchange and got on with the important bit.

"Most Fairies, and virtually all humans, think that the Rhinestone of the Rivers was lost a few hundred years ago, if it ever existed, and is now effectively just a legend. However, a map detailing where it might be was uncovered in the archives of the Fairy Kingdom just a couple of years back.

"The thing about the Rhinestone of the Rivers is that it was originally used by one of the most powerful wizards in the world before it came into Fairy hands. Fairies re-worked it so that it could be slid onto and off any Fairy wand at random."

"You mean like those novelty kebabs they sell next to the public loos ?" Peregrine asked.

"Just shut up for once !" hissed the King.

He turned back to Caroline.

“So what was the big deal and if it matters, how come it got completely lost ?”

“The big deal,” Caroline went on, “was that it was able to give the user of the wand the same level of magic power which the most powerful wizards could employ. It would have meant that the Fairy Kingdom might have been able to take on any wizard, witch or other enemy in the world !

“However, the Fairy who came to try it out, used the magic power to try space flight and got a bit drunk on the Moon.”

“Nice to know it’s not only humans who have these problems,” the King noted pointedly, glaring at his son and his attendant.

Caroline explained further, “So on his way back down to earth, he somehow lost the Rhinestone of the Rivers, which fell off his wand and floated down to land in the Kingdom of the Trolls. Even back then, nobody dared go into the Kingdom of the Trolls so the Fairy noted more or less where it landed, and flew home where he made a map and stored it in the archives.

“After that, it just became a legend until my dad found the old map a couple of years back. However, he told us all to keep quiet about it because the adventure to go and recover it would be just too dangerous, at least in his opinion.

“I’m sharing this with you now, because I’m part of your family, at least indirectly, and with the Rhinestone of the Rivers on my own wand, I think could do quite a bit to repair the Kingdom Next Door for you.”

Caroline also felt a bit guilty because it was possible to argue that the signal which had started the navy barrage had been as much her fault as Peregrine’s but she didn’t bother mentioning that right now. Unlike Peregrine, she didn’t always feel it necessary to broadcast everything in her head at that particular moment. She would also have had quite a bit more to broadcast most of the time too in view of their relative brain capacities.

The King was finally quite impressed. The Kingdom of the Trolls, perhaps ? That was over the mountains behind the Kingdom Next Door and nobody ever dared to go there as there were supposedly lakes, forests, hills and mountains full of dragons, elves and witches all through them. According to one story, there was even a supermarket which sold life-threateningly bad doughnuts but he wasn’t sure he believed that one too.

This should have been a job for special forces, if anyone. However, right now, he needed a good quest on which to send Peregrine, and now Caroline had conveniently given him one. Who knew ? It might just make him grow up a tiny bit, stop behaving quite so badly, in short, achieve everything the navy assignment had failed to achieve. Besides,

as technically an indirect part of the Fairy nobility these days, Peregrine ought to be capable of taking on an adventure into unknown lands of legend.

“Thank you, Caroline,” he smiled. “You’ve just given me an excellent idea of a job for you three and a honeymoon trip which I doubt either you or Peregrine will ever forget !”

With that, he got on with the briefing.

Or was he just being a bit stupid as a result of his anger at the destruction all around him, the King wondered to himself, as he concluded the briefing.

After all, one Fairy and a couple of drunken layabouts with a strange ability to cause complete chaos wherever they went. It wasn’t quite the most dramatic or romantic start to a fairy-tale quest which the world had ever seen.

On the other hand, he reminded himself, by undertaking this expedition into the lands of magic, strange beings, adventure and more, maybe, just maybe they would start to appreciate that the world around them had a beauty, a grandeur and a power which they had never before come to realise.

“Do you reckon they’ll have a few chippies along the way ?” Peregrine asked the other two as they headed out the door to find some horses.

Or maybe not.

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