

*No.5*

*Britain's got Talons*

By Petra Mc Queen

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there was a single mother on benefits. She didn't have a four-wheeled carriage, nor did she fly about with a Dyson like the witch next door, but she was content. She had a little cottage to live in, enough to eat and a thick cloak to keep her warm. Most of all she was happy she could pick her child up from school every day. This was especially important because her child had Aspergers Syndrome. He found the world scary, and the single mother knew that she would always make sure he felt safe even if it meant having to live on benefits for the rest of her life.

One day, a magazine slid through the letterbox of the cottage. The single mother couldn't afford magazines, especially not one as glossy as this. She opened the door to give it back to the paper-elf but he was nowhere to be seen.

'I hope he doesn't get in trouble,' she said, stroking the smooth cover.

All day she read the magazine. All night she dreamed of Eyelash Eye Enhancing Serum, must-have pet pigs the size of teacups, and LED 3D plasma screens. She woke with a headache, and was late dropping her boy at school. As she returned home, she sighed. As usual, the kitchen was a mess. The tablecloth had slid to the floor, a cupboard door hung from one hinge, and there was a puddle of porridge on the floor. Usually the single mother sang while she was stacking the dishwasher, but today she slammed in cups and glasses as though Ikea was just around the corner and she could replace her Pokols and Narhets at a moments notice. As she tidied she became

crosser that her kitchen did not look like the ones in the magazine. The crosser she became, the more things she threw: she tossed the saltcellar on the shelf, hurled scraps in the bin, and flung knives at their block. She grabbed a dishcloth and twirled and whirled, danced and pranced, pirouetted and pouted, as she scrubbed. To anyone looking through the window it would've looked like she'd gone Lady Gaga.

As it happened, there was someone looking through the window. It was the paper-elf, at least, it was someone disguised as a paper-elf. He rapped on the knocker. The single mother stopped her dance, blew her fringe out of her eyes, and opened the door.

'Yes?'

'I fink I left a glossy 'ere, miss.'

'Really?' said the single mother. 'I don't think so.' She closed the door.

The paper-elf grinned, pulled up his trousers, which had been hanging fashionably low, and pulled off his hi-vis vest to reveal a bright white t-shirt. He brushed back his hair and rapped on the knocker again.

The single mother opened the door. 'I told you-' she said, and gasped. Standing in front of her was Lord Hymen-Bowel.

'My lord,' said the single mother, curtsying.

Lord Hymen-Bowel stood with his hands on his hips. He was really rather dashing.

‘I was watching you through the window,’ he said. ‘You have the most marvellous tidying up skills I’ve ever seen. I want you in the next Witches show.’

‘What?! ‘Britain’s Got Talons’? But I’m just a human.’

‘I want to help the underprivileged,’ said Lord Hymen-Bowel.  
‘And you will stun the nation.’

‘What about my boy?’

‘You’ll be doing it for him.’ He stepped forward and took her hand. ‘You’ll be giving him the life he deserves, doing your best for the poor mite.’

‘Well, I... I suppose...Well, okay then!’

Applause broke out, and it was only then that the single mother noticed the camera crew that had sneaked in through the back door.

The next day, the single mother booked her boy into breakfast club and after-school club for the first time. He was worried but the single mother had been up all night making him a special doll that looked just like her. He could cuddle it whenever he was missing her too much.

The single mother was nervous when she walked on stage in front of a live studio audience. There were rows and rows of witches and wizards, elves and fairies, trolls and hobgoblins. At the back, in the cheap seats, were the humans peering through opera glasses. On a special podium sat Lord Hymen-Bowel; Beryl Mole, the animal lovers’ favourite; and a small Leprechaun.

Lord Hymen-Bowell asked the single mother why she'd decided to enter the talent contest. As instructed, she read the auto-cue. 'I want to make a better life for my disabled child.' She stopped, and looked at the audience. 'Actually,' she said, 'he's not really disabled, he's got Asp-'

'Music!' cried Lord Hymen-Bowel.

A track by Kylie Minnie Ogre began to play and the single mother's moment had started. Her kitchen had been recreated on the stage and she grabbed a cloth and twirled and whirled, danced and pranced, pirouetted and pouted. By the end of the song, the kitchen was sparkling, and none of the judges had pressed their buzzers. The crowd whooped, and the single mother beamed. Nobody had ever applauded her tidying up before.

'Oh my Cod,' said Beryl Mole, wiping a tear from her furry cheek. 'That was amazing! You're through.'

'To be sure,' said the Leprechaun.

'And a yes from me,' said Lord Hymen-Bowel.

The crowd screamed their delight.

Over the next week, the single mother had a lovely time. Her neighbours talked to her, children waved as she walked down the street, the phone rang and rang with companies offering her things. She said yes to everything and a team of llamas delivered a year's supply of Eyelash Eye Enhancing Serum within the hour.

Each week, she performed her act on stage, and her son would sit at the front of the audience and watch. Her days were taken up

with rehearsals, beauticians, hairstylists, manicurists, press interviews and photo shoots. Every day she read out Lord Hymen-Bowel's press statement about how she was a single mother on benefits who was doing this show for her disabled child. She read it so many times the words began to feel true. She forgot that the boy with Aspergers wasn't really disabled, just different. She forgot she had a degree in Philosophy, she forgot that she'd travelled the world, and she forgot that she didn't care about money very much. She started to believe that she was young, poor and desperate. It was all people wanted to hear.

Because she was doing so many interviews, she found it difficult to pick her boy up from school. Lord Hymen-Bowel brought in Supernanny, who aside from insisting on wearing her Lycra hotpants, cape and tiara to work, seemed very nice, and let the boy with Aspergers have his mummy doll whenever he wanted. He wanted it all the time, and it started to look frayed and grey. One of the ears fell off, but the single mother didn't have time to sew it back on.

The Final arrived. The single mother was up against John Constable, a painter from Essex, and Susan Boil, a beautiful young singer with the voice of a broken middle-aged woman. The single mother was last on and she was very nervous, but when it was her turn she twirled and whirled, danced and pranced, pirouetted and pouted. The audience went wild.

'So, why should you win 'Britain's Got Talons'?' asked the Leprechaun, as the applause died down.

Lord Hymen-Bowel had spent a long time with her rehearsing her speech and the single mother knew if she got it right, she would be the winner.

'I came to this competition with nothing,' she said. A whimper came from the crowd and she looked down to see her little boy twisting the head of his mummy doll. The camera followed her gaze and his image was projected onto a screen at the back of the stage.

'Aaah,' said the audience, for he really was very cute.

'I want the best for my boy,' continued the single mother. Her son whimpered again and Supernanny put a sticker on his naughty chart. He chewed the mummy doll.

The single mother wanted to go to him, but the crowd were waiting. She swallowed hard. 'My son and me are only human and we live in a tiny cottage. We've never been on a skiing holiday, or to a restaurant owned by Gordon Ramesses, the Egyptian King. Help me make a better life for me and my boy.'

The boy with Aspergers wailed.

The single mother shaded her eyes against the bright stage lights, and saw Supernanny was pulling her boy out of his seat.

'Leave him!' she cried.

'Ah, hem,' said a voice into her earpiece. 'Carry on, your vote is about to go through the roof.'

'My boy,' she said, remembering her lines, 'is disabled, really, really disabled. I mean, he can't look after himself, doesn't know what's going on.'

'My mummy!' shouted the boy with Aspergers, as he was dragged out of the theatre.

'Carry on!' said the voice in her ear.

The single mother took out her earpiece. She stepped from the stage and walked through the auditorium. A spotlight followed her, and the audience nudged each other and whispered excitedly.

On the floor next to the exit was an old rag. The single mother picked it up, turned it over and saw the two button eyes she'd sewed onto the mummy doll all those months ago. She stood there for so long staring at the broken doll that the audience began a slow handclap.

Lord Hymen-Bowel stood and held out his arms.

'Come back to the stage,' he said.

She shook her head.

Beryl Mole furrowed her furry brow and climbed the stairs. She embraced the single mother. 'I know it's hard, pet, but remember you're doing it for him. He can have the best childcare, the best boarding school, the best medical care. He might even become normal again.'

'He's fine just as he is,' said the single mother. She took off her microphone, and handed it to Beryl. The door, closing behind her, muffled the groans and boos of the crowd. The single mother ran down the stairs. In the foyer, just about to leave, was the boy with Aspergers. She ran towards him, waving the doll.

'Your mummy!' she cried. 'Your mummy!'

He turned round, slipped Supernanny's grasp, and came to her. He didn't like to be cuddled but he let her give him a quick hug before he took the doll from her. A flash of paparazzi bulbs lit up the foyer. Journalists surrounded them, barking out questions.

'Why did you walk out of the show?'

'Are you ungrateful?'

'Why have you blown the only chance you had?'

The single mother took her boy by the hand and they pushed their way through the crowd. In front of them, gathered a pack of photographers walking backwards to get their best shot. Behind, journalists shouted questions. The single mother and the boy with Aspergers ignored them. They walked and walked. Journalists trailed off, photographers became bored. The single mother and the boy walked. They walked until the sun rose and there was nobody left but themselves, and a huge red sky stretching over the land. In the distance they could see their little cottage.

They had to step over journalists sitting on the doorstep, but the single mother knew they'd disappear if she said nothing.

The kitchen was messy but the single mother didn't care. She switched on the kettle and made them a cup of tea.

'That's better,' said the single mother, after taking the first sip.

'Yes,' said the boy with Aspergers.

And they lived happily ever after.

*The End*