

The Golden Ass

of

1124

D.L. Randle

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A Granite Diamond Book

*This book is dedicated,
with gratitude,
to
John and Irene Randle*



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About the Author

Introduction

Everyone who attended school knows the story of how Justice came at last to the kingdom of King Gorge in 1124, unless you slept through those classes (we saw you, Simon Coddledmuch). Teachers have enthusiastically told the tale in schools for centuries. But what Simon Coddledmuch and the generations following him could not know is that the story of Justice would save another kingdom from a man who would be, desperately desired to be, but did not deserve to be, King, President, Prime Minister, Chancellor, Chief and The Boss of Everything.

Note: This will be the last mention of Simon Coddledmuch because Simon Coddledmuch did not amount to much because his parents coddled him much too much, leaving him with his one and only skill set: Lazy Git, PIH (Pint in Hand)

Home

On his second last day in the valley, Justice told himself, 'I am so lucky.' This he told himself every morning while going about his chores on his family's Humble Haven Farm. 'Lucky, lucky, lucky.'

Inside the barn, as he walked toward the big door, one of their Holstein dairy cows gave him a gentle nudge on the shoulder. He turned to find Single Spot there.

He rubbed her forehead. "Aren't we lucky, Single Spot?" He removed his hand, and she pushed her face under his hand. 'More please.' He rubbed her forehead again, then slid his hand down her neck, across her ribs, to her belly and udder.

Single Spot had been off her feed for a few days and Justice was relieved to find her belly softened and showing none of the signs of mastitis his mother told him about.

"Okay, girl, let's go." He grabbed the handle of the heavy wooden barn door, leaned back and walked it backwards to open it to the sunshine outside. The cows rushed out into the morning light, bucking and snorting with pleasure through the dewy grass, along with their calves.

They did not separate the dairy cows of Gorge Valley from their calves. Justice did not believe in such cruelty. His parents did not believe in such cruelty. The villagers did not believe in such cruelty.

Every year, Gorge Valley held a loud music festival to drown out the continuous wailing of the cows of Fairliffshire, the next ridge over, when they took the calves away from their mothers. The festival lasted three days and nights. Three days and nights of the plaintive cries of the mothers whose calves would never answer. Three days and nights. Sometimes four.

He was glad to live in such a kind village. They could not get as much milk from their cows as in Fairliffshire, but everyone felt it was a small price to pay for healthier milk from happy cows.

The calves played on the small hill he'd built for them in the middle of the pasture. It made Justice laugh to watch them chase each other. And there were always those calves who stood statue still for long minutes and in the next second ran like maniacs round and round the pasture, their tails little flicking flags.

In the afternoons, the calves would snooze in the sun or the shade. One or two cows would babysit while all the other mothers had their fill of grass. Single Spot always took first rotation in the baby-sitting.

Justice laughed, watching them this morning, and then heard a creaking squeal above. He looked at weathervane at the top of the barn. The galloping iron horse with its mane and tail flying was turning.

'Good.' Justice thought. They could use more rain. He leaned against the barn, enjoying the light breeze and the warmth of the sun on his face.

He swept his brown curls out of his eyes. The smell of bacon, eggs and coffee came to him then. He looked over at the thatched roof house. His stomach gave an anticipatory growl and his mouth watered. There was something deeply satisfying about getting your

morning chores done and then going for breakfast. It was one of the deep pleasures of farm life. Nothing tasted like those bacon and eggs; except the homemade bread, freshly churned butter, and raspberry preserve made from the raspberries they had picked.

He heard hoofbeats then and looked down the gently curving road that bisected the farm. The rider wasn't visible yet, but Justice knew it was his mother, Jill, returning from an early morning veterinarian call. He hoped everything had gone well. The Saunders's colt, Shiny Bright, injured his left hind leg somehow.

He watched down the curving farm road. The tall, gently swaying poplars lining the road always reminded him of sentinels guarding the farm. He pushed himself away from the barn and walked out of the pasture. The wind picked up, and the stand of aspens bordering the farm with their shiny trunks and shimmering shushing leaves sent the earthen fragrance of the forest to him.

Now the light wind brought lavender, lilac, and wild rose to his nostrils, 'Lucky, lucky, lucky.'

"Breakfast" his father Bobor called from the front porch of the house. Jill rode into the farm Florpy, their dog, on the horses' heels. Florpy had been a handful in the beginning, but she was getting a little better.

"Good timing." Jill said, as she dismounted, sniffing the air. She patted Blue's neck. "Smoothest gait in the shire."

"How did Florpy do?"

Jill made a face. "Bit of a relapse today." She bent down to pet Florpy who began bouncing. "You know it's really hard to pet you when you're hopping like a rabbit." She and Justice chuckled as Justice took Blue's reins.

"How was Shiny Bright?"

"He's going to be fine, thank goodness. Kicked the trough and cut his fetlock. Missed all his tendons. Ned didn't realize there was a jagged piece on the trough. Filing it down as I left."

As Justice took Blue's reins, Jill stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"The King's Royal Messenger will arrive in a few hours."

'Shit.' Justice thought, but said, "Maybe it's something else we can ignore."

"Not this time." Jill patted his shoulder and turned away.

"What do—" but she was already gone. Justice watched her until she entered the house, her ominous answer echoing in his mind. 'Not this time.'

Jill and Bobor were much more concerned with the politics of the Royal Court than Justice. As he walked Blue toward the barn, he thought it was because he hadn't faced any challenges as difficult as his parents had before they built Humble Haven Farm. It was humble. It was a farm. And, most certainly, it was his haven.

Justice was born and had grown up here. He wanted 'here' to remain as it had always been. He had banked on the fact it was on the far edges of the Kingdom and King Gorge had bothered little with it for all of Justice's nineteen years. And so it remained the same. Same was good. Same was safe. Same was the same as happy.

Every afternoon, as he walked the rolling green hills toward the tiny colourful village of Gorge Valley, Florpy bouncing at his side, he breathed the fresh air, listened to the birdsong, and sighed, "Lucky, lucky, lucky, Florpy, we're so lucky."

But, on this day, he slowed as he approached the top of Home Hill because Florpy growled. He climbed the rest of the way to the crest slowly. Looking down from the top, he saw the largest crowd he'd ever seen gathered on Only Street. Florpy growled again. He patted her wavy brown hair that matched his own. "It's okay. It's okay, girl." She continued growling. "It's okay, girl. Come on."

He headed down the hill, unsure what caused Florpy's agitation. She'd seen crowds in the village before for festivals and celebrations.

As he walked onto Only Street, he thought it was the prettiest street in the world, not that he'd seen any other street. On Only Street, every storefront was a different bright colour, with contrasting shutters and window flower boxes. Pretty benches lined the street. At Only Cafe, townsfolk chatted at the outdoor tables, and happy shopkeepers waved at Justice as he strode past every afternoon. Today, they were all in the street.

As Justice made his way through the crowd, he heard a lot of grumbling: 'What do they want now?' 'Why can't they just leave us alone?' 'Do you think it's true?' Rumours had been flying for months around the valley about some outrageous new tax levied, as always, only on 'Ordinaries' as the King called anyone not High Born. They couldn't do anything about the tax, but the village had a gesture in place if it turned out to be true.

Justice looked for Cobbler Joe and Cobbler Jane. He spotted them easily by their bright red hair.

"Heaps o' goody good there, young Justice." Cobbler Joe greeted him.

"And Heaps o' goody-gooder there, Cobbler Joe." Justice replied, tipping his felt hat.

Cobbler Jane looked past him, "Where are Jill and Bobor?"

"One of our cows is sick. They sent me to see what the messenger has to say." He hated lying. He especially hated lying to people he liked so much.

"Wondering for a favour there, young Just."

"Yes?"

Cobbler Joe described an onerous task Justice did not want to do. So of course, Justice said, "Yes, of course."

He said, 'yes' to all the onerous tasks the towns-folk requested. Did it make them respect him anymore? As much as Light?

The sound of hoofbeats on the cobblestones silenced the crowd. The King's Royal Messenger rode in, impressive in his red and gold

caped uniform atop his beautiful palomino steed. He pulled a scroll out of the saddlebag and unrolled it. His voice boomed out, “Subjects of King Gorge pay heed now to Your Lord God King God King Gorge’s very own words this day.”

The Messenger cleared his throat and concentrated on the scroll. “My loyal subjects who be subjected to your Lord God King God King Gorge’s beautiful and historical best-est leader-ing in historical histories, I, me, your Lord God King God in infinite wisdom-ness and smarty smart-ness, decrees, decries and declaims that each subject of the Kingdom of King Gorge be assessed a piddle poo tax calculated thusly: three pee pees and one poo poo per day at a cost of six gorges per pee pee or poo poo. This tax applies to Ordinaries and Lowly-Lows only. Royals and High Borns are exempt-ed-ered from such taxes. Your Lord God King God King Gorge loves all his loyal subjects. Except, of course, the Cheaps. Long Live Your Lord God King God, ME!” The Messenger looked at the crowd. “That is all!” He spurred his horse and galloped off.

Cobbler Joe said, “I’ve never seen a Lowly-Low or a Cheap.” as the crowd grumbled amongst themselves.

Justice said, “What a thing to call people. But I’ve heard they only live in the Capitol.”

Cobbler Joe shook his head, “No, young Just. My in-laws live in Fairliffshire. There are some over there and in Smithshire and yes, they do all the work in the Capitol. Poor sods.”

“Poor souls.” Cobbler Jane said, then turned to Justice and smiled. “Young Justice, have the boots I made for you yet trod beyond this valley?”

Justice sighed inside. Always the same question. “Uhm...not yet.”

“But soon? Yes?” She put her hand on his shoulder. “What about adventure? Adventure is for the young. And for all the young souls.”

“I read about adventure. Lots of adventures. I read about all the adventures in all the books.”

Jane leaned against Joe, gave him a peck on the cheek, laid her head on his shoulder. “What about romance? Companionship? It too is for the young. And young souls. Everyone.”

‘I’m nineteen not ninety.’ Justice wanted to say. ‘There’s time. There’s lots of time.’

Hoofbeats. They all looked toward the sound. The King’s Royal Messenger stopped his horse in the village square.

He leaned down and looked at Justice. “What village is this?”

“Gorge Valley”

The messenger straightened and barked out, “People of Gorge Valley. The King has a further message for you.” He cleared his throat. “Subjects of King Gorge pay heed now to Your Lord God King God King Gorge’s very own words this day.” He pulled another scroll from his satchel, unrolled it. “Your Lord God King God King Gorge announcer-ates that Gorge Valley is to be honoured by your Lord God King God with its choice as the site of your Lord God King God’s most exciting-est project ever in the historicals of histories, the most beautiful sight your ordinary eyes will have ever behold-ed. Long Live the King forever and ever and ever. ME!” The messenger shoved the scroll away. “That is all.” He reined his palomino in a tight turn, spurred him on and galloped away.

Cobbler Jane frowned, “That is all? All what? More King’s...” she looked around at the crowd. Justice knew she wanted to say it was more of the King’s gibberish but was afraid, so she said instead, “I didn’t understand what he said.”

But murmurs arose within the crowd: ‘What does that mean?’ ‘Chosen?’ ‘What project?’ ‘What’s he going to do now?’

They grumbled and muttered as they went back to their shops: the butcher, dry goods, produce shops; the cafe, livery stable and tack shop; the haber-dasher, bakery and library. As Justice watched them

reopen their doors, he wondered again why anyone would ever want to leave this place. It had everything anyone could ever want or need.

As Justice, Cobbler Joe and Cobbler Jane watched, the shop owners unfurled new signs over the old ‘Gorge Valley’ signs. Now they were: Piddleshitshire Butchers, Piddleshitshire Produce, Piddleshitshire Fabrics, Piddleshitshire Haberdasher. The citizens had been awaiting this day for several months because of the rumours of the new tax and swore they would rename the town and village. Although still technically loyal to the King, they did not want to carry the name of King Gorge any longer. They had thought of Piddlepooshire, but it didn’t have the same zing.

Cobbler Joe turned to Justice and grimaced. “Young Justice, you’re still a growing boy. You need to eat. Ignore the tax.”

Justice looked back at Cobbler Joe with dismay. He was nineteen, hardly a boy anymore. More dismay came from feeling the ever-tightening waist on his trousers digging into him. Justice threw his wavy brown bangs out of his eyes and sighed. “I’m hoping these daily walks help my trousers fit better.”

Cobbler Jane smiled at him, laid her hand on his shoulder. “All of your walking is even more reason not to restrict your food or water intake, Just.”

‘Just.’ How he hated that nickname. He knew Piddleshitshire Villagers used it with affection. But it reminded him of how he felt compared to his golden brother, Light. What had his parents been thinking? Justice and Light? Who names their kids Justice and Light? Bobor and Jill Fairchild, that’s who. And, while Light had been the light of his parents’ eyes and the golden child of the village, Justice was...Just.

Cobbler Joe slapped Justice’s shoulder. “We’ll go unfurl our new sign. Felicitations to Jill and Bobor.” He took Cobbler Jane’s hand, and they headed to their shop.

Justice looked down at Florpy. “What do you think, Florpy? Time to go see Kendria?” She sat down, staring up at him intensely, every muscle in her body tensed and frozen except for the tip of her quivering tail. “Squiggles?” Florpy jumped up and let loose with the squiggles, her body whipping side to side. Justice clapped his hands. “Let’s go!”

As he walked on toward his usual rendezvous with Kendria, he laughed at Florpy’s enthusiastic bouncing beside him. But, as they went on, he thought back to the favour Cobbler Joe had asked of him and muttered, “Damn it.”

He said, ‘Yes’ to all the lousy tasks the townsfolk were ‘Wondering for a favour there, young Just.’ Did it make them respect him anymore? As much as Light? The ‘Just’ echoed in his head again. Justice was just shorter than most, just softer than most, and his brown eyes were larger and waterier than most. Prone to hiccups, tics and fainting, he was the opposite of Light, the tall, strong, fast, smart Golden Boy who had passed into near mythical status. An early death will do that for a person.

A pang of guilt stabbed Justice. His eyes stung. He blinked rapidly. He missed his older brother desperately. ‘Sorry, Light.’ He thought and turned his attention to Florpy to distract himself. He slapped his thigh. “Come on, girl. Come on.” She bounced happily at his side as they made their way down into the valley below the ridge holding the new Village of Piddleshitshire.

They always took the same path. Every after-noon, the same path. And why not? It led straight down to Kendria.

Her name meant ‘Wise Protector’. Justice found solace, relief, and protection with her. Kendria was a weeping willow, the largest and oldest in the valley. Beneath her tendrils, Justice and Florpy would flop down onto the soft earth and sigh out loud with relief. They were here at last.

Here in the dappled light winking through Ken-dria's leaves, here where Kendria sighed as the breeze swept her branches to and fro, here where the scent of leaf and earth calmed his busy mind. Here where there was only 'here right now'.

Justice ran his hand through the soft green leaves of Kendria's longest tendril. The scent of earth and leaves sent a wave of joy and melancholy through him. "Good afternoon, Kendria."

"Good afternoon, Justice." He whirled at the voice, blinked at The Old Lady stood behind him, her raven, Companion, perched on her shoulder.

Florpy ran to her and calmed as The Old Lady first petted under the dog's chin and then rested her hand on Florpy's head. She looked into Florpy's eyes. "Sweet girl. Do you hear me? Okay, good. Understand this one thing; you are safe. Now and forever. You can relax." The Old Lady stood, and Justice watched as Florpy walked a few feet, laid down in the grass, and put her head on her paws. She let her eyes fall shut as a long sigh left her.

A shock ran through Justice. Bouncing Florpy had come from a terrible situation in another shire. Beaten, malnourished and left outside on a chain for two years. In the rain and snow. In the heat and dust. In the misery of those two years, no one had ever looked after her coat and it became a tangle of painful matts that pulled at her skin and hurt her all day, every day. She suffered alone until some neighbours snuck onto the property and stole her in the middle of the night.

They had spirited her to Gorge Valley and delivered her at four o'clock in the morning to Humble Haven Farm, where Jill gently attended to her. Jill bonded with the sweet-natured girl who was so afraid but still so willing to give humans another chance. The first time Florpy licked her hand as Jill worked to cut the matts out of her coat was the mo-ment Jill knew this little dog was home.

But, Justice wondered, how did The Old Lady know that? Or did she even know? She was not a close friend of the family. She was a respected ac-quaintance. Had she guessed Florpy's painful past? It seemed like more than a guess considering the effect she had on the hyperactive Florpy. And her words: 'You are safe. Now and forever.'

The Old Lady was the oldest person in Piddleshitshire. She was so old that none of her generation remained alive, nor the next three generations behind her. The tiny body which contained her intense power only made her force more focused. Her deep blue eyes, set off by her flowing silver hair, were near buried inside the folds of her face, but no one who looked into those eyes ever forgot the feeling of knowing they must listen to her, of knowing that listening to her was the most important thing on earth at that moment.

She had read every book in Piddleshitshire and all the surrounding Shires. She knew everyone in the village and valley of the new Piddleshitshire and the Shires many ridges over because she walked all the valleys nearby and not so nearby. No one re-membered her name because she had stopped telling it decades earlier. It was a silly name given to her by her parents. A delicate flower of a name which she had spent her life contradicting.

She enjoyed being called THE Old Lady. She had earned it a thousand times over, surviving bliz-zard, fire, flood.

The Old Lady turned to Companion. "Fly." The black bird took off then. She turned her gaze to the sky, following Companion up and up. "What a wonder. To fly."

She turned her gaze on Justice now. "Justice."

He waited for her to say more and when she did not, he simply asked, "Yes?"

"Do you love this place?"

Justice's blood turned cold. Why would she ask him such a question? "Uhm...I...I...ye...yes."

She smiled at him. Whatever her face expressed seemed magnified a thousand times compared to other people. Her smile thawed his blood. It surged through his body and warmed his heart.

She was sunshine when she smiled.

He cleared his throat, straightened his shoulders. "Yes."

"Would you leave it?"

A jolt went through him. His mind spun a dozen questions in seconds: why, what for, to go where, to do what, how far, forever? Never to come back? What about his mother and father, who would look after the farm? Why? WHY? He shook his head.

Her smile faded, but her face still held kindness. "Would you leave it to save it?"

"L...leave...it to...save...save it from what?"

She turned away then and looked down the long, lush valley. A sigh escaped her. "I don't know...yet."

He wanted to snort with derision, but you did not snort with derision at The Old Lady. He wished it were someone else delivering this question with no explanation.

He swallowed and said, "Uhm...Old Lady, I do not know how to answer this question. I do not know why you ask me this question."

She turned back to him. "Something wicked is on our horizon."

He smiled. "More wicked than the King?"

She looked far into the distance. "It is already on the wind. It is already on its way to us. On its way and..." She closed her eyes; a sudden brisk gust of wind moved the long waves of her silver hair. "And more behind it." She opened her eyes and turned her gaze on him. As always, he felt exposed inside the power of her bright eyes. "We need to know what is happening inside the castle."

He tried to swallow the saliva in his mouth, but his throat seemed paralyzed. Finally, he managed a gulp and said, "And?"

“And the King’s Groom of the Royal Stool is retiring. You could get closer to the King and his minions. The information you could learn would be invaluable.”

Justice stepped back, shaking his head. What came out was a squeak. “Me?”

“You.”

“Me?” he squeaked again.

“You. Your name is Justice.”

“Everybody calls me, Just.”

“Everybody is wrong.”

“You’ve mistaken me for my brother.”

“I have not. I am sorry you lost your brother. How I hate to see the young lose their lives.”

“I’m young.”

“You are indeed. And, this job suits you perfectly.”

“Why?”

“You have the cleanest cows in Gor- Piddleshitshire.”

“Are you comparing the King to a-.”

“Cow? No. To a cow’s ass.”

Justice laughed.

“So, you’ll do it. The Old Groom will train you.”

Justice shook his head. “That’s a High Born job.”

“The King does not trust the High Borns anymore.”

“How do you know this?”

“I have someone inside the Royal Court.”

“Well then! You don’t need me.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“This ally is not near the King all the time, unlike the Groom of the Royal Stool. We need to know what he is planning. He wants to leave a legacy. Those who want to leave a legacy are often the most dangerous. We need to know what he is planning. Not just for us, but

for the Kingdom.” She snorted. “As if he hasn’t done enough damage already, malevolent fool.”

“I.I...can’t.”

“You can.”

“This job is not for me.”

“This valley, this place is for you, and this job is for you. It is your destiny.”

His jaw dropped, his eyes big. Some believed The Old Lady had certain ‘powers’. But he never believed it, never believed it until he saw her calm Florpy, never believed it until she stood in front of him, telling him his destiny. Never believed it until he knew somewhere deep inside him, she was right.

“It is?”

“It is.”

He stepped toward her again. He steadied his breathing, hoping his voice would follow. “Old Lady. My destiny is to live out my life in peace right here.”

“Here. Where you are always safe?”

“Yes.”

“And not ‘Out There’. Where Light died.”

Before he could answer, The Old Lady sighed and put her hand on his shoulder. “Then here you shall stay. Until you know it is your turn to go. I will see you again then.” She put her arm up, and in moments, Companion landed and walked up to his perch upon her shoulder. She turned and walked away.

He watched her, shocked at how she was so small in stature, but so large in life. “I’m sorry,” he called after her. Without turning, she waved a hand.

He sighed and looked down at Florpy. “You sleeping, Florpy?” Instead of waking straight into her usual string of bounces, she stretched languorously, enjoying a long yawn. “Well, this is new.” She

sat up and looked at him in anticipation, but with no sign of impending squiggles.

He looked down the valley for The Old Lady, and could just make her out, a tiny speck on the horizon that loomed large in his mind now. How could she think Justice...Just...was in any way suited to infiltrate the Royal Court, to be a part of what ...subterfuge... sabotage? What did she want of him?

They moved under Kendria's green umbrella. He sat on the grass and opened his leather Cobbler Jane satchel. Wherever he went, he carried with him twelve letters, unopened.

The letters from Light arrived after word of his death reached them via a messenger with a fast horse. The slow Royal Post brought them from the far corners of the kingdom one by one. Seeing his handwriting on each envelope was like shards of glass scraping through the family's open wounds.

His parents could not bear to read them. Still, they came. During golden autumn, a crisp white winter, budding spring and the flowering summer. Each bore the colourful stamp of a different county from farther and farther away. And then the farthest; King's County. That last arrived during the warmest September Justice could remember. One year since Light had left on his travels.

Jill couldn't tolerate the letters in the house, so he kept them in the barn. As he touched the stack of bound letters inside the satchel, Justice's heart ached. He saw again his mother sink to the floor on that day the messenger came. He saw her press her face into the planks there, drag her fingernails across the wood until they bled. Heard again that wail that echoed through his nightmares still.

When he asked his mother if he could please read them, she said, "There are no answers there."

The messenger's note told them all. Light had been in the Capitol, Gorgetown, in King Gorge Square and had turned red in the face. His tongue swelled. He couldn't breathe. Many tried to help

him, but he was gone in minutes. 'I am so terribly sorry for your unfathomable loss. I pray your memories bring you comfort. He was a lovely young man...Irene Stone.'

All Justice knew was that Light had died Out There. And back here in Piddleshitshire one day not long ago his mother had thrown her arms around him and said, "My son."

She did not say, "don't leave me." But that was all Justice heard.

He moved his fingers away from the letters and their difficult memories and gripped the book Light had sent him early on the journey Out There. The title of the book was The Golden Ass.

Inside Light had inscribed it, 'Does this remind you of someone?' Of course, it reminded Justice of King Gorge.

The Golden Ass of the book wanted to be a bird, so he tried to learn magic. But his stupidity failed him, and he turned himself into a donkey, 'The Golden Ass.'

Justice fell asleep soon after he started re-reading the book. He had read it three times. It was as ridiculous as the man Justice thought of while reading. Florpy nudged him as the sun sank, as she always did. They headed home. Happy. 'I'm happy.' Justice thought again and again on the walk. 'I'm lucky, and I'm happy. And I'm staying right here being lucky and happy.'

Near midnight Justice got out of bed and checked on Single Spot. The girls did not startle when he opened the smaller barn door because he started singing 'The Moon is Blue' as he walked to the barn. Singing was the only thing Justice could do better than Light. But it wasn't much of an accomplishment because Light's singing caused birds to flee, livestock to stampede and people to smile politely through clenched jaws. Because they all loved Light, they did not disabuse him of the idea he could sing. The only 'abuse' was to everyone's eardrums.

Justice rubbed Single Spot's forehead and offered her a handful of grass, which she took eagerly. He felt her belly as his mother had

taught him. In her youth, Jill had trained for several years with one of the most respected animal healers in the Kingdom. Citizens consulted her regularly when they had an ailing animal.

Feeling around Single Spot's belly, he smiled. "That's my girl." Her belly was softer, not as distended as before, and she did not flinch when he pressed harder in the places his mother had showed him. He looked at her udders, no sign of mastitis still, but then his cows did not get mastitis as often as cows did when they lost their calves. Her eyes were clear, her disposition good. Happy she was on the mend, he left her.

As he walked across the pasture followed by Missy and Sissy, two of the orange tabby barn cats, he glanced up at the full blue moon. He stopped and took in a deep breath. He let it out slowly as his eyes took in the most beautiful sight in the world to him. Humble Haven Farm was magically azure tonight. But he needed sleep.

With a last long look out on Humble Haven Farm, he closed the front door of the house. That sound of the door latching always meant one word to him. Home.

As he slept peacefully in his bed, out there, on top of the barn, the iron horse spun round and round and finally shuddered to a stop a hundred and eighty degrees from the previous. Heavenly blue faded to slate grey.



On his last day in the valley, Justice told himself, 'I am so lucky.' This, he told himself every day. But on this day? Well, on this day there was a different ending, 'I am so luck- WHAT?!' He stopped. Florpy growled.

Smoke. Smoke ahead. He ran up the hill, toward the black sword of churning smoke slicing apart the grey clouds. Florpy growled as they ran.

His lungs burned, and his legs shook. He knew his brother would have zipped up this slope like a lightning bolt.

Then he was over the top, and he saw her. "NNNNOOOOOO!" Kendria. Burning. Her branches flailed in the storm of flames consuming her. "NNOOOOOOO!"

They looked up at him. He gasped and ducked back behind the hill. Those four men wore the uniform of the King's Guard.

He rolled onto his back, squeezing his eyes shut, but the tears were already pouring. When he opened his eyes, he gasped.

The Old Lady was standing over him, Companion perched on her shoulder. Her penetrating blue eyes burned into his brown ones. As always, it was hard to look her in the eye and impossible to look away.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because...THE KING IS A CHEAT!", she shouted to the wind. Companion flapped his wings on her shoulder.

Justice sat up, "SSSHHHH!" He nodded toward Kendria ablaze.

"I do not care." She straightened and shouted, "THE KING IS AN EVIL MORON!"

Justice leapt up, "The...they...they'll hear."

She put her hand on his shoulder, "They cannot hear anything over the roar of your Kendria burning."

Justice swallowed, "Wh... why...why did they do that?"

The Old Lady lifted her hand from his shoulder, looked further down the valley and said, "Golf."

"GOLF?"

The Old Lady turned back to Justice. "The King has already built a shelf for his trophies. As we speak, the metal smiths and wood workers are working on his trophies for the golf not yet played on the course not yet made. The painters are painting portraits of him holding the trophies not yet made for the golf not yet played on the course not yet made. The decorators are looking for spots in the

castle to hang the portraits of the King holding the trophies not yet made for the golf not yet played on the course not yet made.”

“Golf? He’s building a golf course here??”

“Of course not. That would be too difficult. It is just a putt-putt course. All of the greens are designed with troughs so he can sink a putt from any position.”

“But, but won’t everyone putt the same??”

“There is no everyone. He will be the only player to ever play here. He has ordered a trophy designed for every hole. There are going to be eleven thousand, seven hundred and eighty holes. One for every time in his life he has cheated. Though he calls it ‘one for every time your Lord God King God King Gorge has won.’ The course will take up the whole valley and the village itself. Burning Kendria was a test. King Gorge is going to burn the Valley and the Village of Piddleshitshire. Because he’s a shit.”

She stroked Companion’s head, “What is King Gorge, Companion??”

“Shit!” Companion squawked.

Justice sat heavily on the grass. The air left his lungs in a rush. The Old Lady kicked his leg with her pointy shoe, “Ow!”

“Get up. You have work to do.”

He tsked with annoyance but got up. “What are you on about? I’m not going.”

She withdrew a scroll from her satchel and smacked him on the head with it.

“Ow. Again.”

“Respect, young Justice. I demand respect. I have earned it.”

“You have, and I am sorry. I am.”

“Did Bobor and Jill teach you such disrespect? I think not.”

Justice hung his head, shook it, “No. They taught me respect. And I am sorry. Truly.” He nodded in the direction where Kendria stood. “I am upset. But it is no excuse.”

The Old Lady touched his arm. “I understand your loss. And I am endeavouring to save your precious safe place.”

His jaw dropped at her words. “You...pardon?”

“Do you think I do not understand what this place means to you since Light left us? It means something to all of us but you...” She looked into his eyes, studying him in a way no one had studied him before. He swallowed and took an involuntary step back. “It means the most to you of anyone, including me, though I’ve lived decades more, seen the valley through flood and drought and beautiful summers. Light died Out There. So, you wish to stay In Here, where you think it is safe. And where you think ‘safe’ equals ‘happy.’”

She shook her head and handed him the scroll. “Your parents can look after the farm themselves.”

He held the scroll in his hands for a moment, and his heart raced. The tic under his eye fluttered, his head filled with cotton and sparkles appeared in his vision. The Old Lady took his arm. “Sit down before you fall down.”

She guided him to the ground where he squeezed his hands into fists rhythmically as his mother had instructed when he felt close to fainting. The sparkles and the tic stopped. His head cleared, and he unrolled the scroll. As he read it, his eyes widened. “Y... you are joking.”

“You won’t be completely alone.”

“Your person on the inside?”

She shook her head. “No. It is safer if neither of you know you are allies until the time is right. In the meantime, gather as much information as you can on your own. You will be very close to the King and inside the Royal Court. Remember this: keep your mouth closed and your ears open.”

Justice imagined the look on his face matched the alarm churning in his guts because The Old Lady put her hand on his arm.

“Justice. You will not be alone because I will send you messages. And you can send messages back.”

Justice nodded at the raven. “Companion?”

The Old Lady laughed, “Ravens are too smart to be messengers for humans. They would just tear the message off their leg and look at you like you are an idiot for trying such a thing. Wouldn’t you, Companion?” She kissed the raven’s head. Companion made a kissing sound in return. “Besides, they don’t have a homing instinct, like a...” She raised her eyebrows at him, compelling him to finish the sentence.

“Homing Pigeon? But how would it find me? And the people employed in the castle are High Borns. Why would he employ me?”

“The King doesn’t trust the ‘High Borns’, so he’s looking for, as he delightfully calls all the rest of us: ‘Lowly Lows.’” She smiled at him, reached into her satchel, and pulled out a pigeon.

The bird had iridescent blue/grey plumage. She calmly perched on The Old Lady’s forearm.

“This is Amelia. She was raised in the quarters of the person whose job you will be taking. She receives no food there. She gets her food from me. When I have a message for you, I will release her. She’ll fly home. You’ll take the message from her. And if you have a message for me, you’ll roll it up and put it in this tube that attaches to her leg, release her, and she’ll fly to me to get food. If you don’t have a message, release her anyway, and she’ll come to me. But do not feed her there. Just give her water.”

“That’s...it’s...it’s a long way.”

“It’s a three hundred kilometres. She can fly a hundred a day.” The Old Lady petted Amelia’s head, “Can’t you, girl?” She looked at Justice. “She’s friendly. You can show your appreciation for her by giving her a warm bed for the night when she brings a message. And petting her. She likes pets on the back of her neck.” The Old Lady moved her forearm closer to Justice. He petted the back of Amelia’s

neck, marvelling at her smooth soft feathers. He felt her lean against his finger.

The Old Lady smiled at him. “Justice, you are qualified for this very particular job. And my insider has already secured the position for you. I will tell you the story we have written for you, explaining how you came to secure this position.”

“Wh...when do I leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

A shock ran through him, and The Old Lady noted how his face fell. Her voice was raspy suddenly, with emotion or fatigue, Justice wasn’t sure. But her words came with more gravitas now. “Today you have seen the start of what the King has in store for your home and mine. In sixty days that wrinkled old prune is having a 30th birthday party for himself. Forty years late. His birthday candles apparently did not provide enough fire and flame for him, so he has arranged that our village and valley be burned on his birthday. He’s even sending artists to paint the scene.” She took his hand, squeezed it with strength. “The time is now.”

Justice tried to show more bravado than he felt by squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin. “Good. The sooner this is done, the sooner I can come home.” ‘Or die’ he thought. Either way it would be over. “I just have one more thing to do before I go.”

He walked down to where his friend Kendria had stood just yesterday. The Old Lady followed him. He squatted down, picked up a handful of her ashes. He felt the nonexistent weight of the ashes in his hand. “How insubstantial,” he said. “And she was so substantial.”

The Old Lady handed him a small jar, and he filled it with some of the remains of his best friend in the valley.



"You are WHAT?" Bobor shouted and pounded the wooden table. Jill stared straight ahead; her gaze trained on nothing.

To Justice, she looked frailer than her slight frame, and her skin was almost translucent. Her hair tumbled in gilt waves to her waist, framing her face with sunshine this moment, a veil of darkness enveloped her.

"Mom?" he asked. He squatted down beside her chair, put his hand on hers. She blinked rapidly then, as though being shaken awake from a dream...or a nightmare.

"After all we have done to keep you safe." She turned to Justice then, ran her hands through his hair. "What about this?"

Damn. He shook his head. "I didn't think."

His father pounded the table again. "Of course not." He stood up. "I cannot talk about this anymore. I'll allow you one more night here. With the dawn, you had better be gone."

Justice stared at his father's craggy face: sun and wind burnt, tough and kind, strong and tired, merry and sad, mischievous and righteous. The face of a man connected to the land.

Was this the last time he would see his father's face? Bobor turned and walked to the door of the small bedroom he shared with his wife. And then he was gone.

"Why would you do this?" his mother asked.

The Old Lady had been clear that he could not say why he was going 'Out There.' He could say nothing about the king's plans for the valley because the people might panic and do something that would bring the king's unwanted attention down upon their heads.

"I...I want to make a better future for you and Dad."

"The future is unknowable. But what your father and I know right now is that come morning, we will have no son. Come morning, we will be parents without children." She paused, took a long breath. "I wonder...is there a name for orphaned parents?"

Justice nodded, "Ver waister Elternteil. I read it in a German novel." He flinched then, thinking he should not have mentioned it. "Sorry."

"Never apologize for knowing something, Justice. There are people in this kingdom who resent knowledge. We are not those people." Justice felt relieved until she continued. "Come morning, they brand you a traitor to this place for which you profess such love." She shook her head. "What of your grandma and grandpa? What of your aunts and uncles and cousins? Do you not understand there will be no more family Christmas here? No more games around this table? No more laughter? No more shared history? They will not come here again. No one will come here again. Our name will mean less than nothing here. We will bear the family name of a traitor to the people."

Tears flowed down his face. He wanted to scream, 'I'M DOING THIS FOR THE PEOPLE! I'M TRYING TO STOP A CATASTROPHE!'

She wiped at his tears with the back of her hand. "Last time I'll wipe away your tears." She blinked back her own tears and stood. She tugged on a strand of his hair. "You take after your father. Get rid of that before morning."

She walked away from him. As she closed the bedroom door, he heard a sob break from her.



He entered the kitchen. Was it for the last time ever? His mother was sitting at the table. Justice gasped when he saw her; she had cut her hair to just below her ears.

She glanced at his bald head. "Good. Sit down." She slid a bag across the table to him. He knew what was in it before he opened it and found the blond waves.

"Try it on." She said and stood to adjust the wig.

"Did you get any sleep? Maybe you can go back to sleep after I'm...gone." He said as she moved the wig around on his head. Florpy went under the table and laid her head on Justice's foot.

"I have a surgery this morning. Cobbler Joe's cat Shoehorn needs an infected tooth removed. I will sleep later." She moved the wig around, picked up her scissors and snipped here and there.

"It is to my shoulders?" Justice said.

"That is the style in the Capitol." Moving around to look at his face, comparing one side with the other, pulling a tendril here, snipping there. "I can trim the fringe a little. Is it bothering your eyes?"

Justice shook his head and felt her pull some waves forward to cover his forehead and then saw tears come into her eyes.

He gripped her hand. "Mom."

She was breathing hard, and her words choked on her tears. "You look like Light."

"I'm sorry." What she said had cut him deeply. He fought to remember that she was grieving the loss of two sons now and this son, the one still in front of her, suddenly looked like the one who could never come home.

She shook her head and sat down heavily; the strength drained out of her. "I cannot...I...do not understand why."

Tears stung his eyes. If he failed, they would never know why he had gone to work for the King. And not just work for the king. He was to be the New Groom of the Royal Stool, the most intimate position in the Royal Court. And the most odious.

He stared at his mother. He was stalling. Now that the time came to leave, his arms and legs were stone. Florpy slept on his foot. He

moved a little. The weight of her head on his foot was warm and comforting.

He braced his hands on the table and pushed himself up. His mother stared at the door. Florpy jumped up, attentive, enthusiastic about going with him anywhere.

He walked around the table and bent down to kiss his Mom on the cheek. She cupped his face in her hand. "Just come back." He stood, squeezed her shoulder and picked up his rucksack.

Florpy was beside him as he strode to the door. He bent down to pat her. "Good girl. See you later." He scratched under her chin, looked into her eyes. "You're safe. Now and forever." He opened the door just wide enough to slide through.

He closed the door slowly, looking into Florpy's eyes as she whimpered, staring up at him. The sound of the door latching had a finality this time. He turned that thought aside and started off.

Florpy began barking as he walked on down the curving road in Humble Haven Farm. 'Step one. Step two. Step three.' Her cries faded behind him, as he walked beside the pasture where the cows re-garded him curiously and mooded, anticipating feed, water, pets. He glanced back as Single Spot left the herd, trotted to the fence to follow him. He ran.

At the end of the road, he stopped. He looked at the pigeons Light had carved for the fenceposts on either side of the drive. Anxiety landed. The ground shifted under his feet. He swallowed and turned to look back at Humble Haven Farm.

He tried to burn the image into his mind: the winding road bordered by poplars, Single Spot watching him, the green pasture, the barn, the iron horse weathervane, and that thatch-roofed house that held warm fires and his whole lifetime of memories. All of it was grey this morning. All of it was beautiful still. And beautiful in its stillness.

"Goodbye."



As he took the carriage out of Piddleshitshire, he locked eyes with his lifelong friends Cobblers Joe and Jane. They gave him one disgusted look and turned away. As though all the blood had just drained from his heart, it went hollow, empty and cold. The tears came again.

Townfolk at the Only Café tables pumped fists at him. People on benches lining the street and walk-ing with their daily shop turned away. His community. His people. No more. Nausea pinched at his guts with icy claws.

Splat! A tomato struck the carriage. The driver stopped and looked down at the red slimy mess. "You'll pay a cleaning fee for that, traitor. Your new position in the Royal Court is the only reason you're not walking to Gorgetown."

'Gorgetown' Justice thought. 'I'm going to Gorgetown. I'm going to the place that killed Light.'

ME ME ME ME ME!

ME ME ME ME ME! were the first words he heard uttered by the King. 'How apropos,' Justice thought.

But Justice wasn't Justice anymore. He was 'New Groom'. Old Groom had told him to, "Forget your name. Your name is dead here. You are your job, that is all. You are New Groom. And you had better answer to it. Because if you don't." Old Groom sliced a finger across his throat.

"New Groom." He nodded at Old Groom, running the name through his mind again, 'New Groom, New Groom, New Groom.'

"ME ME ME ME ME!" The King's voice sent shivers down New Groom's spine.

"RIGHT. Second time. That's us, New Groom. Go, go, go." Old Groom, a freckled blonde boy of 12, shoved New Groom forward with the Royal Velvet Throne. It was an intricate mahogany and gold velvet commode on wheels accented with swirls of gold leaf. New Groom was sure this King's toilet cost more than Humble Haven Farm and Westview Farm next door.

New Groom kissed the pendant that held Kendria's ashes and gripped the carved handles of the RVT. He took a breath and pushed it through the doors into the King's Royal Bedchamber for the first time.

The RVT was heavy. His shoulders burned as he pushed it. It was as if it wasn't on wheels at all. His body sagged beneath the weight of his Royal garb. His entire ensemble was a mustard colour that re-minded him of baby poop. He supposed it was some kind of gold colour. Sheathed in watered silk, lined with more silk, beribboned to ridiculousness, he was glad the citizens of Piddleshitshire could not see him now. A white lace cravat choked him and the puffed sleeves got in the way of everything. He guessed the whole outfit weighed about 15 pounds. Luckily, all the layers of silk and watered silk absorbed the sweat to which he was prone.

As he moved into the inner sanctum of the King for the first time, his heart jumped inside his chest like a freaked-out frog, whether from exertion or stress was impossible to tell.

New Groom's eyes widened as he took in the Royal Bedchamber. He calculated that five Humble Haven Farms could fit inside this impossibly gaudy, tacky, tasteless room.

Gold. There were no other colours in the heavy draped luxury. New Groom felt suffocated, as though sewn up inside a gold satin pillow. Sweat threatened to advance beyond his blond curls and drip down onto his face. He gripped the handle of the 'RVT' harder, hoping Old Groom wouldn't detect his nervousness.

New Groom's eyes found the huge gold canopy bed with its five-foot sides, 'Where is the king?' he wondered, seeing no one there. 'Is he IN there?'

He noted the two poor stuffed tigers forever snarling in fake ferociousness at each end of the bed. New Groom had heard their story back home. They were a mated pair kept within the King's Royal Private Preserve, along with many species, especially those prized by the Sovereign for their striking fur or plumage. The pair had been drinking from a pond when struck by the arrows of the King's Royal Huntsmen. They were the last of this species of tiger.

New Groom looked at the malevolent snarls molded by the taxidermist. 'That's not how they looked, just drinking from a pond.' he thought. He wished they could awaken. He wished they could awaken and chase this King out of his kingdom. Or eat him. And feed his carcass to their young, who just might save their beautiful species. But...too late.

Three male Cheaps that Old Groom had told him were The Graveyard Cheaps, stood at attention at the foot of the bed. New Groom marvelled at their natural bright neon striped hair.

A frail Ancient Cheap, propped up by the other two, appeared to be dozing. New Groom felt his heart lurch. How old was he? Why did he have to stand here all night? What would happen to him if he quit?

'Stupid,' he berated himself. 'Cheaps can't quit.' It was the first time New Groom had seen Cheaps at work. Anger boiled through his blood.

'No, no, don't think it, don't. My disgust might come out on my face and expose me,' he thought. He put the back of a gloved hand to his forehead to mop the sweat. But his hand shook, so he shoved it down. A mere minute in, and he was already mucking it up. If he didn't get a grip, his fate would match those of these now extinct tigers.

'HEEKU!' The hiccup echoed through the bedchamber. Old Groom stood on his tiptoes, grabbed New Groom's ear and twisted. He made a throat cutting gesture. Would New Groom's cause of death be hiccups? He worked to slow his breath to keep the hiccups at bay.

The two young Cheaps opened the drapes, revealing a drought-stricken landscape. New Groom stifled a gasp as he looked upon the dead trees and cracked earth. After four days of a jostling carriage ride he had arrived, exhausted, on a moon-less night. He never imagined that the wealthy Capitol, Gorgetown, could be so lifeless. How sad compared to lushly alive Piddleshitshire.

"HOLD!" the King shouted.

'Hold what?' New Groom thought.

Delicate fingers curled over the edge of the bedside, then another hand, and another. Three flaxen haired beauties giggled as they climbed over the bedside, barely clothed, and sprinted to the door.

"ME ME ME ME ME!" the King shouted.

The Cheaps pulled kazoos out of their pockets and put them to their mouths.

Old Groom indicated to New Groom to take a thick gold rope at the foot of the bed. Old Groom took up the rope at the head of the bed. New Groom noted the hole woven into the end of the rope.

A palomino, draped in gold, backed into the bedchamber guided by a Stable Boy in the fanciest yellow/gold baby poop coloured garb Justice had ever seen, except of course his own get up.

They hooked the ropes to the golden harness round the horse's shoulders. The Stable Boy urged the horse onward.

The horse put its head down and strained forward. The King's gold draped belly rose like a malignant sun climbing the sky on this morning to further scorch the parched, dying land.

As the King emerged on the gold platform, the Cheaps played on their kazoos, 'Also Sprach Zarathustra.' It amazed New Groom that the King needed to be announced in this grandiose way, in his own bedroom. On the 'TA DA' of the kazoo tune, the King's orange head appeared, looking puny atop his Sumo sized body.

Old Groom maneuvered the RVT to the side of the bed. The palomino backed up to the bed again. Old Groom directed New Groom to unhook the lines on the platform and reposition them to midpoints on the frame. The horse moved forward, and the platform pivoted for a moment, then froze.

"PIVOT!" Stable Boy called out.

Old Groom said, "New Groom, push this corner."

New Groom moved to the corner and pushed on the platform. He pushed until his arms shook, but the platform did not budge.

"PIVOT! PIVOT! PIVOT!" Stable Boy screeched.

'SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!' New Groom wanted to scream, his arms burning with the effort.

Finally, the platform swung round, perp-pendicular to the frame. It tilted up and as Old Groom ran to steady the RVT, the King slid down onto it.

It was New Groom's first chance to see the King up close. The King's face bore no lines though he was in his seventies: no laugh lines, no lines of sorrow, no lines of life. A wooden mask. It was as though he had never known human emotion. And his eyes? His eyes were dead, reflecting no light, no inner life. The King looked like a cadaver. No. Cadavers once had a life. Cadavers once had a heart. The King looked like something that could never aspire to be a human cadaver.

The Cheaps finished the morning tune and moved toward the exit, the two young Cheaps leading the trailing Ancient Cheap.

As they passed the RVT, Ancient Cheap stumbled. New Groom hurried to grab the man's elbow; his arm went around the man's waist. "Steady there, sir." Ancient Cheap looked up at him in astonishment and then pushed him away.

New Groom, shocked at the old man's reaction to his help, let go. He looked up to see the two young Cheaps staring at him.

Old Groom stepped forward. "The Cheap tripped on an errant thread on the carpet. He's quite alright, New Groom, and of course he did NOT need your assistance."

'Damn, did I just get this man in trouble?' New Groom thought. He bowed. "Of course. I felt his strength even as I realized he did not actually need my help. I am sorry, Old Groom."

"New Groom. Royal Personages of the Royal Household do not assist Cheaps. They don't touch Cheaps. Certainly, Cheaps do not touch anyone. For a Cheap to touch a person is a crime for which death is the punishment. Mind your place here. Mind your place. The Cheaps are the excrement smear on the underside of a horse's tail after a bout of explosive diarrhea."

The King laughed. "Old Groom. Good one. You did starter-up your Lord God King God's Day with a goodly good-est laugher."

The King stood and bent forward. Old Groom indicated to New Groom to lift the King's gold robes. When he did, it was not The Golden Ass he expected. The briefest glance took in a cottage cheese surface of straggly hairs, pimples, and dimples.

The King sat on the RVT. Old Groom and New Groom moved to stand at the front corners of the RVT.

The King's fists balled, his face reddened, and he made horrific grunting groaning noises. New Groom gulped and endeavoured to breathe through his mouth, without being obvious, as anxiety rose in him. 'What am I doing here?' His panic exploded as the King flicked a hand toward him. 'Oh Gods... oh Gods...'

The King said, "Old Groom, whoozat?"

"Mutton-Headed Majesty..." Old Groom began. New Groom's head whipped toward Old Groom, mouth gaping open. A warning glance from Old Groom made New Groom shut his mouth, look straight ahead. "May I present the New Groom of the Royal Stool." Old Groom bowed and stayed bowed.

"WHAT? NO. No, you may not be presenting this person-ing. Explain."

Still bowed, Old Groom said, "Supremely Stupefied Sire. I retired last month, and they chose New Groom from dozens of candidates who were-"

The King stopped grunting and roared, "YOUR LORD GOD KING GOD CHOOSES. ME. I AM LORD GOD KING GOD. ME KING. ME GOD. ME. ME."

The King pointed at New Groom and New Groom's body jerked as though he were a slow sheep poked by a shepherd's hook.

The King, red-faced, continued to grunt, "What he knows?"

"Obese Obtuse Oligarch, the New Groom of the Royal Stool knows all."

The King stopped grunting, unfurled his fists. His beady eyes narrowed beneath his flop of golden hair, “So your Lord God King God making efforts for nothings? Effort-ing for no reward?” The King’s voice dropped to a low growl. “Melon Head 693. Bowling Ball.”

New Groom, shocked when Old Groom threw himself on the floor, stood stock still. He watched as Old Groom kissed the King’s pudgy pimpled feet and blurted in one breath, “My Listless Liege, Ruler of All the Lands Seen and Not Seen, I beg forgiveness for prolonging the Royal grunts and can assure his Divine Dingbat that the New Groom of the Royal Stool is fully versed on his duties and his knowledge is my knowledge, my Lord God King God in all your superior superiority your lowly low of the lowest begs mercy.”

The King kicked Old Groom. “Get up-righted.”

Old Groom rose and stepped aside as Melon Head 693 hurried in, golden drawstring bag in hand. His thin body was perpetually bent beneath the heavy folds of his finest court garb. He bowed and bowed and bowed again, his head looking near to dusting the floor.

“Dimwitted Dingiest Dullard. I live to serve my Lord God King God.”

“Show New Groom, the candy-date for...oh...oh candy-date oh, oh, candy, candy Melon Head 693. CANDY.”

Melon Head 693 reached into the pocket of his coat, pulled out a handful of candies, and threw them into the King’s open mouth. The King closed his mouth, cheeks ballooned out like a squirrel storing nuts. He crunched away, drool running down his chin, his voice muffled by the candy.

“Num num num num num.” The King slurped a river of drool up from his chin into his mouth.

New Groom felt his stomach lurch. ‘Don’t throw up, don’t throw up, stop saying ‘throw up’ idiot, think of something nice bluebirds, bluebirds, bluebirds... barfing bluebirds. STOP IT, no no no, stop it now, stop now. Stop now. Now.’

The King mumbled through his chews and slurps, “Sho O’ Groo ‘eweth...ewith oh ee aw.”

Melon Head 693 straightened. “Presenting his Lord God King God’s newest bowling ball.” He opened the golden bag and withdrew a male head with bright neon hair.

New Groom felt the floor tilt beneath his feet as his breath rushed from his lungs. ‘Stop looking stop...oh my gods...breathe...breathe...BREATHE.’ Old Groom’s elbow jabbing him helped him focus.

The King sucked coloured sugar from his fingers with loud groans, “Mmm mmm MMM. Oh, ya, who that again, Melon Head 693?”

“My Crass Crown-ed Cluck, this was the Westerly Wing-ed Floor Cleaning Cheap who failed to find, and dislodge, the mosquito wing stuck to the upper right corner of the fifth tile to the left in the first row in front of the door to the Royal Rounded-For-No-Reason Office.”

The King’s eyes narrowed, and New Groom felt afraid for Melon Head 693. “The Cheaps bowling balls only rollie roll two times mostly-est cause they are a thinnny thin lot with not much between the ear flaps. Where are the fatty fat Re-PUBIC-an bowling balls?”

Melon Head 693 shifted, looked at the floor and cleared his throat.

“My Divine Disappointment, we - we are sorry to report we have located none of the Republican rebellious rabble who are determined to abolish your divine Crown. They have proven slippery.”

The King grinned, squinted his black eyes at New Groom. New Groom’s eyes met the King’s. New Groom thought, “It is like looking at black marbles. Nothing is looking back.”

New Groom’s blood turned to ice; he could have sworn he heard his veins cracking as they froze.

The King laughed. “This pale New Groom might be the first Re-pubic-an bowling ball. Or be you Drunk-o-crat?”

New Groom’s body jerked involuntarily. His nervous tic made the flesh below his right eye twitch.

“Are you a spasty spaz?” The King laughed louder. “Old Groom, what have you brought here?”

Old Groom’s face drained to a whiter shade of pale. “M-my Lord God King God, he did have the cleanest cows in the county from whence he came.”

The King narrowed his eyes and looked New Groom up and down. New Groom found his mouth full of saliva, and he had to swallow. It turned into a gulp.

The King said, “It may be entertaint-ing to watch the herky-jerky of a spasty spaz. They are the funniest of funnies, but the New Groom has to attend-er the King’s Royal Butter-ocks. And this New Groom has not answered his Lord God King God. Be ye Re-pubic-an or Drunk-o-crat?”

New Groom swallowed and said, “M...m...most Magnificent M-Majesty, I...I have not heard of the - the Re-pumpkins? Drunk-o-crats? I have not heard the name, b...but they all s...sound a...awful.”

“Dis-crusting is what they are. Tell them how dis-crusting Melon Head 693.”

Melon Head 693 said, “The Re-Pubic-ans speak the okie dokie plain folk speak of the land people and pretend to be rooted in the salted earth while salivating on their silver spoons as they scheme and covet the King’s riches. They would keep the wealthy wealthy while telling ludicrous lies of wealth falling from their lofty purses and landing in the hands of the masses so long as the masses work for nothing. False hopes kill the joy of life. They are sewing discord and disquiet across The Kingdom. And the Drunk-o-crats? So frail are they that they faint and swoon with a slight harsh word and tangle the simplest processes in a twisted nest of rules, so nothing is accomplished. Both wish to topple the monarchy, which is the very stability our kingdom has depended upon for eons. Our stable genius King stabilizes all around him. Everyone knows their place, knows what is expected of them and what to expect from life. There are no hopes here to disappoint. There is only the reassurance that one need not aspire. Surely, that is a certainty worth protecting and a sacred one at that, the divine, God Given, right of the King’s rule.”