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# Graeme Smith



# A Comedy of TERRORS

## Back Cover

A Comic Fantasy Novel by Graeme Smith

Segorian Anderson's an Idiot. But that's fine with him. It's a well paying job with no heavy lifting.

Nobody ever remembers Segorian. It isn't magic—he just has the sort of face his own mother could forget, and she's been trying to for years. But being forgettable is a job requirement for an Idiot.

No, he's not the Court Jester. He doesn't wear motley (whatever motley may be). That's a different union. He's the Idiot. In a Queen's castle, wine spilt down the wrong dress can lead to war. So someone unimportant has to be blamed for it. That's the Idiot's job. He's The Idiot Who Did It. For any value of 'It'. Of course, as soon as he's exiled-for-life out of the castle gate, he uses his back-door key and sneaks back in.

But that's not all. Someday, something really bad will happen. Really, really bad. Badder than a bad thing on a very bad day. With extra badness. When the world's about to end (or the washing up won't get done—whichever comes first), who you gonna call? No, not them. They haven't been invented yet. You call the Idiot. Someone nobody will miss if things don't work out. And now Peladon has a case of dragon.

But the dragon may be the easy part. Segorian has woman trouble, and he's the only person in the castle who doesn't know it. Because to Segorian, women are an open book. The problem is—he never learned to read.

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*This book is dedicated to many things.*

*To laughter.*

*To being silly.*

*To those who know the difference between idiots and Idiots—between fools and Fools.*

*It is dedicated to my wife, who put up with a lot of loud typing, and to the real Sonea, who allowed me to put her in Peladon.*

*And to my mother.*

*Who isn't in this book.*

*And, if I may, it's dedicated to The Shark. Who laughed when I broke the rules.*

## Acknowledgements

No book comes from one thought, from one mind or from one pen. And this one is no different. To my readers, both alpha and beta, I owe no small debt. And so:

To Kaptain K, to Mr DJ, to Lady A, to Lady Cheryl, to the real Kohkoh, the real Sonea, to Sexy Nerd (no—don't ask. She'd have to kill me. Again), to Lady Talon, to Lady Tanya (hmmm—is there a pattern here?), to Nix (and yes. She's always a lady—to me) my thanks. And don't go away. The not-summer night sky is screaming.

And to my editors. To Lady Chris—who I drove mad, and who drove me back, and to Lady Richelle—who knew my gramma even when I didn't. Lordy, my gram'ma could laugh...

# A Comedy of Terrors

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## Prologue

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm an Idiot.

This wouldn't be news to anyone who knows me, apart from my mother. She believes me to be an incredible idiot and would be amazed I'd been able to improve to just 'idiot.' Her view is probably more accurate. She's known me even longer than I have.

If I'm going to be totally honest (a bad habit I'm trying to break), Idiot is only one of my names. To the Elves, I'm 'Oh-god-it-eez-eem-aygayn'. To the dwarves I'm 'Bugger-lock-the-door-and-keep-quiet-he-might-go-away'. To the Halflings—actually, I don't know what the Halflings call me. I can't ask. They have a restraining order, and really good lawyers. With writs—writs with nails in.

But still, I'm an Idiot. And not unhappy with that. It's a well-paying job with no heavy lifting.

Job? Sorry. I can see you're confused. As you can tell, I'm not very good at this. Let me start again.

Segorian Anderson, Royal Idiot at your service. Well. Not at *your* service. At the Queen's service. And gods above, every ruler needs an Idiot. Queen Sonea? She has me.

That's Queen Sonea of Peladon. Or Sonea, Queen of Peladon. I can never remember the proper form. I'll get exiled for it one day.

No. I'm not the Jester. Not the Fool. I don't wear motley (whatever motley may be) and I don't tell complicated jokes nobody understands, giving me an excuse to bash them on the head with a pig's bladder. Besides, that's a different union.

I'm an Idiot.

Whenever something goes wrong, there has to be somebody to blame. When a visiting dignitary has wine spilled down their tunic—some idiot spilt it. When the generals lose a battle—some idiot read their plans wrong. When the Royal Pageant starts out on a bright sunny day, and the bright sun turns to dark clouds, and the dark clouds to hissing pouring...oh. I forgot. Nobody cares about the weather report. Anyway. Some idiot wrote down the wrong day in the Royal Calendar.

I'm the Idiot.

When the call comes, the Queen's people pull out something relevant—a servant's tabard, perhaps a Colonel's uniform—and I go to my duty. I stand where I must stand. Some people shout at me for a while, and I'm banished from the Kingdom forever for my grievous sins. The offended parties feel vindicated, and nobody important has to suffer unduly. I accept my exile, at least as far as the back door to the castle, and then I slip back inside. To wait for the next time. Because everybody needs an Idiot.

Like I said, it's a well-paying job. And no heavy lifting. Or it was. Until the dragon...





# Chapter One

## The Heights of Idiocy

Yesterday was a busy one. I was exiled-for-life for dancing with the Emissary from Targis at Queen Sonea's welcoming ball. It hadn't been the dancing. Apparently I'd worn red shoes, and only an idiot would wear red shoes to dance with a Targisian. Red shoes are the mark of their Assassins' Guild. So in Targis it's a point of honour to let people in red shoes kill you.

Targisians are crazy. Everybody knows assassins wear green shoes.

While I was dancing with the Emissary I was also running down the corridor of the castle with a message for the Queen's First Minister. Apparently I'd tripped and fallen, knocking over a four hundred-year-old vase. It was a gift from First Fist Andrakan of the Eldrak Horde. What else could it be except, exile-for-life?

Of course, I wasn't in either of these places. Well, I was, professionally speaking. Not in person. But that's my job. *The Idiot Who Did It*. For any value of 'It'. So I was exiled-twice. It helps to have a key to the backdoor.

It's an essential qualification for my job to look like, well, like nobody. I have a face my own mother has problems remembering. Of course, she's had more practice. She's been trying to forget it for years. That's why I can get exiled-for-life so often. Nobody notices that while the uniform might change it's always the same me underneath. And even if they did, they'd make sure they didn't. Notice, I mean. That's Politics, that is. But with two exiles in one day and both the First Demon and the Emissary still in the castle, I was confined to quarters till they left. Just in case.

I'd been on a necessary visit to Jake-down-the-hall. Of course, I got lost. I didn't know my way around the upstairs halls yet. My old quarters in the lower cellars were apparently infested with something undefined but clearly infesty. Not that I'd ever seen anything infest-ish. I only knew because some people came by one day, picked up everything I owned, and moved it to new quarters on an upper floor. There were only two of them, but at least that meant one of them had a hand free to open doors. They had a piece of paper with lots of 'By orders' and 'Herewith and hereunders' on it. There was even a seal. With a tassel. I try not to argue with tassels.

When I found my way back to my new rooms I checked the tiny piece of parchment I trap in the jamb each time I leave. I know all sorts of things I've been exiled for doing, which sometimes makes people nervous. Whatever paranoia is (I don't think it's been invented yet), it's one of my hobbies. Anyway, the piece of parchment was still there. So it was a little surprising to find the other side of the door less than empty. It was even more surprising to see what was un-emptying it. I made sure I was looking at the floor before I spoke. "Good day, Your Majesty."

Of course, there's isn't any law against looking at the Queen. I'm told even cats do it, not that cats would care about laws. It's just that she expects people to notice things. Things like her hair looking different. Or that she has a new-new-new dress. Women are like an open book to me. Mostly because I never learned to read. So I kept my eyes on the floor. That way at least I could say I hadn't seen whatever it was I was supposed to be noticing. This time I might have got away with it. Her Majesty was looking out of my window.

“Idiot.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Not you, Segorian. Him!”

From the window of my new apartments on the third floor, I could see a figure scurrying to and fro across the courtyard beneath. From time to time, for no reason I could identify, the figure would suddenly roll on the ground and freeze while it looked around.

“The Guards do this all the time. They assign some trainee to follow me. This idiot is the latest.”

I watched the figure for a while. “So he's...” I peered a little closer. “... yes, he's a trainee. He was assigned to follow you. He failed to do so. There is no doubt his superiors will find out. And only an idiot would fail in such an important task. No doubt he will be exiled-for-life. Or rather, I will, of course. Your Majesty, I'll arrange for a trainee guard's uniform. Would tomorrow be appropriate?”

“Not necessary, Segorian. There are Rules, you see. The Guard OverCaptain has standing instructions in such matters. As anybody would know, nobody in their right mind would assign a trainee to follow the Queen. The OverCaptain is by definition in his right mind else I would have removed him from his post. Since I have not removed him—there was no trainee. There is no trainee. No exile required.” Queen Sonea stepped away from the window. I—did not.

“Your Majesty. I notice my window is open?”

“Is it, Segorian?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I also notice the ivy growing up the wall is quite prolific this year. It is no doubt well rooted.”

“No doubt, Segorian. No doubt.”

“I try my best to know if anybody has entered these apartments. Through the door at least. As far as I can tell, nobody did.”

“Segorian. Let us be realistic. You seem to be trying to suggest the Queen of Peladon, irritated at being followed by a trainee who thought rolling was a proper form of locomotion, saw an open window and climbed up the ivy to an empty apartment. Which is madness. The Queen climbing ivy is clearly impossible. So it must be the case that it didn't happen. The Queen is not in your apartment.

The Queen is walking around the gardens wondering why the gravel behind her crunches every now and again as if someone—not an Idiot—were rolling on it. Is that clear?”

“Quite clear, Your Maj...” I knew if I’d been looking at her I would have seen the “Look” in her eyes. It is not a good day when the Queen looks at you with the “Look.” “Quite clear, Your Not-Here-ness.”

Her not-Queen-ness threw herself down in one of the better cushioned chairs. “Segorian...I’ve been an idiot.”

“The Queen cannot be an Idiot. She *has* an Idiot for that sort of thing, Your Not-Here-ness.”

“The Queen can be anything she damn well pleases to be, Segorian. It’s part of being Queen. Tell me. What do you know of dragons?”

Dragons? Gods above. A bad day was clearly about to get worse. “Dragons, Your Not-...” I could almost feel the “Look.” “Er, right. Yes. Dragons. As investigated and confirmed by the Royal Commission established by your father, may he rest in peace...”

“Pieces, Segorian. Pieces. It was a very messy battle.”

“...by your father, may he rest, as you say, in pieces, dragons are mythical beasts. They are found in the legends of nearly every country and people. However, they’re probably a race memory. Whatever a race memory is, Your Not-Here-Ness. A race memory of, um... of something huge and scaly with massive teeth and claws. Something very definitely not a dragon. The Commissioners were very clear on that, Your Maj... er, Your Not... and the fire breathing nonsense is probably Poetic license. And we all know about Poets, Your Majesty.”

“What else, Segorian?”

“Well, er, oh! Yes! Festival! Young men put on a scary dragon costume and run round the streets. Always fun! It was started to interest children in joining the Dragon Corps when they grew up. But it’s just Poetry these days. Your...the Queen disbanded the Dragon Corps. No point in spending large amounts of gold supporting a band whose job was to slay mythical beasts. Better and much cheaper to spend imaginary gold on a mythical band whose job it is to slay mythical beasts. The rest, well, we have Poets for that.”

“Indeed. And so—I’ve been an idiot.”

Of course, I waited.

“It seems a figment of the imagination has been sighted in the Blackrock Mountains. When the reports came in, the Royal Commission declared them to be founded in strange cloud formations and rocky shadows seen at night by peasants all the worse for—for whatever peasants drink. So they sent a team to investigate Which is part of the problem. Because it appears a strange cloud formation or a rocky shadow (the reports are a little confused) burnt their camp to the ground. Fortunately nobody was killed, but the team is currently trying to decide if their singed clothing is the result of a persistent

and infectious mass hallucination or the unfortunate result of new advances in soap manufacture. They prefer the soap manufacture idea, but they can't announce it until we have some. New advances, that is. Or even soap."

Not-Queen Sonea stood up and stared out of the window. "Segorian, I've been an idiot. There seems to be a real imaginary beast threatening the kingdom. An honest to why-the-gods-me dragon. And I have—Peladon has—no dragon slayers. And...and I don't know what to do!"

I looked around the apartment. It had been a nice apartment as apartments go. "Your Not-Majesty. There appears to be a dragon. Dragons must be fought. And, well, only an Idiot would fight a dragon."

"Segorian..." There was a note of objection in her voice, and rather more relief.

"Your Maje--"

"Her bloody Majesty isn't bloody here, Segorian." Even if I didn't look, I could feel "The Look." No. Not that "Look." The other one. Of course, I had no idea what it meant, but it was still there.

Yes. I'm an Idiot.

## Chapter Two

### The Scales of Idiocy

Queen Sonea gave me a rather nice horse. A brave and swift charger, trained in all the ways of battle. As the rocks of the Blackrock mountains (no they weren't black. They were rock coloured. No. I don't know why the mountains were called that either) rose around me, I found myself wishing the horse was much slower, and rather more cowardice-plod-slowly-in-the-opposite-direction trained.

The exile-for-life had been much like any other. Some nonsense regarding my breaking an engagement to one of the Queen's Ladies In Waiting, who would certainly be Waiting rather longer. Only this wasn't an exile where I walked out the front gate and in the back. This exile took me over the hill and far away to—well, to more hills. But in between the first hill and the other hills there was a trusted member of the Guard, and a rather too brave charger.

Perhaps I didn't mention that bit of the profession.

Everybody needs an Idiot. Not only to blame things on. It's in the small print when you take the job. Some day—and perhaps that day will never come—there will be something. Some manner of thing that must be done for the good of the Realm. Something only an Idiot would take on.

No. Not Her Majesty's Most Secret Agent. Not a highly trained assassin. Not a seemingly ordinary yet really mysterious master of magic. Not even someone with one single strange spell stuck in their head they can never actually use. Those have all been tried. And they didn't work. So someday, someday everybody hopes will never come (especially the Idiot), there's only one thing left. One last chance to roll the dice against near-impossible odds and wager something nobody will miss if you lose. An Idiot. In this case, an Idiot with a big sharp pointy stick thing, wearing unfamiliar armour and sitting (well, mostly sitting—I have an advanced degree in falling off) on a horse he can barely ride.

I'm the Idiot.

Like I said. It's a well-paying job and no heavy lifting. Well, not much. But don't tell my mother. She'd be rooting for the dragon.

Most of the reports of strange shaped clouds and shadowy rocks had come from one particular lump of big rock. If this was a tale of stirring adventure, it would have been called Mount End-Of-The-World or some such nonsense. As it was, it was called 'See the biggest one? Not that one. The third biggest to the left of that when you face the sunset.' Well, I suppose it wasn't. But that's what the locals told me and that's how I found it.

One of the problems of using sunset as a signpost is you have to sort of wait for the sun to be setting. And when the sun is setting, mountains tend to go rather overboard on loomy and foreboding. I

would have jumped at every shadow, but the rotten armour was too damn heavy to jump in. Suddenly, as I rounded a corner, there it was.

It looked exactly like a strange shaped cloud would look if the strange shaped cloud looked nothing like a cloud and exactly like a big scaly thing nearly the size of a house. With a lot more big, spiky claws than my one big, spiky stick. I had a sudden and extreme case of spiky-stick-envy. Oh, and the little curls of smoke coming from its nostrils suggested we may not know all we think we know about Poets. Thanks to all the gods, it appeared to be sleeping.

I looked at my sharp pointy stick and I looked at the strange shaped cloud. According to protocol, I was supposed to get up to a good run, scream at the top of my voice, and ram the pointy stick into the cloud.

Bugger protocol.

I cast round for ideas. While I did I could feel something nagging between my ears. I had a horrible feeling it might be an idea. Probably one involving me doing something totally stupid, and absolutely necessary. And worse – it involved heights.

I hate heights.

I looked up at the ledge high above the sleeping cloud formation. My sub-conscious mind and eye must have noticed it, and I made a mental note to give both of them a good talking to later. If I was still alive, anyway. But as an alternative to protocol, the ledge seemed to be all I had available. I imagined me and the pointy stick jumping off it and dropping onto the drag...the strange shaped cloud. Well, me jumping. The pointy stick would be mostly pointing and, I hoped, sticking.

Like I said. I hate heights. Still, a Royal Command is a Royal Command. And sometimes I'm too smart for my own good. So it would have to be the ledge.

The climb was hard. Well, the climb was easy. It was dragging the sharp pointy stick thing that was hard. But eventually I got to the ledge. I could have stopped and taken a breather, but I decided I was going to get all the fresh air I needed soon enough. Jumping to certain death can be like that, not that I knew from personal experience. But I'd been told. Not by people who had jumped to their certain death. Those people didn't tend to be saying much afterwards. Mostly it was Poets. I suppose that should have warned me.

I took the rope I'd brought and tied two lengths to the handle of the pointy stick, the part protocol normally demanded I hold on to. It had a big flared guard that was supposed to protect my hand while the rest of me was getting roasted, or torn to pieces or some other horrible fate worse than death. Well, probably including death. Anyway, the guard provided a convenient place to tie the ropes. I tied foot loops to the other ends of the ropes. The plan (if it could be trusted with such a high sounding title) was to drag the sharp pointy thing to the edge, put my feet in the loops, swing the pointed end down over the edge—and drop. My weight should help give it proper direction and

bloody-minded purpose. Screaming was an optional extra.

I dragged the pointy stick to the edge of the drop. I looked down to check my ‘landing place.’

“The depressing part...” the voice was both rumbly and somehow light “... the depressing part is it might actually work. If I was asleep. Or ill. Or perhaps both.”

I got my feet out of the foot loops. Very slowly. I stood up, very slowly. I turned—well. You have the picture. Very not-fast. The strange shaped, and apparently talking, cloud...oh, to the hells with it. The dragon was perched on a rock above me, looking very big. And very not amused.

“I’m not. Asleep that is. And rather more important—Not. Down. There.” One thing the Poets hadn’t mentioned. That dragons spoke. “They sent you out to kill me, hmmm?”

I looked at the dragon. I looked at the sharp pointy stick. Denial seemed a little unlikely to be believed.

A spear of flame shot from the dragon’s mouth. In an instant the sharp pointy stick was...well, rather more of a very not-pointy puddled blob.

“By all the eight...” I could see the dragon’s lips moving. My mother used to close her eyes and count to ten, then open them hoping I’d been a bad dream. I learned to lip read numbers very, very early. “Damn. I always forget Aberystwyth. By all the NINE hells! The winds whisper to me of a threat to your back-of-nowhere country. A back-of-nowhere country which has spent a great deal of time and effort killing off all its dragons. I try to talk the Dragon Council into letting me help. Of course, they refuse...” The dragon started muttering under its breath. One of my few real talents is highly sensitive hearing. “Actually, they told me to go to my cave and that I was grounded for the next hundred years. But I’ll show them...”

Oh, no. Please. No. I replayed the words in my head. “You’re a dragon.”

“I’m a dragon.”

“And you don’t mean the Dragon Council, you mean your parents.”

“I’m a dragon.”

“And they grounded you for...” I looked up at the great beast...I looked up at the great, looming scaly thing “...for a hundred years.”

“Look! In a thousand years I’ll be of age. And anyway, they’re my parents. They just don’t understand! And-the-demon-Scythorax-is-coming-to-kill-you-all-and-only-dragon-fire-can-kill-him!”

Dragons, it seemed, were very good at speaking very fast, especially ones who thought nobody was going to listen to them. But that’s all right. Idiots and nobodies tend to be very close to each other in the grand scheme of things. I listened, and I heard. I just didn’t want to. Because there it was, a demon. A demon called Scythorax. And the demon was coming to—well. The dragon had said why he was coming. So there it was. Badder than a very bad thing on a very bad day. With extra badness.

That's the Idiot's motto. Of course we don't carry shields, so you mostly find it on gravestones. It was just my time. My time and my fault.

“And they just don't care!”

I looked at the dragon. “You're of age in a thousand years?”

The dragon looked at me. “I'm a dragon. I'm the only dragon you've got. You're a fearless, deadly dragon killer with...” the dragon looked over my shoulder “...with a melted, blobby stick. Can we get on with it?”

I looked at the dragon again, making sure I offered a most puzzled expression.

The dragon sighed. “You're going to make me do it, aren't you?”

I waited.

“You really are?”

I waited.

“Take. Me. To...” the dragon looked at me, plaintively. “Do I have to?”

I waited.

The dragon gave me a dirty look. Either that or it had indigestion. “Your leader.”

Sometimes you take victory where you find it.



## Chapter Three

### The Idiocy of Return

At least on the way back I appreciated the fast horse. Oh, and if ever you find yourself in a position to do so, do *not* ask a dragon if you can ride it. It seems there are some things not even mentioned in polite dragon society. Or any other kind of dragon society. Ever.

Do scorch marks come out of armour?

From the edge of the trees, we could see the castle. It stood on a hill overlooking the sea. A perfectly round full moon rode high in the sky, casting a silver bright glow over each brick and rock in the walls. Which, in the circumstances, I rather wished it didn't. It was hardly conducive to sneaking. Especially if you were the size of a house, like the dragon behind me. Dragon...dra...Ah. Right. "Segorian." Silence. "My name, I mean. Segorian Anderson. Idiot. That is, er, Royal Idiot." The dragon said nothing. Perhaps I wasn't being clear. I tried again. "Um, might you...Er, do dragons, do they have, um, names?"

I looked behind me. A dragon head was paying close attention to the stars. Even in the midnight not-too-clear, I could see its lips moving. It was counting. "...ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred! I see, Lord Deadly Dragon Slayer. You have a name. And it finally occurs to you to ask if I have one! After you fail to try to kill me, after we come all this way to this...this...this pretend cave. You want. To know. My name." The dragon shook its head. A bolt of fire flew skywards from its jaws. "Now he wants to know. Now!" Dragons, it seems can shout. Really, really, really loud.

"Er, sneaking?" I, on the other hand, did not shout. The not-nameless dragon, who clearly had a name even if I didn't know it, looked at me. It seemed a good time to explain. "The fire. Well, and the shouting. We're supposed to be sneaking into a castle full of guards. Guards with more sharp pointy things."

"Oh. Right." Dragons, it seems, aren't good at whispering. "Velasandrixbaldrasian."

I made a wild guess the jumble of sound was a name. I thought about the higher pitch I had heard in the dragon's voice. I thought about the shouting. I thought about the long suffering note I could hear. Right. Of course.

I looked at her.

"Well, not quite. You really have to be able to do this part way through-Velasandrixbaldrasian." As she spoke her name, small puffs of flame erupted from the dragon's jaws. Each flame was a different colour. "The flame makes all the difference."

My jaw winced at the idea of trying to wrap itself round Velasandrixbil...Velosindrax...I decided I'd rather risk being a Sunday roast, especially as it wasn't Sunday. "Sandy." I said.

“Sandy?”

It appeared the dragon didn't see herself as a Sandy. Never mind. My jaws would thank me for it. “Sssh! Sneaking here! Sneaking!” Somehow I didn't think the idea of surreptitiously smuggling a huge and scaly not-figment-of-the-imagination into the castle was getting through.

The dragon looked at the sky. “I should let bloody Scythorax do whatever it wants to them, I really should. They deserve each other.”

“So Sandy. What do we do now?”

Sandy looked puzzled.

I guessed dragons didn't have a lot of experience with castles. Not ones with walls they hadn't knocked down yet, anyway. “It's like this. We have to get into the castle so you can tell Her Majesty what you told me. My job is being exiled-for-life, so I have my own key. To the back gate, anyway—the Idiot's entrance. But you wouldn't fit through it. So how do we do this? Do you chew some mysterious herbs, and turn into a mysterious lady with faintly...” I checked her scales...”...faintly emerald skin? Nice shade, by the way. It matches your eyes.”

“Nope.” For some reason her voice sounded different. Not quite so terrifying-dragony. Gods. I'm an Idiot.

I tried again. “You see, the Poets really aren't clear, Sandy. So what do you do? Turn invisible? Size-of-a-mouse type thing?” I was starting to be able to read the drag...Sandy's eyes. A little at least. I ducked. Fortunately, I needed a haircut anyway. Well, I did now.

“Dragon. Wings. Claws, like those that just deliberately missed you. More size-of-what-you-see. Poets. We dragons, we know all about Poets. And that bloody George. He cheated!” Obviously, I looked puzzled. “George. George and the Dragon. He dug a great big pit and ran away. Uncle Agristoitexbarian'tkul'sdorin'jsathragund'Bdethth'zutik ran after him, the fool. Of course, that was just what George wanted. A net, some rocks—it was all over. Ex-dragon. But that's not the story. Oh, no. Not ever the story. George, the brave and valiant knight in Shining Bloody Public Relations. Bloody Poets!”

I nodded in my best wise-man fashion. It seemed better than my much more practiced er-what-the-heck-are-you-talking-about look. There was only one thing for it. Gods. I hate heights.

Actually, I don't hate heights. What I really hate is drops. Really, really high drops. Really, really high drops where I'm clinging to ivy with one hand, and trying to tap on a window with the other. I'd worked out that if I just held my hand near the window pane, my shivering-in-abject-terror took care of the knocking. After a while, I heard movement. I quickly grabbed hold of more ivy with my not-knocking-any-more hand. A head poked out of the now open window, preceded by a hand. A hand with a sharp pointy thing. Queen Sonea leaned out of the window.

For a brief moment, I thought how fortunate it was I had to look up at her rather than down.

“Who dares...oh. It's you. Segorian, what on earth are you doing?”

“Not falling, your nightie—er—Your Majesty. I think that's my primary focus right now.”

“Not falling—because?”

“Because I rather like the number of bones I have in the number of pieces I have them, Your...oh.

Because I bring a message.”

“A message?”

“Yes. A message Your Majesty. From Sandy.”

For some reason, Her Majesty did not seem happy.

“Sandy? A *girl* Sandy? And just who, Idiot, is Sandy? And Segorian. Just for information, that's poison ivy.” The window slammed. Peladon weather is strange at times. After all, where else does the air turn to ice in a single heartbeat? That was it, of course. The weather.

All of a sudden dropping seemed the least of my troubles.

Climbing down the ivy, I knew I was going to hate myself in the morning. Or at least my hands. And face. Poison ivy will do that. At the bottom, a rather more dressed Queen Sonea waited. A rather more dressed, but for some reason rather furious Queen Sonea. “The Kingdom is suffering an imminent case of dragon. The Queen herself finds herself with no other resort save the Royal Idiot. She exiles the Idiot so he can go and sort it out. And what does the Idiot bring her?”

I had a feeling the question didn't need any answer. Not from me at least. Not then. So I didn't.

The Queen shook her head, and looked up at the sky. A bolt of fire flew from her jaws. Well. It didn't really, because she wasn't a dragon. But somehow it seemed like it should. “Sandy! He brings me a *message* from *Sandy!*”

Queens, it seems, can shout. Really, really, really loud.

“Er, sneaking?”

Sonea looked at me blankly. I tried again.

“Sneaking, Your Majesty. Sneaking. I have to...there's someone...we have to sneak, Your Majesty.”

“Queens, Segorian, do not sneak. You can sneak. Like you've probably already been sneaking to see this Sandy. The Queen will not sneak.”

Now I was really confused. But that's my normal state of mind where Queens are concerned. This Queen, anyway. So since the Queen didn't sneak, the Not-Queen and I snuck. Er, sneaked.

After somebody not the Queen and somebody most definitely an Idiot had sneaked some, we managed to leave the castle. The Not-Queen of Peladon achieved this by marching up to the guards as we came upon them and telling them that the Queen was most definitely not here. That they hadn't seen

the Queen here. And to open whatever damn gate they were guarding and get back to not seeing anybody.

Not-Queens sneak different from us. Er, me.

At the edge of the forest I was expecting to find a large presence of Sandy. But there was no such thing. Not until there was a rush of air, a beating of wings, and the severe absence was all presence again. Presence of dragon. I opened my mouth to introduce—I opened my mouth. That was about as far as I got. An irresistible force slammed into my chest and I was knocked to the ground. I saw a flicker of steel appear from somewhere highly improbable and Queen Sonea stood over me, blade ready. It was almost as though she was protecting me, which was clearly and absolutely impossible. I kept my eyes tight on the improbable steel sword blade. It was better than letting them fall on the impossible Queen Sonea. Because she was standing over me. Standing over me wearing a skirt.

“Back! Back, foul beast! Ye shall not have him, if it must be my last drop of blood that stops ye!”

Sandy lowered her head to the ground. Ignoring the waving sword blade, she whispered in my ear. “Segorian. Should I bite her? She knocked you down!”

Did I mention dragons really aren't good at whispers? Mother told me there'd be days like this. Lord, mother could laugh.

It took a while. Sandy wasn't too pleased with people who went round knocking over someone she repeatedly referred to as 'her' deadly not-dragon-slayer. Each time she did, Queen Sonea would say, Idiot. The first time she said it Peladon nearly lost a forest to dragon fire. And a Queen. And, in case anyone was noticing, an Idiot. Of course Sandy realised it wasn't meant how it sounded. Probably. Possibly. Perhaps. So on the one hand—er, claw—it was 'my not-slayer.' On the other claw—er, hand—it was 'my Royal Idiot'. Of course, I'd had a lot of experience in these things. However it turned out, it would be my fault. That's what being an Idiot is.

Suddenly exile-for-life didn't seem quite so bad.

\* \* \* \*

Eventually they got round to Scythorax. And if I thought things were bad so far—well. Everybody says Idiots don't think. They may be right.

Sone...Queen Sonea and Sand...and Velasandrixbaldrasian were getting on much better. As Sandy explained it, her parents really were on the Dragon Council. On it in the sense everybody else on it was more under it. Or under them, which made her a sort of Princess. Which in turn made it all right for the two of them to get round to first names. Her Majesty's voice got a little chilly when Velasandrixbaldrasian insisted on being called Sandy, but that was just coincidental. Right?

Anyway. Sandy had overheard her parents talking about Scythorax. By her account this Scythorax was, or more depressingly is, a rather nasty demon not detectable by any form of magic. Who comes out every now and again to feed. To dragons, every thousand years ranked as now and again.

Scythorax picks a place well stocked with food, and eats. Terrible table manners as well. Not, Sandy said, that he bothers with a table much.

When I say food, I don't meant roast quail with little currants where the eyes used to be, and a pretty roasted parsnip for it to sit on like a branch. I mean people. Us. Everybody. And this time it was Peladon's turn to be a table. Yes, Scythorax was coming.

It wasn't all bad news. Sandy said Scythorax could be killed. Or at least, sent away hungry. You see, there are Rules about that sort of thing. Rules like not just turning up, knocking on the castle door, and asking people to cover themselves in salt and pepper. The demon has to be invited. So he starts whispering from the demon world to find people who'll listen. The demon offers all the usual promises, like power and wealth and really, really good tax avoidance planning. So there's always someone who'll listen. Listen and call.

Oh, not just call. There's a whole big ceremony. Robes, secret chants, strange herbs... Well, the herbs aren't really necessary. They just make the food taste better. But sure, herbs.

And that's it. Lunchtime. Once Scythorax decides to come, then according to dragon lore he can't be stopped. If the chants get chanted, if the robes have the right swirly symbols—with optional herbs—then that's it.

Or almost it.

Sandy had heard her parents say there was still one last chance. There sort of has to be. It's another Rule. But the Rule needed fire. And not just any kind of fire. It needed Dragon fire.

If a dragon happens to be passing when Scythorax appears, and if the dragon feels so inclined, there is one moment when Scythorax can be sent back to his dimension without dinner. But it really does have to be just as the demon appears. And, because Rules are like that, it means a forfeit. A penalty for the demon. He has to go hungry for the next ten thousand years.

At least, that's what the stories say.

One dragon-fire moment. But Peladon was fresh out of dragons. They'd been hunted and chased, and they were most definitely not amused. Not in a Peladon state of mind. At least, not in a 'let's send a dragon to risk its life to keep the dragon killers safe' state of mind. So the Council had decided. Decided no dragon was to come anywhere near Peladon till Scythorax went home with a bad case of indigestion. Dragons could go then, because Peladon would be empty. Nobody to hunt them and lots of empty pretend caves to break and real ones to live in. Serves the two legs right. Bloody George most of all.

That was when I left them to it. Walked into the forest. It was clear as a clear thing on a very clear day. It wasn't over. I had hoped that... But no matter. The day everybody hopes will never come had rather impolitely come for a visit, and decided to sit down to have a nice long chat.

I came back to bravely and stupidly volunteer my services for whatever stupid thing needed doing that only an Idiot would try. They were still talking. I did the gentlemanly thing—I hid behind a tree and listened.

I'm still working on the 'gentleman' thing.

“I've never been a Royal Dragon. Not a two leg one, anyway. It doesn't involve any of bowing does it?” Sandy sounded amused.

“Only for other people. They have to bow. To you.” Sonea was clearly amused.

“And I want him.”

“Him? Segorian? My Idiot? You can't...no. I can't...why do you want him?”

“Because he's braver than he thinks. Because I like him. Because—because he may be an Idiot, but he's not stupid. Besides, if you don't count the legs and just look at his eyes...”

It seems Queens cry tears just like everybody else.

“You might as well. If my Councilors thought...if they knew...well. He'd be exiled-for-life. The kind of exile that comes from a bright and shiny headsman's axe.”

“Oh? Ohhh. I see. I think. Does he know?”

“He's not just an Idiot, Sandy dear. He's a male. He thinks he...he thinks he amuses me. That's all.”

“Well, even with the wrong number of legs. I think he's—what's that two leg word? Cute. That's it. Cute.”

The two of them giggled together. Me? I stood behind my tree. A dragon and a Queen. Two not-women in my not-life. I must be an Idiot.

## Chapter Four

### The Egg-Selence of Idiocy

It might seem a little strange to be standing on the East road covered in broken eggshells and dripping yolk. And if it was you standing there, it might be. But it was me, and I'm an Idiot.

Another day, another exile.

You see, that morning Countess Adriana had stormed into the Throne Room. Some Idiot had chosen the wrong silk for her new ball gown and she'd ended up with a dress exactly like someone else's dress. The Countess had demanded some additions to ordinary exile protocols. She'd demanded eggs. To be specific, rotten eggs. Very, very rotten eggs. She had her people there passing them out to anybody nearby as I walked out of the East gate. Exiled-for-life wasn't enough.

Perhaps I should explain. Every one of the gowns worn by Ladies of the Court is made by the highly skilled and experienced hands of the Court's team of highly skilled and experienced seamstresses. At one time each member of the Court had their own seamstress. But there were far too many occasions where more than one courtier arrived at a function in something looking almost-nearly-like some other courtier. Which tended to lead to loud voices, kicking, biting, screaming—and that was just the husbands. Oh, and far too many exiles. The Book of the Idiot records on one particular day the poor Idiot was exiled fifty times. They had to put a rubber band round his waist and keep firing him from a catapult just to keep up.

All right. It doesn't really. There is no Book of the Idiot. After all, if it isn't written down, it never happened. So Idiots don't keep diaries.

Anyway, after all those exiles, the Queen of the day (well, more like eight years, but who's counting) decreed all gowns must in future be made by the Court Seamstresses.

It is, of course, important everybody at Court look quite ridiculous. I am told this is called 'fashion' (Bustles. Somebody explain bustles to me. Please? Pretty please? And what, exactly, is a cummer, and why must it be bunded?). The Court Seamstresses ensured that while all were equally ridiculous, nobody present looked quite like anybody else.

You'll note the gender there. Something-esses. So how might it be that the Royal Idiot, who was fairly comprehensively male the last time he checked relevant items, was being exiled? Why not the Royal Idiot-ess? Because there isn't one. Never has been, never will be. An Ess, I mean.

It's one of the Rules of the job. Whether or not all men are idiots, all Idiots are men. And history has shown how wise this is. Because whenever something Idiotic has been done, the right type of investigation has always been able to show there was an idiot at the root of it. And that the idiot in question was suitably equipped, male-wise. Of course, the 'right type of investigation' generally

involves somebody running to the Idiot's quarters and telling him—er, me—what costume to wear. So some Idiot had sold the wrong silk to a seamstress, and I was standing in the road. Egg-siled.

A bush at the side of the road hissed at me. "Psst!"

I tried to examine the bush with the eye of a highly trained botanist. Unfortunately, I didn't have one. I was fairly confident it was a bush. And green. Deciding for once to do what any sensible person would do, I ignored the bush and started to walk towards the postern gate.

Whatever type of bush sprouts short legs and runs after people, this was clearly that type of bush. "Pssst!"

Idiots are well trained to handle nearly any type of situation. Well, any type of situation which might involve being exiled-for-life. Lots of crazy people do things that end up with other people knocking at my door with a fresh costume. Crazy I can do. So I stopped and walked over to the bush. "You—er—hissed?"

The bush shook. The charitably inclined might call it a nod. I stepped a little closer, the better to examine the bush. I thought I could hear a stifled gasping.

"Fire in the...er...out of the hole!" the bush shouted.

Splooosh!

This wasn't just the type of bush that sprouted little legs and ran after people. Not even the type of bush that talked as well. It was also the type of bush that appeared to be able to produce a bucket of water from nowhere reasonable. Produce it, and deposit it on an Idiot. And it wasn't even June yet! I made a mental note my bath had come early this year.

"No need to thank me. No, no need at all. Worry not. Ye be safe now." The bush was determined, logic and reason aside, it was going to carry on talking.

"You...you...you drowned me!" I ran my hands through the bush, looking for the bucket.

"Oy! Bad touching!" It occurred to me I was talking to a talking bush. Searching the bush for the bucket it had emptied on me, my hands found something very not-bushy. Or at least, not leaf-and-spiky-twig bushy. I tried to work out what it was.

"Let. Go. Of. The Beard." The bush began to shed parts of its self. Leaves and twigs fell to the ground. Fall was falling early this year. Like baths.

A dwarf with twigs stuck in his...in her...in...Dwarves are hard. Both kinds have beards. I watched a dwarf with twigs stuck in 'its' hat and jerkin stop being a bush. My hands had hold of the dwarf's beard. I think that meant we were married. Or that we ought to be...then I felt a lump in my throat. It was the head of a large hammer the dwarf had produced from somewhere impossible.

I let go of the beard.

I tried again. "You drowned me!"

"Drowned you? Gods below! You try to save an idiot 'too-tall', and what happens? They



complain!”

‘Too-tall’ is what dwarves call anybody who isn’t a dwarf. Because they’re, um, too-tall. It’s not very polite, but dwarves don’t think anybody else notices. It would be like the English, if we’d invented them yet. “That’s Idiot, thank-you. Not idiot. My employer is a stickler for protocol. And I wasn’t aware I needed saving.”

“Look. I’m a dwarf. And I know fire-gas when I smell it. And when a dwarf smells fire-gas, it’s bucket time!”

Smelled? I sniffed. Only once. Once was all it took. After my stomach had finished, I decided I hadn’t liked my breakfast much anyway. “That’s not your fire-gas! That’s—that’s eggs! I’ve been egg-siled, you see?”

“Egg-siled? Oh, right. You’re the Idiot. Exiled. Got it. No, laddie. Eggs it might be to you. But to a dwarf, it’s fire-gas. There’s caves we used to have, we don’t have now, to prove it. They egg-splod...Bugger! You’ve got me doing it now! They exploded! Boom! So you’re lucky I was here! Fire-gas. Water. No boom today!”

“I see.” I didn’t, but saying so might make the dwarf egg-spla...dammit!...explain more. And the headache I didn’t have yet would change its mind and come visit. I hesitated. I was probably going to regret this. “So what brings your bucket here, Mr...Miss...so what brings your bucket here?”

Of course, I was right. Without the probably.

“If you’re going to be an Idiot, laddie, then I’m going to have to be First Pick. First Pick Gunder.”

It sounded a very dwarf-y title. Dwarves are miners. Which doesn’t mean they’re all too young to do things they won’t be interested in doing when they’re old enough to do them. It means things like picks are really, really important. “First Pick? Is that like Queen Sonea?”

“Queen? Oh, yes. The too-tall...lady? Man? You too-tallss are hard. Not enough of you have beards. The one who tells you what to do?”

“Yes.”

“And you do it?”

“Yes. Well, mostly. Or it’s exile. With an axe.”

“Huh. Then no. Of course, I *can* tell dwarves to do things. Dwarves like a good laugh. But nobody has to do them, the things I mean. No. I’m the Sorter.

See, when dwarves have something that needs sorting out, the Lowest and his (well, or her, but that’s dwarf business, laddie) Low Council put everybody who doesn’t want to do it in a big cave. The Lowest asks for a Volunteer, and everybody who doesn’t want to do it (which means everybody, because dwarves aren’t stupid) tries to run away. As soon as they start running, the Lowest grabs the

first one. First Pick, see? The First Pick gets to sort it out. Somebody tripped me.”

“And if you don’t sort it out?”

“I get to pick the axe.”

Like I’ve said before. Everybody needs an Idiot. I raised one eyebrow. Unfortunately the other one followed it so it didn’t feel lonely. First Pick Gunder didn't seem impressed.

“I heard you know about dragons.”

I could almost hear mother laughing.

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### **About the Author**

This is me. Graeme Smith. Fantasy writer. Mostly comic fantasy (which is fantasy intended to make you laugh, not fantasy in comics).

When I'm not writing (well, or editing my writing. Or re-writing. Or editing my re-writing. Or... Quite. You get the picture), I'm doing other things. Things like wishing I could play keyboards. And not playing them, not even very badly. Things like online gaming (If you know Bard Elcano, you know me. If you know a grumpy old dragon called Sephiranoth, you know me. If you know a tall, dark, handsome but brooding vampire, charming witty and brilliant—we never met. That's someone else.) And strange midnight practices involving mushrooms. And garlic. And knitting needles. But the less said of my cooking, the better.

So there you are. This is me. Graeme Smith. Short, fat, bald and ugly (fortunately my wife has lousy taste in men). Time was, I worked on a psychiatric ward. Now I write about people who believe in magic and dragons, and who live where the crazy folk are the ones who don't.



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