



Road  
Like A  
River

Craeme Smith

## Back Cover

Urban Fantasy by Graeme Smith

"Hey, Charlie. You like the truck better? Than the boat, I mean?"

That's what she said as she walked away from the last ride she should ever have taken. And this one was smart. Kharon, even if he went by the name of Charlie these days, knew she'd be okay.

But this one wasn't just smart. She was different. Because this one came back.

Charlie's a trucker, an Independent. Meaner 'n snakes, he's been there, done that and kicked its butt—twice. What Charlie picks up, he delivers. Now Charlie's biggest customers want him to take on an extra little job—an investigation into missing deliveries. Charlie turns them down flat. Because when god an' the devil (not God and the Devil—it's a union thing) are both sounding scared, a smart trucker drives away.

Then Rosie comes back, scarred from a whipping she swears Charlie gave her. It's not like she's the first to try to kill him. But she damn near succeeds, and not even the idiot in the lion skin did that. And it's soon clear that whoever's stealing souls wants Charlie in the frame—so they can take what's in his truck.

Now Rosie's pissed. And Charlie's pissed-er. And someone's going to pay. Pay a lot more than Charlie's penny. Because nobody— not god, not demon, not poly-dimensional trans-optical hyper-sentient autonomous non-organic entity—nobody touches his truck.

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MuseItUp Publishing

14878 James, Pierrefonds, Quebec, Canada, H9H 1P5

Cover Art © 2012 by Charlotte Volnek

Edited by Christine I. Speakman

Copyedited by Nancy Bell

Layout and Book Production by Lea Schizas

eBook ISBN: 978-1-77127-247-6

First eBook Edition \*January 2013

Production by MuseItUp Publishing

*Dedicated to ADP—who first made me believe I might write something one day. Though this probably wasn't what he had in mind...*

## Acknowledgements

One night I was chopping onions for dinner, when for some reason I started thinking about a black truck running down a midnight road. Whoever sold me those onions? Thanks. Really, really thanks. And my particular thanks to Peter Diakep... Diakapi.... Diakopy... Er, Peter D. Who taught me nearly every word of Greek I wrote here. I think he's still blushing...

And as ever, this book went past a whole lot of people before it reached you. So:

To Lady Cheryl—who saw that first half page and told me to keep on down the Road. To the real Kohkoh Baroque, who let me put her in Sin (-Sation). To the brave souls of the alpha and beta reading teams – my deep appreciation:

To Kaptain K, to Lady A, to the real Kohkoh (again), to the real Sonea, to Lady Leanna, Lady Talon, Lord Jim and Lord Tranq, to the long suffering Bright Fantastic of InWorldz who come to the Blarney to hear me read, to Lady Tanya, my thanks. And don't go away. Segorian is itching at my keyboard. Again...

And last, but never least—to Lady Gail. Who knows y'all, y'all.

# Road like a River

**Graeme Smith**



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## Prologue: Eighteen Wheels and No Roses

The truck's lights speared the night.

Sounded dramatic, he thought. But it weren't like they could do much else. Dark was dark, and light was light. Damn beams didn't know no better than to keep goin' 'til they hit somethin' solid, or got plumb tired an' gave up. So sure. What the heck. Let 'em spear.

He stared out of the windscreen, as he had so many nights. He didn't have to look at no map. Barstow was long gone behind, and Sweetwater was a ways ahead. Sweetwater, Abilene, Fort Worth—that was I-20. El Paso didn't count. El Paso was I-10, and he weren't drivin' I-10 tonight. Pecos to Marshall, then the world stopped, 'cos this was Texas. Round here, nobody gave a damn about anything as wasn't.

He jammed his way up through the gears, then jammed them down again. Weren't like he had to. I-20 wasn't big on hills or bends. But he liked the sound, so sometimes he did it anyways. He reached to the dash and turned up the radio, 92.3—Lonestar. Blair Garner was sayin' as how that-all had been Sugarland, and this-all comin' up was Kenny Chesney. It didn't matter none. He couldn't jam the gears all the time, an' the radio was noise at least.

There it was. Big Spring. About right. Soon enough, anyways. Past Big Spring an' before Sweetwater. Real pain in the ass, havin' to sub-contract the way he did these days. But the truck was too easy to notice, an' it was the only way to get what he had to get. He looked quickly at the black lily hanging in the middle of the windshield, swinging with each sway of the rig's cabin.

Soon enough, there she was. Right by the side of the Road where she was supposed to be. Caught in the beams, wavin' and, from the looks of her, hollerin' fit to bust. He started to jam the gears down. The rig always took a while to get stopped. Still, he knew the woman behind the truck would be comin' along. Likely, runnin'. There wouldn't have been anything else along here since she'd been...well, since. The rig slowed to a stop, and he waited, watching in the mirrors as she stumbled down the Road. He leaned over, and pushed the door handle.

"Mister...?" She stood there, looking up into the cab. That made it okay. She'd asked. He only ever did it if they asked.

"Y'all need a ride, missie?" Y'all. It weren't Texas-right, still it would do. And, of course, she needed a ride. That's what sub-contractors were for. They still had to ask. Every time, they had to ask. Then they was his.

"I...where you goin', mister?" She looked as though she'd heard all sorts of stories about late nights and long roads. And drivers. Probably heard this one, too. Not that she had a lot of choice. 'Course, none of them knew. Knew what they were choosing.

“I-20.” She looked puzzled. “Oh, just my little joke, missie. Wherever this Road goes, I’m goin’. All the ways to Marshall. I’d tell you where else, but everybody knows there ain’t no world outside of Texas.”

“Can...can I ride to Eastland? I...I landed at Midland. There was this guy...”

She looked half scared, half fightin’ mad. She had good reason for both. Just didn’t know why yet. She only thought she did. He decided to make it a little easier for her.

“Right. There was this guy. An’ he offered you a ride, an’ you thought he looked cute, right?” He shook his head.

“Cute? Hell, I only needed a ride!” Her face flushed. “Okay. So he was cute, too.”

“No need to look embarrassed, missie. You ain’t the first.” She’d better not be. He had to pay enough to get them where he could—but never mind. Not yet, anyways. “So he drove ‘til you was in the middle of nowheres, an’ it turned out he weren’t so nice, right?”

Now she really looked pissed. “He’d’ve been singing fuckin’ soprano if he hadn’t drove off as quick as he did.”

He chuckled. “It’s okay. Jump in.” She climbed into the cab. Her suitcase was in the long-gone car, but her purse was in her hand. That’s what he told his sub-contractors. Keep the case. Throw them their purse. It didn’t work else. “Long as you can afford the price, you can go anywhere I’m goin’, lady.” She got scared again, and grabbed for the door. But it wasn’t time for that. He smiled. “No need to be frightened, missie.” Not yet, anyways. “You got a penny?”

“A penny?” Scared and pissed were gone, replaced by confused. Good. She was off balance. How he liked it.

“Jus’ my little joke. You got a penny, I’m your driver.”

“And if I don’t? Got a penny, I mean?” She smiled, her first. He let her enjoy it a while.

“It don’t make no never mind. Like I said...”

“Here.” She smiled as she handed him the penny. He waited. She raised an eyebrow.

“Cain’t drive nowhere with the door open, lady.” She reached over and pulled the door closed. He kicked the rig into life and jammed up through the gears.

The truck’s lights speared the night. The wheels ate the Road.

“You been doin’ this long, mister?”

“Mister? Heh. I stopped bein’ mister to pretty ladies a long, long time ago. You can call me Charlie, lady.”

“Charlie. I knew a Charlie once...”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her smile again, lost in a memory. “Seems you did, lady.” He looked back through the windscreen. “Yup. Guess I been doin’ this a while.”



“I bet. You look like you should be retir... Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Like I should be retired? Heh. You keep goin’ red, you better hope the wind don’t change. You’ll stay that way, you will. It’s okay. It don’t bother me none. I guess I’m just not good at bein’ in one place.”

“You see a lot of places, mister? Doing this, I mean.”

He nodded at the black night outside the cab window. “Sure. You see much, lady?”

“Well, it’s dark. But it isn’t always dark, right?”

He shrugged. “Guess not.” The light glowed up ahead. He started to jam down the gears.

“What...?”

He could tell she knew how far it was to Eastland, an’ he could tell she knew they couldn’t be there yet. The fear was coming back. Good. It was nearly time. Nearly time for her to find out why she should be scared. “You ain’t goin’ to be goin’ no further, lady. See, you paid. Now? Now I deliver.” Her face drained of blood. She struggled with the door handle. But it was too late. This was it. What he did.

He pulled into the parking lot. He grabbed the lily, snapping it from its string, and got out of the cab. He could hear her. She was screamin’. It wouldn’t make no difference. Not here. They all screamed here. He opened the door on her side, watching her cringe back into the seat. “Time to get out, lady.” She didn’t get. Not many did. He reached up and took her hand, pulling. He was old, but he was stronger than he looked. It didn’t take long.

Out of the cab, she screamed some more. “Help! He-e-elp!” ‘Course, nobody came. They never did. They knew better. The lights in the roadhouse windows burned. White ones, bright and clean. Red ones, shadowed and near dark.

“Shut up.” He clamped his hand over her mouth. His hands, long practiced, tightened. He turned her head toward the Roadhouse sign. He held her there, making her look at it. Then he forced her head back. Her eyes met his for the last time. Yes. It was there. *The look*. They one they all got. When they finally knew. The knowledge. The acceptance. It was what he waited for. The thing that let him do it. So he did it.

He let her go.

“Go on in. They’s waitin’.” He handed her the lily.

As he walked back to the rig, she called to him. “Hey, Charlie. You like the truck better? Than the boat, I mean?” She turned away, and walked toward the Roadhouse, the lily cradled in her hand. He chuckled as he got back up into the cab. Yup, she was quick. She’d do okay.

Driving away from the Gates, Kharon tossed the penny into the back of the truck to join the rest. He had another delivery, an’ this one thought he was in Kansas. Turning off I-20 onto I-70, he heard

Blair Garner talkin' 'bout the plane crash at Midland. Then Blair was gone, lost in the crackles.

The truck's lights speared the night.

## Chapter One: Red Light

The guy up ahead was yellin'. Yellin' an' dancin', an' not a stitch on. Charlie sighed. He jammed up a gear and the rig picked up speed. Damn suicides. Get in bed, pop some pills. And wake up. On the Road. On the Road, and their wallet in the pants they didn't have on.

No penny, no ride. That was the rule. They got to walk. A hundred years of walkin', gettin' nowheres but sorry-ass. Then he'd drive by again, and this time he'd stop. That was the way it was. Way it allus had been. The penny, or the walkin'. Once, weren't nobody didn't know. Charlie spat out of the side window. Bloody schools these days. Didn't teach a damn thing worth knowin'.

In the mirror Charlie saw the guy stick one finger in the air. Charlie looked again to make sure he remembered the face. *Two* hundred years.

The wheels ate some more of what should be—Charlie checked his schedule—I-65. He concentrated on the blacktop for a moment, and that's what it was. I-65. Philadelphia behind him and lots of nothin' much 'til Brentwood. The radio crackled. As he reached for it to find some station as could at least spell Waylon, he saw them. The lights. One red, one white, slowly spinnin' up ahead on the Road.

Charlie cursed every Smokie from here to hell an' gone. He wrenched at the wheel, tossed an extra curse at the blacktop and dragged the rig onto I-39. Haulin' the bends at San Rafael, he swore again. There they were, right ahead. One red, one white. I-15, 27, 89...it was no good. The lights were always there.

“Kharon!” The voices spoke loud in his head. Two voices, One dark and hard, one bright and sweet. And not a gnat's wing between them as they spoke the old name. Both lights and both voices wasn't any kind of good. And what they really meant was—Charlie looked hard at the road. Then he was there. No signs, no numbers. Just there. The Road. The only one there was. He jammed down the gears, the rig slowing to a stop as it neared the lights. Charlie scowled at them. A bad day was getting' worse, an' he didn't see why all the bad should be his. He reached behind him and grabbed the wheel hammer. He swore sometimes he could still feel his old oar when he picked the hammer up. Charlie popped the door and swung down. Not a star in the sky, 'cos there weren't no sky. He couldn't see a thing, apart from the lights. Not because of the dark. There just weren't nothin' there to see.

That was the Road. It weren't ever anywhere. Just always where you was.

Charlie slung the hammer over his shoulder, and walked the short ways down to the lights. This was the Road, and they weren't pretendin' no more. The red one. Suit sharp enough to make the wind bleed. If there'd been a wind. And the other one. All glow and white robes. Charlie shook his head.

Some things never changed.

“You’re in my way, boys.”

Charlie was an Independent. Suits and robes, he didn’t care. The Road and the pennies. They was what was important.

“You will show respect!” A wall of fire rolled from Red. But this was the Road, and the Night. The fire rolled past.

“Boys. You’re in my way. You’re slowin’ me down.” Charlie unshipped the hammer from his shoulder.

“Even you will come to the Gates one day, Kharon. Even you!” A bolt of lightning spat from a white robed hand. But this was the Road and the Dark that wasn’t Night swallowed it whole.

Charlie shook his head again. Lightnin’. Damn right, some things never changed. He raised the hammer. “Boys.” Slam—the hammer hit the Road. “My daddy was Darkness.” Slam. “My momma was Night.” Slam. At each strike, the whole Road shook. “Granddaddy was here a-fore there was here to be.” Slam. “And you...” Slam. “Are in...” Slam. “MY DAMN WAY!” Slam—Slam—Slam—Slam.

Charlie looked at I-89. At the two empty Vermont Highway patrol cars. They was messes, crushed and dented by hammer marks. The bridge over the Connecticut River weren’t looking much better, a huge hole in the middle of the span. He shook his head. Some days...

“Freeze, mister.” The man wore the uniform of the Highway Patrol. A little non-standard, but that was the way of things. “I said freeze, mister! And lose the hammer!” The officer dropped into a perfect Weaver stance, his gun ready.

Charlie sighed. “Double-0 Buck? Yup, that’ll do it every time.”

“I said freeze, mister!”

Charlie shook his head. “See, that’s not how you do it, boy. You call for backup. That how it happened? You didn’t call?”

“I said freeze!” The sound of the patrol man’s pistol echoed off the hills. The echoes rolled and rolled as the patrolman emptied his gun.

Charlie stepped close and reached through the gaping hole in the patrolman’s chest, down to the uniform back pocket. He took out the penny waiting there and waved it in the man’s face. “Right. You’ve paid. Now get in the damn truck!”

The officer looked at his weapon. He looked at the penny. He looked at Charlie. But there it was. Some things never changed. “I said free...!”

He wasn’t worth the hammer. Charlie smacked the delivery one handed, and picked up the unconscious body to sling in the cab. He’d been right. It was a bad day. Now Charlie had to work out who it was going to be worse for. Someone was goin’ to pay for slowin’ him down, and it weren’t

goin' to be no damn penny either. He fired up the rig and stared at I-89. In a moment, he was on the Road. Charlie jammed up the gears. Yup. Someone was goin' to pay.

The truck's lights speared the night.

## Chapter Two: Take Your Job and Shove It

The rig pulled in to the Gates roadhouse. The hole through Officer Travis (Charlie had to check the delivery's wallet—00 wasn't kind to name tags) hadn't stopped his delivery, but Charlie's smack upside the head had maybe stopped him a bit too well. Charlie sighed. For the—he tried to count, and gave up when he ran out of numbers—for the most recent time, he reminded himself to stop doing that. He grinned. Not likely he would, but didn't they say it was the thought as counted?

Charlie swung out of the cab, went round and opened the door on the other side. He reached in, pulled the delivery out, and slung the meat over his shoulder. He trudged over to the front door, not looking at the red windows or the white. They weren't his concern. He knocked on the door.

It stayed shut.

Charlie nodded. So it was going to be like that. He knew what sensitive was, and long ago he'd decided it was for other people. Looked like he'd bruised their egos. He grinned sourly. Well, bruised them again. He knocked. He waited a while, but nobody came. So he did the only thing he could. He kicked the door in. Looking at the wreckage, he decided it wasn't really the only thing he could have done. But it sure as hell—given where he was, sure as hell and heaven both—it was the only thing he was *goin'* to do. Which was kind of good, since he'd already done it.

The Door-Ward was standing a few feet back from the wrecked and shattered door. He'd had his orders, but he knew Charlie. So he'd taken precautions. Like standing well back.

"They want to see you, Kharon."

"Yup." Charlie propped the officer against a wall. He slumped to the floor. Charlie turned and walked back to the truck.

"Kharon! I said..."

"Yup." Charlie kept walking. He got up into the cab and yanked off the black lily. He got down and walked back to the Roadhouse. Inside, he waved the lily under the delivery's nose. As the officer started to come round, Charlie tossed the lily to the Door-Ward. "There ya go. He's all yours."

It was the Door-Ward's turn to sigh. "Couldn't you have done that *before* you broke down the door, Kharon? Broke it down again, I mean?"

"Yup." Charlie ignored the delivery's confused 'where am I-s'. He ignored the Door-Ward as well and walked down the corridor. He tried opening the door at the end. The door was locked. Charlie raised an eyebrow, and grabbed the door handle. The crack of the snapping door frame announced him as he entered the room. "Y'all wanted to see me?"

The two behind the desks, the red desk and the white, didn't look happy. They never did when Charlie was visiting. The figure behind the white desk shook his head.

“Kharon. Do you know how much doors *cost*?”

Charlie turned and looked at the door. He looked back at the desks. Without taking his eyes off the figures in front of him, Charlie reached back and tore the door from its frame. He let it fall.

“Nope.”

The figure behind the red desk looked pointedly at the one behind the white, who shook his head again. “I did it last time. It’s your turn.” The red desk’s occupant gave white a dirty look. He waved a hand, and there was a new door where the old one had been.

“Okay. You’ve seen me.” Charlie turned to open the door. This time, it was unlocked. He swung it wide and started to leave.

“I’m losing people, Charlie.” The voice echoed in his head. It was dark and held undertones of eternal fire and suffering.

Charlie kept walking.

“We’re both losing people, Kharon.” The second voice didn’t echo. It rang. If a voice could have been music, this one was.

Charlie had always hated harps.

Charlie wondered if there were special days set aside for sighin’. He sighed. Sighed, and went back into the office. He shut the door.

“I jus’ deliver ‘em, boys. After that, I don’t give a damn. Or a blessin’.” Charlie nodded to the white desk. He decided to be polite on the off chance it might get him out quicker. “After that, they’s your problem.”

“Oh, we’re not blaming you, Charlie.” The white desk was always big on polite. Mostly just before the lightning.

“But...but we need your help.” If the red desk could sound any more sour, lemons would have to go out of business. Charlie knew if there was something so bad these two had to lower themselves to ask for help, he didn’t want a damn thing to do with it. “You see, we know you deliver. And you do it really well, Charlie.” That wasn’t good. If the red was trying to butter him, no good was behind it.

“And we take what you bring us, Kharon. We take them and we...assess them...” The white voice was sounding reasonable. Too reasonable. “We assess them, and we send them where they must go.”

“But they don’t get there!” The red voice was angry. “Some of them—they don’t arrive!”

“We don’t know what’s happening, Kharon. They cannot get lost. That is as it is written. So we think someone is taking them. Someone...or something. And we must find them!”

Right. A bad day gettin’ worse had taken ‘worse yet’ and changed the spelling to ‘oh-shit’. “Y’all don’t need me. You got people for that. For any ‘that’.” Charlie turned to go.

“Of course we have! And I offered!” The fire burned brighter in a voice now angry.

“Of course you offered. And the stories of those who took your generosity all turned out *so* well.” Even the harps were off key. “And you turned down my offer.”

“Because your people play by the rules. And whatever is going on here has nothing to do with...”

“Shove it.”

At Charlie’s words, both the red desk and the white stopped arguing. Flames sprang up around him, and the room burned bright with lightning. “YOU PRESUME TOO MUCH!” The voices were in harmony. And angry.

Charlie waited. Eventually the flames sank down and the glaring white faded.

“Crap.” Charlie’s voice was blunt. “Okay. It’s what you both want people to think. The Big Bad and the Great Good. Enemies since the beginning of time and all that shit. Well, laddies. There was Dark before there was Light...” Charlie nodded to the white desk “... and fire is just another form of light.” He nodded to the red. “My daddy was Dark and my momma was Night. And granddaddy... well, granddaddy was gramps. You ain’t no enemies. You’re Company, through and through. Made to give people choices to fuck things up with. Well, shove it. I don’t have to choose. I’m Independent, and I does what I does. I deliver. So I’ll stick with my deliverin’. Take your little bitty problem and shove it where the sun don’t shine and the fire don’t burn.” Charlie turned to go. He walked down the hall as fast as he could without running, wonderin’ if someone would stop him. Or try—not as they’d succeed. Nobody did. The Door-Ward was still trying to make the guy with a hole in him understand why he was dead but still talkin’, and the front door was still in splinters. Charlie got in the cab and fired the rig up. He hauled it onto the Road and turned the lights off. There was a place he went when it was time to go there and he didn’t need lights showin’ anybody else where it was. So he went.

The rig pulled into the yard. It weren’t much, but it was home. Charlie shut the rig down, and got out. He walked over to the shack.

“Hey, boy!”

One head was chewing on a bone still heavy with large lumps of bleeding meat. Charlie wondered whose bone it used to be. Another slept, no doubt dreaming dreams of how it got the bone. The third head was awake, both eyes watching the yard. Charlie reached out and scratched the sleeping head between the ears. Both ears twitched. He scratched the other two heads as well, so’s not to play favourites.

“Good boy.”

He straightened up. A sound broke the silence, one that shouldn’t be there. Wings. He shook his head. Some people just didn’t listen. He leaned down and whispered into three pairs of now alert ears.

“Get ‘em, boy.”



Cerberus leapt to his feet and into the dark. For a few moments, the wing beats went silent. Charlie could see flashes of red and sudden shimmers of white. Charlie waited. After a while, Cerberus returned. The left head still chewed on some burning red feathers, while the right took a moment to spit out the remains of shining white ones. The middle head looked disgruntled. Probably 'cos the fight hadn't lasted long enough. Charlie looked into the dark. He raised his voice, in case anyone was pretendin' not to hear.

“There's more where that came from. So jus' tell 'em. I said no!”

Inside, the shack was dark. It was a gift from Daddy and Momma. Charlie liked the dark. He didn't sleep, but the dark helped him rest. Rest, an' think. An' he had some real thinkin' to do. Souls wasn't supposed to be gettin' lost. An' even though he'd turned 'em down, Charlie knew he couldn't ignore somethin' that bad. He stepped over to his favourite rocking chair. That was when it happened.

“Bastard!”

Someone hit him. And it hurt.

## Chapter Three: Cracklin' Rosie

Gettin' hit wasn't no new thing. But gettin' hit and gettin' hurt—well, the dumb ox in the lion skin was the last time Charlie remembered it hurtin'. And that wasn't all he remembered. He sighed. So. It was time. Bloody Moira.

“Bastard!”

Something hit him again. As it did, a green flare of light filled the room. Charlie wondered where the damn dog was. He turned round to see who, or what, was trying its hardest to make him into the legend he already was. Whatever... No. Charlie remembered what Moira had said. *Whoever* was hitting him, hit him again. The green light was brighter, straining against the dark. He could feel it burning, see it in the black. He wondered how it might have gone outside of Daddy's place. Weren't nothin' could break the dark in here. Maybe, just maybe, somebody had figured wrong. Whatever was hittin' him, hit him again, this time wrapping clean round his arm. He grabbed hold of it and pulled. As he did, the green light burned brighter, and so did the figure on the other end who had been swinging at him. The green light burned, burned—and was gone.

Ain't nothin' could break the dark in Daddy's place. Daddy's and Momma's both.

Charlie looked at the heavy chain wrapped round his arm. Some of the links were fused and melted from the power they'd carried. He looked at who was carryin' it. Swingin' it. A few last green sparks and flames snapped from her, then were gone. But dark weren't no matter. Not to Charlie.

“Bastard...” She dropped the chain. Dropped it, and started to cry.

“You're a long way from Eastland, lady.” Charlie raised an eyebrow. Likely didn't make no never mind, what with the dark and all, but he did it anyway.

“You're a bastard, Charlie. So get on with it already.” The crying stopped and the words tried to sound brave.

“Get on with what, lady?”

“Rosie. It's Rosie, you bastard. If you're goin' to kill me, at least use my damn name!”

“Couldn't use it 'til now, lady. Didn't know it.”

“You know it, you...”

“Guess you're right though, lady. Momma and Daddy weren't what you'd call married none.”

“BASTARD!” The woman launched herself at him, hands clawing for his eyes.

Charlie back-handed her across the room. It seemed the green fire was all she'd brought, because she hit the wall and slumped. Charlie went over to look at her. The fire had burned away what little she had been wearing. But it hadn't burned away the scars, the cuts. The wounds and the bruises.

“Admirin’ your work, Charlie?” The voice was barely more than a whisper.

“Las’ time I saw you, I gave you your lily. That’s all, delivery. This ain’t mine.”

“It’s Rosie.” The voice was fainter. “An’ you’re...you’re a lyin’ bastard, Charlie.” He barely heard the last word before the voice was gone.

Damn, Charlie thought. This wasn’t goin’ to be good enough, not no-how. Not yet, at least. He sighed, and grimaced. Acorns. Bloody Moira. Still, there was no helpin’ it. He got up and grabbed a pot off the shelf. Inside was one shriveled apple. Bugger, he thought. Last one. He wondered if the tree was still standing. Charlie wrenched open the delivery’s jaws and jammed the apple in, holding the jaws open so she couldn’t chew or swallow. A faint glow of gold came from the apple and he heard a soft, shallow breath. He’d have to be quick. Which one? It wasn’t as though any of them liked each other much. Which...Ah!

“Sis! Git your ass in here, you old hag!” If anyone had seen him they might have wondered why he was shouting to the empty air. But this was Daddy’s place. And Momma’s. The air filled with a beating of wings.

“Bloody hell, Charlie. You pick the damndest times. I was washing my hair. What...?” His sister’s voice stopped. A glow surrounded the delivery.

“Kharon Kharopos, is this work yours? For if it be so, then Vengeance I will have, by my name and power, for Rhamnousia I am, Rhamnousia and Neme...”

“Shut up, you old bag. I didn’t do this.”

The winged figure stopped what was rapidly becoming a proclamation. “Oh, that’s all right then. Who’s the twist?”

“Rosie.”

“Rosie? Kharon! You gettin’ sweet in your older age? Much older age?”

“Bloody hell. Don’t you women think of anythin’ else? No, I ain’t gettin’ sweet, sis. I delivered her a night or so ago, as the world turns. No big deal, though she got it quicker than most.” Kharon thought of telling Nemesis about the job he’d turned down. Then he thought again. ‘Keep it in the family’ was all very well. Unless it was his damn family.

“She turned up here, sis’. She finds *here*, an’ she gets past Cerby, an’ she hits me with a chain. All green fire and bugger-me-it-hurts. Reckon if I hadn’t been in Daddy’s place, I’d be gone. The Dark, it put out the fire.” Nemesis’ face lost the glee on it from thinking Charlie was going soft.

“So I put her down, and I check her out, and I see—well, you can see. And she tells me I did it.” Kharon looked at Nemesis. “I damn well didn’t. Not my style.”

“No.” Nemesis sounded pensive. “No, it’s not. If it was, I could probably have got someone to kill you a long time ago.”

“Kill me? Bloody hell, sis!”

Nemesis shrugged. “You used to pull my pig-tails. I am the goddess of Vengeance, after all.”

“Ah. Fair enough, I guess. Anyway. Someone gave her power. Someone who wanted her to come after me. So someone must have given her a real fire to do it. An’ I saw the scars, and the wounds, an’ I thought...”

“Vengeance. Oh, yes. She’s playing my tune, she is. I can smell it. Well. Hear it, I guess. But she should be dead already from what they put in her. How come she’s still breathing?”

Charlie pointed to the shriveled apple.

“Oh. Right. They always did like you more than me. But it may not be enough. She’s real close to gone, Char’...I wonder if...”

“I WILL NOT INTERFERE.”

The voice echoed in both their heads and was gone. The two looked at each other.

“I never did like him.” They both spoke at once.

“Look.” Charlie said “If they did what we think, can’t you show us? Goddess of Vengeance and all?”

“Course I can, Charlie. But only if the damn woman stays alive. Otherwise, I have to go ask Than’. She’s his. And we just heard what he thinks.”

“Alive?”

“Yes, Charlie. Alive. As in not-dead.”

“Right then.” Charlie pushed hard. The woman’s jaws closed. He held them closed for a few moments and pulled them open. The apple was gone.

## Chapter Four: Chain, chain, chain...

Rosie knocked on the door to the Roadhouse. Behind her the rig started up. As she raised her hand to knock again, the door opened. Inside stood a figure lit in both red and white flickering light.

“Welcome, shadow in the night. I am the Door-Ward and guardian of the portal. Pass me ye must if...” The figure paused. “Look, would you mind if we skipped the formalities? It’s bloody perishing and my knee’s going to give me gyp again if I stand here too long.”

Rosie tried to look as though she understood what was going on.

“Oh, the hell...” The figure paused and sighed “... yes, and the heaven with it. Come in. You got your lily? Don’t tell me you dropped it. I’ve told them, I have. We need a light or something out there. Can’t see a damn—or a blessed—thing. Not that they listen. All they do is argue over what colour it should be.”

Rosie held out the lily Charlie had given her. The Door-Ward, whatever one of those was, seemed to be happy doing the talking for both of them.

“Thank <insert deity or demon of preference here> for that. At least we don’t have to go scrabbling around in the parking lot.”

Rosie wondered how anyone could manage to talk in brackets. On the other hand, he’d probably had lots of practice.

The Door-Ward closed the door behind Rosie. He cleared his throat. “Shadow in the night. This ye must know. To this place ye are come, as all must come...”

“Er... weren’t we skipping the formalities?” The Door-Ward was right. It was bloody cold outside. Rosie hoped the Roadhouse was real enough to give her a nice, warm room. Then she remembered the windows glowing with red light, and what Charlie had implied the place was. Not too warm, she corrected herself.

The Warden looked round nervously. “Look, don’t be a smart ass. They don’t bother much with outside, but we’re not outside anymore.” The Door-Ward lowered his voice. “And they might be listening.”

“They?”

The Door-Ward leaned closer. “They. Management,” he whispered. “And I’ve got my millennial performance review next week.”

“Oh,” Rosie whispered back. She raised her voice. “Most...er...gracious guardian. Might...um... might ye permit me the...er...the wisdom ye...” her voice trailed off. She looked at the Door-Ward and shrugged. “Sorry. Best I got.”

The Door-Ward looked at her. “Gracious guardian? You really think so? Look, I get off at...” He

looked out of the window at the stars in the night sky. Stars Rosie had a feeling never moved. “What am I talking about. I never get off.” He shook his head. “Trust me. Somebody offers you eternal life, check the small print first. Oh, sod it. Bugger off. Door at the end of the corridor. Knock, wait, and go in when they call.” The Door-Ward stomped away, muttering under his breath.

Rosie looked down the corridor. The door at the end seemed further away than it should be. She started walking toward it, but it didn't get closer as fast as it should. Occasionally she passed other doors. Those on her left had red glows seeping from them. Those on her right gleamed white around their frames. Suddenly a door appeared in the wall where none had been before. A sickly green light spilled round its frame. The door swung open and an arm reached out, dragging her in. A hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her startled “What the...?”

“Shsh.” said Charlie.

\* \* \* \*

“No, I bloody didn't! I wasn't there, sis'!” Charlie shook his head to shake it clear of the memories Nemesis was drawing out of the unconscious woman.

“Shut up, Khar'. You want to see this or not?”

Muttering under his breath, Charlie let his sister draw him back into the delivery.

\* \* \* \*

Charlie took his hand off Rosie's mouth and put a finger to his lips. He winked.

“Charlie! What...?” Rosie whispered.

“I said hush up, lady! You want them to hear you?”

“Them?”

“Yup. Them. Management. Cheatin' lyin' scumbags, the both of 'em. They think I don't know.”

“Know what, Charlie?”

“Know they're doin' it! Killin' people a-fore their time! I does my job, I does. And it don't include cheatin'! You want out of here or not?”

Rosie followed Charlie down the green glowing corridor. It wasn't straight like the one in the Roadhouse. It twisted and turned. “Are we goin' to the truck, Charlie?” Rosie was getting tired. She wondered how she could be dead and get tired. Charlie didn't answer. The corridor twisted more and turned corners that didn't fit. “Charlie?”

Charlie stopped in front of her. He turned round, and smiled. It wasn't any smile she wanted to see. He laughed. “Stupid bitch.” And he hit her. Hard.

\* \* \* \*

“That was the light, sis'. The light in the chain.”

Nemesis shook her head. “And I passed on a hot date with an incubus for this. Can we get on with it?”

Charlie sighed, and shut up.

\* \* \* \*

Rosie came round. The manacles were cold and tight round her wrists. As consciousness returned, she screamed. Screamed because the whip in Charlie's hand had opened another bleeding wound on her naked body.

"Damn, lady. I must'a hit you harder than I thought. Figured you was never goin' to wake up." Charlie laughed as he lashed the whip again. It bit deep. Rosie screamed again. "Mind, you got a fair set of lungs on you when you's awake, lady." The whip cracked out. "Still, you're strong. I can feel that. Last me a while, you will." The whip cracked. Rosie slipped away.

When she woke it was dark. The cuts the whip had made still dripped blood. A chain had somehow been passed clean through her neck. When she moved her head, the chain clanked. She lifted her hand to where it joined her neck. She tugged at it.

"Don't...don't bother. It won't come off." The voice sounded tired.

"Quiet."

"Hush."

"Shhhh!"

The other voices were just as tired.

"Not that way, at least." A flickering glow appeared. It came from a small flame dancing on the finger of a woman who was lying on the cold stone floor next to Rosie. A number of other figures lay stretched on the floor. The chain ran through each one's neck, like it did Rosie's.

One of the figures on the floor stirred. "Put that bloody light out, Kathalos. You want him to come back?"

"Shut up. He'll always come back, light or no light. She's new. We talked about this. We agreed. Right?" Kathalos' voice didn't sound so tired. Now it sounded angry.

"Now?"

"You mean...?"

"Is she strong enough?"

The voices all spoke at once. Some sounded scared. She wondered what would scare whatever she was chained to.

"We have a choice?" Kathalos' voice was flat.

The chain clanked. In the flickering light, Rosie could see the others on the chain moving to gather round her until she was in the centre of a circle, facing whatever a Kathalos might be. Every one of those around her bore scars, old wounds—and new ones. The crone called Kathalos saw her examining the bodies of her companions. She shook her head. "What do you think? He pulls up for a

tank of Super-8?"

Rosie wondered if she looked as confused as she felt. Apparently she did.

"Infernal combustion, stupid. Us. The damn truck burns souls. Of course they give him what the truck needs for pick ups. It's in his contract. But he enjoys it. He takes the truck out, for fun. Night-riding, looking for...for others. Ones Management don't know about. Ones he takes. Before they're ready." Kathalos saw Rosie looking at the dancing flame. "Right. I'm a witch. Well, was. He lets me keep a little power. Not enough to do anything with. I think it amuses him. And that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"You. You want out of here? Because there might be a way. We can help. But only if you promise."

"Promise?"

"To kill the bastard."



## Chapter Five: ...Chain of Fools

The flickering flame danced on Kathalos' finger. If nothing else it probably gave the circle surrounding Rosie a way of seeing how crazy she thought they were. "So let me get this straight. I'm dead. I'm somehow bleeding..."

"It's not blood. It's your...you. You're leaking. He likes the whip too much, though. It's why he keeps having to get more of us. He whips, he feeds—and in time, we're gone. It's too late for us. We've been here too long. But you're new. Fresh. So, do you want to help? You on the side of the angels, meat?"

Rosie remembered. The open road. Twenty hot hogs round her and her new colours burning on her back. "Sort of. I guess." She shrugged. "Whatever. You're a witch. These others are—whatever they are. What can I do you can't?"

"It's not what you are. Well, it is. We've all been here for a long time. Whatever we were, we aren't now. Most of our *us* is gone. We're not strong enough. You, though—he's barely started. You might be able to get away. But you have to promise."

Rosie raised an eyebrow. "Promise?"

Kathalos spat. "To kill him."

Rosie smiled. For a moment she heard the sound of hog engines again. "Oh, I'll kill him. You give me a way—I'll kill him."

"There's a catch." Kathalos looked uncomfortable.

Rosie shrugged again. "Isn't there always?"

Kathalos' eyes were cold. "It'll kill you, too."

"I thought I was dead already?" Rosie was confused again.

Kathalos nodded. "You are. But that's just ordinary dead. I mean dead-dead. Gone. No more—what's your name?"

"Rosie."

"I mean no more Rosie. Ever. No heaven, no hell. Just—gone."

Rosie thought of the black truck driving the Roads. She'd never been religious. She'd always thought once she died, that was it. No more anything. Looked as though she'd get to be right after all. "So what do we do?"

"Not we. You. You kill us."

\* \* \* \*

It had taken a while. Kathalos had to explain, then Rosie asked some questions, then Kathalos got mad, then she explained some more. Eventually Rosie got there. The witch knew all the how. Knew

some things, she said, Charlie didn't know she knew. But she didn't have the strength left to do what was needed. She knew where to get strength, but if she did... Well, it wouldn't work. Kathalos had lost too much. So the prisoners had talked. Talked—and decided to wait. For fresh meat. For Rosie. So now it was up to her to do what had to be done.

Now Rosie was doing it. She tensed her hands and twisted her wrists harder. Twisted the chain round Steve's throat. Listening to him tell her his life. His wife, his three kids, his dog... While she was killing him. Because apparently it didn't work unless she knew what she was doing. What, and to who.

Killing dead people to get stronger. Rosie didn't think Kathalos had been any kind of white witch.

Rosie pulled on the chain, twisted it tighter. Steve tried to be brave, but even so a small scream escaped his lips. She pulled. She pulled and pulled and pulled until it was done. And when it was, a faint green glow was in the links of the chain. But Steve wasn't enough. Mary. Gekthis. Franz. Wives, husbands, children, lost dreams, and done deeds. Josef, Ben, Stefan, Bendrath. She didn't know if she'd be able to do it. The only thing kept her going was their begging, their pleading. Not to stop. For it to be over. Serian, Alison, Lance. Simon, who for some reason kept asking for her to call him Peter. 'Til the chain was burning green fire, and only Kathalos and she remained.

“We have to find your lily.”

“What?” Rosie thought she'd forgotten how to cry. She was wrong. She dried her eyes. She'd cry after she'd gutted Charlie. Not that she'd cry for long if Kathalos was right.

“Your lily. He keeps them. I know where. You can't kill him here, not in his place. You have to find him. On the Road. The lily knows...”

“But...” Rosie waved her hand at the glowing green chain joining her to Kathalos.

“Pull it out.”

“What?”

Kathalos pointed to the chain through her neck. “Pull it out. It's yours now. They'll help. The others.”

Rosie grabbed hold of the chain and tugged. It resisted.

“Don't play with it. PULL!” Kathalos was gasping in pain. Rosie pulled as hard as she could. A link on the end of the chain snapped off in her hand. Rosie looked at it, amazed. Kathalos sighed. “OK. So I'm helping a bit. What do you think, you're going to pat him to death? Now pull!” Rosie put the no longer green link in her pocket. She pulled. The chain ripped and tore, slicing free of Kathalos' throat.

“Come on. I haven't got long. Long enough, but not long.” Kathalos' voice spoke in Rosie's head. Probably because she didn't have a throat left to talk with. Rosie got up, and went to the locked door of their prison. She tugged, but it didn't open.

“Use the chain, stupid!” Patience clearly wasn’t Kathalos’ strong suit. Of course, it wasn’t Rosie’s either. She looped the chain in her fist and lashed the length against the door. It exploded in green fire.

“Follow me.” Kathalos went ahead, through the twisted corridors. After a while, she pointed to another door. Rosie lashed the chain.

The room was huge. Huge, and filled with ranks of cabinets. Cabinets with drawers. Kathalos pulled open a drawer. Inside sat a black lily.

“Find yours.” She looked at Rosie.

“How?”

“Listen. It will call.”

Rosie listened. She could hear it. A faint whisper. She ran through the ranks of cabinets, letting it guide her. At last she stood in front of a drawer identical to the others. She opened it—and took the lily. It sang to her.

“Now me.” Kathalos voice said she was getting weaker.

“You?”

“The lily won’t want to let you find him. It wants you to be...to find the Gates. So someone has to...has...” Kathalos’ voice was fainter... “... has to make it find him. That’s me. Give me the lily.”

Rosie put the lily in Kathalos’ hand.

“When you find him, the fire won’t be enough. Not on its own. You can do it, though. You’ll feel it. It will pull at you. Let go. Then he’ll die. Remember...you promised...” And Kathalos faded, soaking into the lily. The lily fell to the floor. Rosie wrapped the chain round her waist and bent to pick up the lily. She felt a tug. The tug changed direction.

“You promised.... Remember...” And Kathalos’ voice was gone. Rosie held the lily in her hand. Oh, yes. She remembered. She followed the tug.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a long chase. First to get out of the tunnels. When she did, Rosie found herself on a wide open plain, at the mouth of a cave. But the lily still tugged. It had tugged, and she had followed. And now she was here. At the Gates.

From where she crouched, hidden behind the corner of the Roadhouse, she saw Charlie walking across the yard, something slung over his shoulder. He knocked at the door of the Roadhouse. He knocked again. After a moment, he kicked the door down. He went inside.

Rosie had asked around, while she was chasing him. Funny what people knew. Or thought they did. She checked the green-glowing chain wrapped over her shoulder. She made sure her lily was still in her left pocket, and patted the right, to make sure the other thing was still there. Three heads or

one, she figured a dog was a dog. She ran from the corner of the Roadhouse over to the truck. She tried to lift up the tailgate, but it was locked. Fair enough. She gave the lock a smack with the end of the chain, and it sprang open. She lifted the tailgate and climbed in, easing it back down to make sure her presence wasn't obvious.

The pile of coins nearly filled the truck. Spread flat over them, Rosie heard a whisper. A thousand whispers. A million...she clapped her hands over her ears. The rig started up, and she could feel it pulling out of the Roadhouse lot. She didn't know how long it drove, but eventually it stopped. Rosie heard Charlie get out. It was time. Wherever she was, it would do.

She eased up the truck tailgate.

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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 Sephiranorth, 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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# Also by Graeme Smith

## A Comedy of Terrors

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.

## 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 Andrakon 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.



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