

The glass chimes on the front door tinkled and the Kingdom's sole glassblower raised his head. "Now who?" he said, and peeped out from his cramped back room, only to hastily withdraw.

"The gods have mercy," he whispered.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but the image remained imprinted on his eyelids. Standing in the front room, staring imperiously down his nose at a glass unicorn, was none other than His Royal Highness, the King.

During his long career the glassblower had come to know well the sound of priceless glass artwork breaking. It was this sound that now penetrated the curtain separating both rooms. The glassblower winced. The unicorn had been his finest work.

The reason for his distress had little to do with destroyed masterpieces, however, or with the import of visiting royalty. It had everything to do with fear for his life. Though the glassblower never attended one, it was well known that public executions were held frequently in the Royal Square. They were so frequent, in fact, that the majority of those executed couldn't possibly be guilty of anything—except perhaps of displeasing the King in some insubstantial way.

"Isn't anyone back there?" the King said. "You mustn't keep me waiting! I'm terribly busy, and my dungeon is full, and I have only one way of dealing with this kind of insolence!"

Clenching his teeth to halt their incriminating chatter, the glassblower stepped out, glad for the wooden counter between himself and the King. The craftsman prudently averted his gaze from the pile of broken unicorn at the monarch's feet.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he grunted through clamped teeth. "What a pleasure to have you in my humble shop." Again he winced. He was a terrible liar.

The King took no notice. "I want to commission a piece of your work," he said.

The glassblower noted the King's composure, or rather his lack thereof. The royal garments were unwashed and rumpled, and a royal stench made the glassblower wrinkle his nose. The King was a mess.

Nevertheless, he came with a business proposition, and so the glassblower adopted his most professional manner. "For whom will I be crafting this piece, Your Majesty?"

"The biggest harlot in my entire Kingdom."

The glassblower hesitated.

"And what shape shall it take?"

"A heart," the King said, his voice wavering. "I want it shaped like a heart, and I want it to be extremely delicate."

"Delicate, sire?"

"Yes, you overblown peasant. Delicate." The King paused. "I want it to break in her hands."

The glassblower cleared his throat. "Am I right in thinking, then, Your Majesty, that you want a piece of artwork that will break, but only when it is held by a certain maiden?"

"That's correct."

The glassblower swallowed. What the King asked was virtually impossible. Stalling for time, he said, "I take it this woman has wronged you, Your Highness?"

"I take it you wish to be flayed?"

"Forgive my intrusion, sire," the glassblower said quickly, "but why not simply imprison her?"

"Because I love her," said the King, and started to cry. "I'll be back for it in two days." He left the shop, sobbing.

The glassblower gazed vacantly as the entrance bell announced the monarch's departure. It might as well have tolled the craftsman's funeral.

The King's assignment was unfeasible, and so there remained only two courses of action. The glassblower could stay, dutifully working to fill the King's order, and ultimately failing—and probably losing his head in the process—or he could leave, forever abandoning the store his family had managed for generations.

Thirty minutes saw the glassblower barrelling north with only a horse, his tools and a few pieces of carefully wrapped work.

3 days before

“I love you!” exclaimed the King. “You are the sun around which my world orbits! Nay, the sun pales next to your scintillating beauty! You are the rose whose splendour a name does no justice! You are the object to my subject! The adjective to my noun! You—”

“Are you finished yet?” said the woman to whom he spoke, yawning.

15 days before that (arguably the beginning)

The King looked down upon his home and tried to decide if it was a palace or a castle.

The very fact he looked *down* at it betrayed the edifice's strangeness. It occupied the trough of a valley, and was surrounded by the houses and shops of peasants, many of whom could glance down upon the King whenever they wished.

There was even a nearby hill upon which his home might have been built. It was currently occupied by shepherds and their herds, but it would only have been a matter of paying them off—or exiling them, convenience permitting—and the structure might have dominated the countryside.

Instead, the royal architects had seen fit to construct it upon the lowest point in the land. One architect was kind enough to inform the King the enormous building was actually partly below sea level, which accounted for the frequent flooding during the rainy season.

The previous castle—or palace, or what have you—had also been constructed at the very bottom of the valley, which might explain the ease the invaders enjoyed when they infiltrated and burned it to the ground. Since they took nothing, and departed immediately after setting the royal domicile ablaze, no reason could be found for the invasion, except perhaps to criticize the Kingdom’s architectural integrity. The monarch at the time—the present King’s predecessor—stubbornly ordered the new castle/palace built in exactly the same spot.

After surviving an invasion, a fire and a wagonload of bad publicity, the former King perished from eating a bit of uncooked meat at the banquet celebrating his newly constructed abode.

After the previous monarch’s demise, the present King leaped up to join the struggle for the throne—to find he was the only one standing. No one else wanted the job. Even the former monarch’s sons expressed no interest, instead choosing to take up horseshoeing in a village ten leagues to the west. The King became the King by default.

He shrugged off the depression his hybrid-home never failed to elicit and returned to his waiting steed. It bleated loudly. You might be quick to point out horses don’t bleat—they neigh—but this horse *did* bleat, by simple virtue of not actually being a horse. It was a goat. All the

horses in the royal stables had contracted colic, forcing the King to use this slightly less conventional mode of transportation.

Presently, it began to rain. The King grimaced, and pulled his cloak tighter.

The goat bleated again. He had given the beast a name, however it is rather a vulgar one, and therefore must not be recorded here.

An oversized saddle rested on the animal's back, and had a propensity for shifting about, often depositing its rider onto the ground. It was in this the King now attempted to sit. Cautiously he circled the goat, murmuring calming words, which were drowned out by the creature's protests. He tried placing his foot in the stirrup, but the goat shied away. His frustration grew, until finally he flung himself awkwardly onto its back, causing the cantankerous beast to take off with the King half in and half out of the rain-slick seat. Petrified by the goat's acceleration, he held this precarious position for dear life.

As they barrelled through the muddy streets, the King clutching the saddle horn as the saddle shifted wildly about, some peasants shouted advice on goat riding from the safe dryness of their doorways.

"See if you can grab its horn!" shouted one.

"Kick it in its flanks!" suggested another.

Whether their ideas would have helped or hindered, the King dismissed them without thought. He suffered from an unfortunate excess of education which, much like a microwavable dinner left in till it crisps, had rendered him beyond repair. He respected only opinions that originated within his own cranium, and since those of the peasants hadn't, the King D.Litt. Ph.D. D.Agr. D.Arch. Th.D. Ed.D. D.B.A. D.D. D.A. D.M.A. D.Mus. D.C.L. Dr.P.H. Psy.D. LL.D. P.L. ignored them.

It is only appropriate that next the goat charged through the campus of Kingdom University, knocking over academics as it went and causing them to scream articulately at the King.

The goat exited the campus, the King still miraculously astride. He noticed it had brought him near his home, albeit in a roundabout way. Indeed, the royal moat was at the end of the very street along which they now galloped. He speculated briefly about whether the beast's lunacy would allow it to stop.

The goat *did* stop. The King, however, didn't. He continued moving through the air, until at last his flight ended with a large splash. Floundering, saturated and sputtering, the King decided it must be a castle, after all. Only castles had moats.

"Your Highness!" said a high-pitched, barely masculine voice. "Whatever are you doing down there? You're going to be late!"

Of the many unfortunate things the King had inherited from his predecessor, the man who now addressed him was perhaps the worst. He was slim, unimpressive, and sometimes mistaken for a woman. He possessed an uncanny knack for turning up during the King's darkest moods.

"Being late," the King answered, treading water, "implies previous knowledge of an engagement. I had none."

"But sire, I *did* tell you! I told you this morning I'd hired a bard for your entertainment!"

"Oh. Well, it also implies caring. And I don't."

The man was the King's advisor, and unlike most royal advisors—who conducted themselves according to hidden agendas—he actually seemed to care about how the Kingdom was run. This made him insufferable.

“Sire,” the advisor said as he helped the King out, “you really must stop swimming in the moat. Don’t you know it’s nearly winter?” He smiled. “It’s a good thing I advised against the man-eating alligators, now isn’t it?”

The King glowered. Shivering, he tried with futility to wring out his garments.

His mood enjoyed no improvement as they traveled the castle’s near-empty corridors. The King found it difficult to find anyone willing to work for him, and had grown adept at tricking unwitting applicants into signing contracts. That was how he’d acquired his stable master.

“Do you suppose my subjects dislike me?” the King asked his advisor.

“Er, of course not, sire. I suspect they merely feel unworthy of working for you.”

The King digested this. “Now I remember why I keep you around.”

The hallways were filled with tapestries and statues: remnants of the former King’s reign. The present King hadn’t altered much, except to smash a few pieces of artwork on his bad days. He wasn’t much of an interior decorator, and he was yet to hire any masons for the castle’s upkeep. As a result, it was falling apart.

The bard waited in the throne room, tapping his dulcimer impatiently. At the King’s entrance he launched into his narrative, accompanied by an up-tempo melody.

“There once was a King who everything owned:

Or at the least, everything that mattered.”

The King smiled.

“Everything, that is, except for a wife.”

The King frowned.

*“It might be argued that the gracious King
Would eventually wed a lady
Who in the Kingdom lived. Logically,
Since he owned the Kingdom, he owned a wife
As well. He owned them all, technically.”*

The King began to redden.

*“That is not the point,” the bard said quickly,
having noted the King’s discontentment.
“The point is that the King wasn’t married.
Without a mate, he could produce no heir,
And without an heir, who would make the rules?
One had to have rules, else folks misbehaved.
Wouldn’t you, were there no one to make rules?”*

The King turned to his advisor. “I don’t care about rules!” he screamed. The bard tactfully began a musical interlude. “People can do as they bloody well please!”

“Sire, it’s only a story!” the advisor squeaked.

A purple vein asserted itself on the King's forehead. "I'm not a dunce—I know a thinly veiled allegory when I hear one. I *was* schooled at Kingdom University, you know!"

"At least let him finish!"

The bard began the second half of his ballad.

"For years the King ruled wisely and fairly,"

he sang, nearly choking on the untruth,

"With the help of his friend, the advisor:

With time, however, the noble monarch

Passed away, leaving no heir to make rules,

And do other kingly—"

Now crimson, the King was grinding his teeth audibly. The bard hurried on, abandoning pentameter.

"With the King's death, the Kingdom descended into a dark, lawless period, emerging from it only after adopting that nightmarish bane of all rulers—democracy."

On this grisly note, the bard stuffed his dulcimer into its case and fled, having both noted the King's foul mood and recalled the monarch's fondness for executions.

The King rounded on his advisor. He hissed: "You've taken your last liberty, vermin." He began to advance, and the advisor began backing up.

“But sire!” he said in what he hoped was a calming tone. “As King, it is your duty to marry! The Kingdom needs an heir to the throne. Do you remember what happened the last time it lacked one?”

The King halted momentarily, frowning his brow. “Yes!” he growled. “I became King!” He rolled up his sleeves and continued his approach.

The advisor, in retreating, bumped into the throne and fell into it. Realizing where he sat, he nearly wept in horror, but could not get up without kneeling his liege in the face.

The King glared up at him. “Mark my words: *I—will—not—marry!*”

“Yes, but sire!”

“Yes, but sire!” the King mimicked, his voice cracking. “Yes, but sire! Is that all you know how to say, you bureaucratic twit? But sire, *rules*, sire! Bugger your blasted rules! Did you hear that? Bugger!”

A shocked silence ensued.

“But sire!”

The vein pulsing on the King’s forehead seemed in danger of exploding. Finally he threw up his hands, wheeled about and marched out of the room.

The advisor leaped up from the throne as if scalded.

7 flagons of ale later

“Barman! ‘Nother flagon.”

The tavern keeper came over and eyed the King dubiously. “Your Highness, you’ve already had several.”

“Mmph. Know what else I’ve had? Several men executed. Bring me another bloody flagon.”

The tavern keeper shrugged and went to get the King’s drink.

The King continued to stare into his empty mug. He was a champion drinker. Of course, he got a lot of practice. It wasn’t easy being King, and every bartender in the Kingdom knew it.

One day, shortly after his coronation, the King had announced that the gods endorsed his rule, and that he bore the mandate of heaven. He much preferred this to the truth: that he was King because no one else wanted to be.

A month or so after this declaration, a group of farmers marched into his throne room. “This year’s harvest is lousy,” they said. “It’s your fault.”

“*Me?*” said the King. “Why blame me?” He glanced nervously around the room, his gaze settling on a guard. “Why not him?”

The guard looked up. He blinked.

“We blame you,” the farmers said again. “For the harvest, and for the hurricane last Tuesday.”

“That’s ridiculous. You can’t blame me for the weather.”

One of the farmers dared to position himself within inches of the King’s face. “We sure can,” he said. “You said yourself you rule by divine right. If there’s something wrong with the harvest, or with the weather, then it must mean you’ve done something to anger the gods.”

The King stared at the farmer, his mouth working wordlessly. He couldn’t believe it. In consolidating his rule, he’d somehow given his subjects licence to criticize him for absolutely anything that went wrong.

A *clink* jolted him from his gloomy reverie. The tavern keeper had returned with his drink. The King began downing it immediately.

The tavern in which he sat obeyed the three D's: dark, dingy and dilapidated. He preferred such bars over other, nicer establishments, because he was less likely to encounter young nobles with bright ideas about how the Kingdom should be run. He couldn't decide who he disliked more: farmers who condemned him or busybody nobles who tried to help.

Thinking about nobles and farmers only made him more depressed. It seemed somebody was always storming his throne room with a complaint or a suggestion. He never had any peace. He sighed.

"You look like you've had a rough day," observed the two women who appeared beside him.

"You don't know the half of it," the King muttered. He turned to look at them. "Are you twins?"

The two women eyed him askance. "Er, there's only one of me."

"Ah. Sorry. I'm very drunk."

"I can see that. In fact, I was just now given to wondering what would occasion such a conspicuous display of alcoholism."

"In short, I'm having marriage shoved down m'throat." The King hiccupped.

"I know what that's like. I've lost count of how many guys have tried to swindle me into wedlock. So, who's this unshakable woman?"

"It's a man, actually."

The woman's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you correctly. Did you say a *man* is trying to talk you into marrying?"

"Aye, a colleague of mine. He says it's for the best."

"I see. I suppose there's no point in continuing this conversation, then." The woman bade him farewell, and left the bar.

The King stared into his drink in consternation. He knew something had gone awry, but he had no idea what. It would have consoled him to know he wouldn't remember any of this in the morning.

"Where did I go wrong?" he wondered aloud.

The tavern keeper spoke without looking up. "She thinks you're gay, sire."

The King's drink exited his mouth. "She thinks I'm *what?*" he said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that sort of thing, of course." He began to stammer. "Nothing at all. It's just that—I don't—I've never—"

The King grimaced. "Get me another flagon."

the next morning, 5 hours before the King's hangover subsides

"Let other men play at other things," the advisor said as they rode out onto the enormous polo field. "The King of Games is still the Game of Kings."

"I like that," said the King. It served to distract him from his throbbing head, which the driving rain and cutting wind were doing nothing to improve. "Did you come up with it?"

"I read it on a stone tablet."

The King and his advisor squared off in the center of the field. The King had commissioned the construction of the polo field under