



ACT I

*When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.*

—*King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 5

ONE

ALWAYS A BLOODY GHOST

Tosser!” cried the raven.
There’s always a bloody raven.

“Foolish teachin’ him to talk, if you ask me,” said the sentry.

“I’m duty-bound foolish, yeoman,” said I. I am, you know? A fool. Fool to the court of Lear of Britain. “And you *are* a tosser,”¹ I said.

“Piss off!” said the raven.

The yeoman took a swipe at the bird with his spear and the great black bird swooped off the wall and went cawing out over the Thames. A ferryman looked up from his boat, saw us on the tower, and waved. I jumped onto the wall and bowed—at your fucking service, thank you. The yeoman grumbled and spat after the raven.

There have always been ravens at the White Tower. A thousand years ago, before George II, idiot king of Merica, destroyed the

1. Tossler—one who tosses, a wanker.

world, there were ravens here. The legend says that as long as there are ravens at the Tower, England will stand strong. Still, it may have been a mistake to teach one to talk.

“The Earl of Gloucester approaches!” cried a sentry on the west wall. “With his son Edgar and the bastard Edmund!”

The yeoman by me grinned. “Gloucester, eh? Be sure you do that bit where you play a goat and Drool plays the earl mistaking you for his wife.”

“That would be unkind,” said I. “The earl is newly widowed.”

“You did it the last time he was here and she was still warm in the grave.”

“Well, yes. A service that—trying to shock the poor wretch out of his grief, wasn’t it?”

“Good show, too. The way you was bleatin’ I thought ol’ Drool was givin’ it to you right proper up the bung.”

I made a note to shove the guard off the wall when opportunity presented.

“Heard he was going to have you assassinated, but he couldn’t make a case to the king.”

“Gloucester’s a noble, he doesn’t need a case for murder, just a whim and a blade.”

“Not bloody likely,” the yeoman said, “everyone knows the king’s got a wing o’er you.”

That was true. I enjoy a certain license.

“Have you seen Drool? With Gloucester here, there’ll be a command performance.” My apprentice, Drool—a beef-witted bloke the size of a draught horse.

“He was in the kitchen before the watch,” said the yeoman.



The kitchen buzzed—the staff preparing for a feast.

“Have you seen Drool?” I asked Taster, who sat at the table star-

ing sadly at a bread trencher² laid out with cold pork, the king's dinner. He was a thin, sickly lad, chosen, no doubt, for his weakness of constitution, and a predisposition toward dropping dead at the slightest provocation. I liked to tell him my troubles, sure that they would not travel far.

"Does this look poisoned to you?"

"It's pork, lad. Lovely. Eat up. Half the men in England would give a testicle to feast thus, and it only mid-day. I'm tempted myself." I tossed my head—gave him a grin and a bit of a jingle on the ol' hat bells to cheer him. I pantomimed stealing a bit of his pork. "After you, of course."

A knife thumped into the table by my hand.

"Back, Fool," said Bubble, the head cook. "That's the king's lunch and I'll have your balls before I'll let you at it."

"My balls are yours for the asking, milady," said I. "Would you have them on a trencher, or shall I serve them in a bowl of cream, like peaches?"

Bubble harrumphed, yanked her knife from the table and went back to gutting a trout at the butcher block, her great bottom rolling like thunderclouds under her skirt as she moved.

"You're a wicked little man, Pocket," said Squeak, waves of freckles riding o'er her shy smile. She was second to the cook, a sturdy, ginger-haired girl with a high giggle and a generous spirit in the dark. Taster and I often passed pleasant afternoons at the table watching her wring the necks of chickens.

Pocket is my name, by the way. Given to me by the abbess who found me on the nunnery doorstep when I was a tiny babe. True, I am not a large fellow. Some might even say I am diminutive, but I am quick as a cat and nature has compensated me with other gifts. But wicked?

"I think Drool was headed to the princess's chambers," Squeak said.

2. Trencher—a thick, wide slice of stale bread, used like a plate.

“Aye,” said Taster, glumly. “The lady sent for a cure for melancholy.”

“And the git went?” Jest on his own? The boy wasn’t ready. What if he blundered, tripped, fell on the princess like a millstone on a butterfly? “Are you sure?”

Bubble dropped a gutless trout into a bushel of slippery cofishes.³ “Chanting, ‘Off to do ma duty,’ he was. We told him you’d be looking for him when we heard Princess Goneril and the Duke of Albany was coming.”

“Albany’s coming?”

“Ain’t he sworn to string your entrails from the chandelier?” asked Taster.

“No,” corrected Squeak. “That was Duke of Cornwall. Albany was going to have his head on a pike, I believe. Pike, wasn’t it, Bubble?”

“Aye, have his head on a pike. Funny thing, thinkin’ about it, you’d look like a bigger version of your puppet-stick there.”

“Jones,” said Taster, pointing to my jester’s scepter, Jones, who is, indeed, a smaller version of my own handsome countenance, fixed atop a sturdy handle of polished hickory. Jones speaks for me when even my tongue needs to exceed safe license with knights and nobles, his head pre-piked for the wrath of the dull and humorless. My finest art is oft lost in the eye of the subject.

“Yes, that would be right hilarious, Bubble—ironic imagery—like the lovely Squeak turning you on a spit over a fire, an apple up both your ends for color—although I daresay the whole castle might conflagrate in the resulting grease fire, but until then we’d laugh and laugh.”

I dodged a well-flung trout then, and paid Bubble a grin for not throwing her knife instead. Fine woman, she, despite being large and quick to anger. “Well, I’ve a great drooling dolt to find if we are to prepare an entertainment for the evening.”

3. Cofishes—other fish in a group, coworkers, cohorts, etc. Shut up, it’s a word.



Cordelia's chambers lay in the North Tower; the quickest way there was atop the outer wall. As I crossed over the great main gatehouse, a young spot-faced yeoman called, "Hail, Earl of Gloucester!" Below, the greybeard Gloucester and his retinue were crossing the drawbridge.

"Hail, Edmund, you bloody bastard!" I called over the wall.

The yeoman tapped me on the shoulder. "Beggin' your pardon, sirrah,⁴ but I'm told that Edmund is sensitive about his bastardy."

"Aye, yeoman," said I. "No need for prodding and jibe to divine that prick's tender spot, he wears it on his sleeve." I jumped on the wall and waved Jones at the bastard, who was trying to wrench a bow and quiver from a knight who rode beside him. "You whore-son scalawag!" said I. "You flesh-turd dropped stinking from the poxy asshole of a hare-lipped harlot!"

The Earl of Gloucester glowered up at me as he passed under the portcullis.⁵

"Shot to the heart, that one," said the yeoman.

"Too harsh, then, you reckon?"

"A bit."

"Sorry. Excellent hat, though, bastard," I called, by way of making amends. Edgar and two knights were trying to restrain the bastard Edmund below. I jumped down from the wall. "Haven't seen Drool, have you?"

"In the great hall this morning," said the yeoman. "Not since."

A call came around the top of the wall, passing from yeoman

4. Sirrah—form of address, "dude."

5. Portcullis—a heavy vertical grate, usually spiked on the bottom and made of or clad in iron to resist fire. Typically the inner gate of a fortress, an open grate so attackers could be hit with arrows or spears if they broke through the outer gates.

to yeoman until we heard, “The Duke of Cornwall and Princess Regan approach from the south.”

“Fuckstockings!” Cornwall: polished greed and pure born villainy; he’d dirk⁶ a nun for a farthing,⁷ and short the coin, for the fun.

“Don’t worry, little one, the king’ll keep your hide whole.”

“Aye, yeoman, he will, and if you call me *little one* in company, the king’ll have you walking watch on the frozen moat all winter.”

“Sorry, Sir Jester, sir,” said the yeoman. He slouched then as not to seem so irritatingly tall. “Heard that tasty Princess Regan’s a right bunny cunny, eh?” He leaned down to elbow me in the ribs, now that we were best mates and all.

“You’re new, aren’t you?”

“Just two months in service.”

“Advice, then, young yeoman: When referring to the king’s middle daughter, state that she is fair, speculate that she is pious, but unless you’d like to spend your watch looking for the box where your head is kept, resist the urge to wax ignorant on her naughty bits.”

“I don’t know what that means, sir.”

“Speak not of Regan’s shaggacity, son. Cornwall has taken the eyes of men who have but looked upon the princess with but the spark of lust.”

“The fiend! I didn’t know, sir. I’ll say nothing.”

“And neither shall I, good yeoman. Neither shall I.”

And thus are alliances made, loyalties cemented. Pocket makes a friend.

The boy was right about Regan, of course. And why I hadn’t thought to call her *bunny cunny* myself, when I of all people should know—well, as an artist, I must admit, I was envious of the invention.

6. Dirk—a knife, especially a dagger, or the act of using a dagger on someone.

7. Farthing—the smallest denomination of English coinage, equal to one quarter of a penny.



Cordelia's private solar⁸ lay at the top of a narrow spiral staircase lit only with the crosses of arrow loops. I could hear giggling as I topped the stairs.

"So I am of no worth if not on the arm and in the bed of some buffoon in a codpiece?" I heard Cordelia say.

"You called," said I, stepping into the room, codpiece in hand.

The ladies-in-waiting giggled. Young Lady Jane, who is but thirteen, shrieked at my presence—disturbed, no doubt, by my overt manliness, or perhaps by the gentle clouting on the bottom she received from Jones.

"Pocket!" Cordelia sat at the center of the circle of girls—holding court, as such—her hair down, blond curls to her waist, a simple gown of lavender linen, loosely laced. She stood and approached me. "You honor us, Fool. Did you hear rumors of small animals to hurt, or were you hoping to accidentally surprise me in my bath again?"

I tipped my hat, a slight, contrite jingle there. "I was lost, milady."

"A dozen times?"

"Finding my way is not my strong suit. If you want a navigator I'll send for him, but hold me blameless should your melancholy triumph and you drown yourself in the brook, your gentle ladies weeping damply around your pale and lovely corpse. Let them say, 'She was not lost in the map, confident as she was in her navigator, but lost in heart for want of a fool.'"

The ladies gasped as if I'd cued them. I'd have blessed them if I were still on speaking terms with God.

8. Solar—a sitting room or parlor in the top story of a tower. The tower unblocked by outer walls receives a lot of sun, thus the name.

“Out, out, out, ladies,” Cordelia said. “Give me peace with my fool so that I might devise some punishment for him.”

The ladies scurried out of the room.

“Punishment?” I asked. “For what?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, “but by the time I’ve thought of the punishment, I’m sure there’ll be an offense.”

“I blush at your confidence.”

“And I at your humility,” said the princess. She grinned, a crescent too devious for a maid of her tender years. Cordelia is not ten years my junior (I’m not sure, exactly, of my own age), seventeen summers has she seen, and as the youngest of the king’s daughters, she’s always been treated as if fragile as spun glass. But, sweet thing that she is, her bark could frighten a mad badger.

“Shall I disrobe for my punishment?” I offered. “Flagellation? Fellation? Whatever. I am your willing penitent, lady.”

“No more of that, Pocket. I need your counsel, or at least your commiseration. My sisters are coming to the castle.”

“Unfortunately, they have arrived.”

“Oh, that’s right, Albany and Cornwall want to kill you. Bad luck, that. Anyway, they are coming to the castle, as are Gloucester and his sons. Goodness, *they* want to kill you as well.”

“Rough critics,” said I.

“Sorry. And a dozen other nobles as well as the Earl of Kent are here. Kent doesn’t want to kill you, does he?”

“Not that I know of. But it is only lunchtime.”

“Right. And do you know why they are all coming?”

“To corner me like a rat in a barrel?”

“Barrels do not have corners, Pocket.”

“Does seem like a lot of bother for killing one small, if tremendously handsome fool.”

“It’s not about you, you dolt! It’s about me.”

“Well, even less effort to kill you. How many can it take to snap

your scrawny neck? I worry that Drool will do it by accident someday. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"He stinks. I sent him away this morning." She waved a hand furiously to return to her point. "Father is marrying me off!"

"Nonsense. Who would have you?"

The lady darkened a bit, then, blue eyes gone cold. Badgers across Blighty⁹ shuddered. "Edgar of Gloucester has always wanted me and the Prince of France and Duke of Burgundy are already here to pay me troth."

"Troth about what?"

"Troth!"

"About what?"

"Troth, troth, you fool, not truth. The princes are here to marry me."

"Those two? Edgar? No." I was shaken. Cordelia? Married? Would one of them take her away? It was unjust! Unfair! Wrong! Why, she had never even seen me naked.

"Why would they want to troth you? I mean, for the night, to be sure, who wouldn't troth you cross-eyed? But permanently, I think not."

"I'm a bloody princess, Pocket."

"Precisely. What good are princesses? Dragon food and ransom markers—spoiled brats to be bartered for real estate."

"Oh no, dear fool, you forget that sometimes a princess becomes a queen."

"Ha, princesses. What worth are you if your father has to tack a dozen counties to your bum to get those French poofers to look at you?"

"Oh, and what worth a fool? Nay, what worth a fool's second, for you merely carry the drool cup for the Natural.¹⁰ What's the ransom for a jester, Pocket? A bucket of warm spittle."

9. Blighty—Britain, Great Britain; slang.

10. A Natural—the "Natural" jester was one who had some physical deformity or anomaly, a hunchback, a dwarf, a giant, Down's syndrome, etc. Naturals were thought to have been "touched" by God.

I grabbed my chest. “Pierced to the core, I am,” I gasped. I staggered to a chair. “I bleed, I suffer, I die on the forked lance of your words.”

She came to me. “You do not.”

“No, stay back. Blood stains will never come out of linen—they are stubborned with your cruelty and guilt . . .”

“Pocket, stop it now.”

“You have kilt me, lady, most dead.” I gasped, I spasmed, I coughed. “Let it always be said that this humble fool brought joy to all whom he met.”

“No one will say that.”

“Shhhh, child. I grow weak. No breath.” I looked at the imaginary blood on my hands, horrified. I slid off a chair, to the floor. “But I want you to know that despite your vicious nature and your freakishly large feet, I have always—”

And then I died. Bloody fucking brilliantly, I’d say, too, hint of a shudder at the end as death’s chilly hand grabbed my knob.

“What? What? You have always what?”

I said nothing, being dead, and not a little exhausted from all the bleeding and gasping. Truth be told, under the jest I felt like I’d taken a bolt to the heart.

“You’re absolutely no help at all,” said Cordelia.



The raven landed on the wall as I made my way back to the common house in search of Drool. No little vexed was I by the news of Cordelia’s looming nuptials.

“Ghost!” said the raven.

“I didn’t teach you that.”

“Bollocks!” replied the raven.

“That’s the spirit!”

“Ghost!”

“Piss off, bird,” said I.

Then a cold wind bit at my bum and at the top of the stairs, in the turret ahead, I saw a shimmering in the shadows, like silk in sunlight—not quite in the shape of a woman.

And the ghost said:

“With grave offense to daughters three,
Alas, the king a fool shall be.”

“Rhymes?” I inquired. “You’re looming about all diaphanous in the middle of the day, puking cryptic rhymes? Low craft and tawdry art, ghosting about at noon—a parson’s fart heralds darker doom, thou babbling wisp.”

“Ghost!” cried the raven, and with that the ghost was gone.
There’s always a bloody ghost.