

# Ranunculus, Reorgs, and a Quest With the Strawberry Gnome

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2018 JUN 10



In the shire of Rose Hill, which lies in the higher elevations of the kingdom of Kirkland, I labored mightily to expunge the ranunculus from our precious strawberry bed. Yeoman's work yes, but the activity has a palliative effect on me and I was in dire need of such. Still stinging inside from yet another reorg followed by the inevitable round of layoffs, I struggled to work off the pain. Though not likely to fill the gaping divot in my treasure store, yanking the nasty weeds made me feel like I was improving something.

After hours of digging and tugging, I hauled a bucket of the awful stuff to the waste bin. Ranunculus, a singularly unpopular weed that is also known as "Creeping Buttercup," should be called "Creepy Buttercup" for the way it spreads and spreads no matter how many times it is pulled from lawns, gardens, and strawberry beds. It is said that The Evil Weed can reproduce many times over from its rhizomes. Its seeds can sprout even after 80 years. Truly, ranunculus must have been spawned by unimaginably deep and dark magic.

Such thoughts ran through my mind as I straightened my back and breathed heavily. My arms and hands ached from the constant clenching and pulling. I had been told that there

is a magic potion that is said to cripple if not completely destroy ranunculus. The potion, however, comes with its own deep dark threat. At best, any who attempt to use it will be ravaged by disease. At worst, it kills any living thing that it touches. So, clench and yank. Clench and yank.

Inside me I was feeling a bit of relief from the post traumatic stress of grand and sweeping, though ill-timed and executed, layoffs. Outside, my fingers, hands, arms, back, and buttocks were so sore I feared that I may not rise again. But rise I did. I turned to leave and then heard a gravelly yet high pitched voice.

I turned back toward the bed. The voice seemed to have come from the gnome figurine placed there eons ago. Did the brow of the figurine just move? I moved closer. Closer still. When I was nose to nose with him, the gnome smiled and relaxed from the upright pose he normally maintained. "Holy buckets!," I exclaimed.

"Indeed, that is a holy bucket you wield oh Killer of Ranunculus," replied the gnome. He politely paused while I rearranged my sense of reality to accommodate him.

Was he really talking, and moving too, or had I been out in the drizzle too long today and the moisture seeped in and rotted my brain? In situations like this I have found that all I can do is plot it out and see where it goes. And so I did.

"So, you've sat in our strawberry patch all of this time, stiff as a, well, a statue, and now you decide to address me? What is your purpose? Your motivation? Your..."

"Be at ease good sir," said the gnome. "I do not stand here all this time. I go about my usual life when unobserved and return to my station as needed."

"You miss my meaning, gnome, what I was asking was..." says I.

"Some call me Strawberry Gnome, or Strawberry, but I prefer that you call me Berry."

"Fine. Berry it is. So, Berry, why have you chosen today to make yourself known to me?"

Berry smiled and nodded, a common behavior of aged gnomes, some of which are hundreds of years old. Apparently Berry has been in that company for some time. "Here is, as you humans say, the deal. The Ranunculus Monster holds a prisoner precious to me and my kind. A princess of such high minded virtue she is close to the angels, or would be if we gnomes believed in such things."

"So, you're telling me that you don't believe in angels but I'm supposed to believe in you and the story you tell?"

"Truth is truth, Martino."

Wait. How could he know my name? The easy answer is that this is all an illusion, the product of my own psyche tortured by long hours of pointless labor followed by an inglorious dismissal by those superior to me in title only. But obviously that could not be. No VR or AR intervened and yet, there he was, ruddy skin, red cap, and all.

“Yes, I know your name. You hear lots of things wandering about the shire. But let’s get to the heart of the matter or as you might call it, the pitch. Where was I? Princess of great virtue...ah. And beauty that makes all who see her weep for joy and be shot through with hope for a better world. But the Ranunculus Monster that holds her prisoner keeps her in a state of perpetual sadness. When she cries, and she’s the sensitive sort so it happens a lot, he collects her tears and by some mysterious and dark alchemy uses them to produce diamonds and gold.”

I started to say, “Perhaps vapor deposition? Nuclear bombardment? In today’s market, the prices of these treasures would not be enough to justify...”

He stopped me with “Martino. Sir. We are not talking about your world. Stay with me on this or we’ll never reach the end.”

“Which is?”

“I need your help to rescue the princess.”

“But I’m a married man, and happily so,” says I.

Berry sighed. “Why do they always do this?” he exclaimed to no one in particular. He held up a finger, shook his head, and said to me, “I suppose a lifetime of fairytales is to blame. Conflating rescue with, shall we say, romantic coupling. You are only to rescue her. If she happens to want to couple with another member of the rescue party...” His eye twitched. Was that a gnome wink?

“For instance, you?” says I with all the sarcasm I could muster.

“Her choice of course.”

“So, you’re recruiting me for this adventure?” I asked, unsure of how I wanted him to answer.

“Recruit is too course a word. Think of me as your agent.”

“Berry, my financial position is such that I cannot afford to embark on any venture that does not, how to put it, involve remuneration.”

“A bargainer,” sighed Berry. “Fine. If the nobility of the quest is not enough, you may take as much of the diamond and gold as you can carry.”

Now in my most sly attitude, I asked, "What would you have me do? More to the point, what would you have me do that you cannot do yourself?"

"You're part way there already. When all of the ranunculus has been expunged from the bed, the Monster will appear. That tool in your hand..." I looked down at my trusty weed digger. "...you must trust it into his..."

"Heart?"

"Anus. If you strike him in the heart, he'll just die," said Berry. "The Ranunculus Monster anatomy is configured so that the brain, by way of the brain stem, is connected directly to the anus. A thrust to the anus will change his mind, his attitude. He'll go from being a greedy, heartless beast to a creature more in tune with nature. There are other details of his transformation, but in short, he'll become happy with what he has."

I expressed my one last concern. "But a creature capable of making gold and diamonds is surely capable of removing a tool from his ass..."

"I am told that the change is permanent, even after the tool is removed." Berry's face took on a quizzical expression. "Come to think of it, the influence of the Monster on your world affects things like, what do you humans call them? Reorgs and layoffs? A thrust in his dark place will make them go away."

With new energy, I straightened up. "Berry, I can avoid this quest no longer. Lead on."