

IX

Fit For A King

The procession had grown from a pair of dirty wild children to a glittering ensemble of the Faction's silver and gold, joined with the red and bronze of the Nebarrese soldiers that clambered into the fray.

They brought them up the winding path, through the main gates, and up to the door of the keep where the soldiers stopped in lined formation while Merci escorted her companion into the castle.

A long carpeted hallway, lined with another regiment of Nebarrese soldiers who remained at statuesque attention while the pair filed through. At the corridor's end, a pair of soldiers pushed open the double doors, bringing them into the glowing lights of the throne room. The room itself was exactly how Pollen imagined a throne room to be. Decorated to the pinnacle of elegance; a monstrous chandelier dangled from the ceiling, in the corners, four smaller chandeliers highlighted it's grandness. Smaller stained glass scenes lined the walls, telling of story of the country's founding, or perhaps simply showing the line of inheritance. Golden candlestands, goblets and fixtures lined the rest of the walls, with velvet wall hangings accenting every cove and nook in the intricate architecture.

As for the room's filling, that was another matter. Cluttered, bustling, confusing – completely lacking the serene prestige his stories of youth had informed him of.

“Mama!” Merci called out into the mob of servants, finally breaking through to a poofed up woman, still being painted by three maids.

“Oh, Mercietta, there you are,” she said, little emotion in her voice. “Don't hug me, I'm still being done up and... you reek of the swamp. Rufio! Draw a bath for the Princess.”

“As you wish,” said an old servant with a bow and a quick stride away.

“Where have you been? Actually, don’t tell me, tell your father.” With an agitated point she gestured into another mob and brushed her daughter away.

Pollen chose not to say anything, he simply removed himself from the insanity and attempted to keep up with his host, a task he was unprepared for. Feeling a bit left out, he grabbed for the arm of a blonde, freckled face that carried a pleasant enough smile. As soon as he received her attention, however, he quickly re-examined his impression.

“What?” came the haggard reply.

“I’m sorry. What’s going on?”

Her face was that of sheer contempt, as if asking her this question, or any question for that matter, was a complete atrocity. “Get back to work!” she growled, before taking her arm back and storming into the hallway.

“Pollen,” Merci finally called to him. “There will be a dinner in your honor! But you must dress first... I’ll have a room made for you... where’s Ada?” And with that, she was gone again.

The servants seemed to be moving faster than before, swirling around him, not pausing enough for him to grasp onto a single face and commit it to memory. He could catch occasional glimpses of red fabric that he assumed was the Queen, they being in the same direction he remembered seeing her and being unnaturally rich looking. The fray was busier in the area he assumed was the throne, where the King probably was, but he hadn’t made visual confirmation on that one. When he turned to look, he couldn’t even find the door he entered through.

The Princess’s hand carved its way into the crevasse of his elbow and turned him back toward the freckled blond servant, who at this moment managed to keep a straight face.

“Ada,” Merci addressed her, “could you please take our guest here to the room that’s been made up?”

Her poise was breaking. “Are you sure, your majesty? That room was for the pr...”

“I’m quite sure, Ada. Please do as I say. And help him find a suitable outfit for dinner.”

“Yes, your majesty.” She had little time to bow before Merci disappeared again, and soon her demeanor had melted into that sour face once again. “Come on,” she growled, slicing into the crowd with little regard as to whether Pollen could follow or not.

“And treat him like royalty,” Merci added, her voice barely a whisper through the waves of agitation. “He’s a very dear friend of mine.”

Pollen was suddenly reminded what a smile felt like as his legs magically carried him through the bustling parlor and into the winding stone colon of Castle Nebarra.

Like a hundred screeching jackals, the prison door opened wide.

“In you go, boys.” The metal bars slammed shut. “Brenner will be here soon.”

That was the fifth time they had heard that. And this was the fifth jail cell they had been in. Lido didn’t know how long he and Coren had been in this dungeon. But they hadn’t eaten since they arrived, and they were starving. But they were both too frightened to ask for food. And as soon as they were about to fall asleep, it seemed, they were uprooted and dragged into another cell, another floor down, and told “Brenner will be here soon.”

Six times now.

At the end of the hallway was another staircase which led to a big wooden door. When the guards opened it, it seemed to lead into a vast empty void which the boys were promptly tossed into. They landed on a cold stone floor.

“Last stop, boys. Brenner will see you soon enough.”

The door was slammed shut and only tiny flickers of light returned from the torch distancing itself from the other side of the barred entrance. Hope quickly faded as the soldiers’ footsteps disappeared and the boys were left in the dark. They sat motionless, staring at the dark void where the floor must have existed at some point in time. Every once in a while, one of the

other prisoners in the hole would cough or moan, and the boys would flinch and shudder, but otherwise they were still. Eventually, as their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, they found enough courage to turn up their heads and look around the dungeon. It was quite a large room, with a central pillar, and prisoners bound in the corners. A few had managed to wrestle loose their chains, a few had died overnight. As their pupils became more and more dilated, they saw that the room was much larger, appearing to be a circle of cells around the room in the center, which housed the staircase upward. Although several torch ends hung on the walls, they weren't lit, whatever light allowed them sight in the room was almost eerie and unnatural enough to be another source of terror.

Depressed, scared, and hungry, the two boys huddled on one side of the room as the prisoners began to stir and moan. One of the prisoners, a skeletal mass in rags shuffled over to the center door, put his face through the bars and began shouting, "Food!" The rest of the inmates soon joined him, and there was a small choir of prisoners filling the basement of this fortress. Before long, a wooden mace flew through the door, crushing the face of the original soloist.

"Get back ya mongrels!" yelled a voice from the stairway as three soldiers threw the door open, scattering the inmates with their spears. The portly guard in the center kept yelling, "Get back!" as he produced a large sack from behind him and emptied its contents on the floor. The prisoners screamed with delight as they ran forward to collect the loaves of bread as the soldiers quickly closed the door behind them and hurried upstairs. In a matter of seconds, the screaming had turned to laughter as the prisoners ran back to their corners with the food they had managed to hoard in their bony arms.

Too scared to move, the boys sat closer together as they looked out onto the dimly lit stone room. Across the cell, one of the prisoners had pushed away a stone slab and was about to drop his bread into his secret cache, when he noticed the rest of his store had been removed.

With a leap and a quick look around the room, the prisoner growled, “‘Ou stole m’scerd bread?”

The room was quiet for a second before one voice spoke up. “It was me!” yelled the man chained to the wall. With a shriek, the breadhoarder charged toward the man on the wall with his sharp, hardened nails open and ready to attack. At the last moment, the man on the wall lifted his leg and caught the breadhoarder hard in the stomach with a loud “snap.” In the next second, both men were wincing in sheer pain as the breadhoarder stumbled back to his corner, and the man on the wall dropped under his broken leg.

A ragged man with an eye patch began to move towards Lido and Coren cackling. As he approached them, he muttered, “They lock us up ‘til we can’t move ‘nymore, then, as soon as we’s dead, they let down the Kill-Hounds to feast on our rotted flesh.” The man gave Coren a good stare with his eye. “But I stole ‘is patch, I did,” he laughed as he moved the patch to the other eye. “I stole ‘is patch.” The old man laughed hysterically as he made his way to the other side of the cell.

When the lunch crowd died down, the two boys found the courage to crawl over to an empty corner of the cell and lie down.

When things had quieted down sufficiently, Lido had thought to say something to Coren. Now more than ever he felt as if this was his fault, that Coren would still be safely at home if not for him. He realized that they hadn’t actually spoken a word since they were arrested. Of course, before that day in Foothill, they’d barely spoken a word to each other before. Coren was a very quiet person, though Lido could faintly remember a time when he was a little brighter, a little friendlier. That was before the cave-in, before Coren was forced to move in with the Linds. Was it that family, or was it sadness? Coren became Kameryn’s flunky - his brawn - almost instantly. After that, Kameryn did all the talking. Yet somehow, these two boys found themselves together in this jail cell, hopefully taking the brunt of the persecution for their crime.

He hoped the others were ok. He wondered who that girl was. He felt bad for Coren. He decided to say something.

“I’m so sorry about all this.”

He turned to his companion, but found him snoring away. Somehow he had managed to drift off to sleep. But Lido was so wide awake the darkness hurt his eyes.

He wasn’t sure how long he had just been staring forward. Maybe he had fallen asleep. Maybe he had been asleep the whole time. But he was in a daze and unaware of it until he was pulled from it.

“Boy, wake up.”

Lido jerked awake. The voice didn’t sound crazy like the rest of the prisoners. It was sane and logical and comforting.

“Boy... over here.” He turned and saw a faint light peeping through a crack in the wall. After looking over to Coren and seeing that he was still asleep, Lido slowly approached the source of the voice. As he neared, he could make out an eye through the hole in the wall.

“You must keep quiet about this,” the voice began. “My name is Seth, and I’ve been sent to help you.” Lido only nodded in agreement, still too afraid to speak. “I’ve been digging this tunnel, but it may not be done for quite some time. Until then...” he said as he pushed a few small bread rolls through the crack, “take these, and hide some for your friend.” Lido moved closer to collect the rolls, but stopped as the voice spoke again. “One more thing,” he said as the eye reappeared in the hole. “Don’t eat the bread the guards bring you. The bread is poisoned. It weakens you and eats your mind before eventually killing you.” Lido nodded again as the light on the other side went out. “I will see you again, take care.”

“Please pass the rolls.”

The table stared awkwardly at him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Could you pass the rolls please?”

He had barely sat down, and already Pollen had ruined his first royal dinner. He wasn't sure how, exactly, but the Queen's irritated glances were enough to reassure him that he had made some grave disruption of etiquette.

Finally the Queen relented. “Ada,” she moaned. “Please give *that one* another roll.”

Without a word, Ada moved from the line of servants, all hands clasped and facing down as if in mourning, and quickly delivered the roll to its recipient.

“Merciella,” the Queen regaled, “the next time you are kidnapped, please do so in a civilized nation.”

“Ha ha!” Pollen laughed awkwardly, certain that the Queen had told a joke, but realized he had made his thirty-eighth mistake of the night, and sank into his chair, picking his roll apart and nibbling on his tiny pinches of dough.

“We should be thankful that Chella was not visiting one of your ‘civilized’ nations, Mother, when her abductors made their attempt.” The voice was that of Liam, one of Merci's brothers, seated across from him. In fact, they were all seated across from him, the Queen, Rumela, and to a lesser extent, King Franco, who barely made a peep during dinner, just sat smiling quietly, sipping from his glass of wine often enough to have the nearby servant pour more in when his wife wasn't looking. Next to the king sat the eldest son, Ferio, who said nothing at all, but instead ate slowly while staring at the dining room's double door. “In a ‘civilized’ nation, that rogue Faction patrol wouldn't even need to disguise themselves to attack a public dignitary.”

“If you ask me,” the Queen began, giving more attention to the slice of beef she was cutting than anyone else in the room, “dinner has no room for politics. In fact, I think politics shouldn't be discussed at all.”

“Aren’t you the Queen?” Pollen said proudly, but only in his head, where his audience found him very clever. However, he kept his witticisms within, for favor of “Merciella’s” feelings. In his imagined dinner, he was having a very captivating conversation where he spoke of music and his accomplishments in the field. How he was the youngest musician ever to play in the Founders’ Celebration Orchestra. “The flugelhorn is the grandest of all instruments,” the Queen would agree.

She was looking at him now; in fact everyone was looking at him.

“A question was posted to you, young man. Best to defeat it where it lies.”

“Um.. the flugelhorn?”

“You’re from the house of flugelhorn?”

“I’m sorry, I thought you were asking what instrument I played in the Founders’ Orchestra...”

“The flugelhorn? Who in their right mind, outside of perhaps the duck, would hold interest in any matter concerning the flugelhorn? A mar on the perfectly marvelous brass family. Such a mistake of an instrument.”

“Well, I play the flute as well.”

“Yes, mother,” Merci chimed in, living up to her alternate namesake for the first time that night. “In fact, Pollen is a composer as well.”

“A composer?” the King said with a swoon. “Why don’t you play us a song?”

The Queen interrupted before Pollen could feel the weight of the instrument around his neck. “Liam is learning the zither. Liam, you should play a song.”

Liam waved his open hands in front of him. “No, mother, I can barely make the strings sound. Pollen, please, that flute isn’t mere decoration, is it?”

Merci clapped her hands together gleefully. “Oh yes! Play the song you played at the Trade Fair. It was ever so beautiful.”

“The Trade Fair,” the King mused, the volume of wine he’d consumed finally drowning the fear of his wife, “so you’ve played for large crowds then? You have nothing to be shy of here.”

“Well... the acoustics in this room... I mean, I don’t have to. Merci’s just being nice...”

“Merci?” squawked the Queen. “Mercy. Merciella, when did you receive such an ignoble appellative?”

“I’m sorry... I meant Merciella. How silly of me.”

“A song!” the King cried. “A song!”

After additional implore from the King and his daughter, Pollen finally abided, standing to his feet and readying his flute. He was half-way into his first note when Ferio, silent until this point jumped from his seat and turned his attention to the entrance, where a team of Faction soldiers suddenly lined the entrance, and a tall, grandly dressed man in the gold and white of Lucra glided through the crowd.

“Our guest of honor has arrived,” Ferio announced, taking no heed to Pollen’s pride.

“Ah, Marathon,” the King said, tossing back another cup of wine. “Join us. If we had known you were coming, we would have prepared another seat for you.”

The tall golden man stood tall, as if mounted on a plaque, and spoke as if delivering lines from a speech. “Your Royal Highness, I regret to inform you that I am on business, and as such, am obliged not to participate in any recreational settings, as tempting as it may be. I simply carry a message from my lord to bring to you.”

“The dinner table is no place for politics,” Franco jested, imitating his wife.

“Worry not, father,” Ferio broke in. “I will handle this matter myself. Brutus...” he addressed one of the line of servants trying to blend into the wall. “Pack my dinner and deliver it in the study. I shall finish in there.”

“Of course,” the man said, never looking into his master’s eye.

“Ah, my eldest son,” the King said proudly, “all too eager to take over his father’s role, and I am all too eager to let him.” By this time, Pollen had done his best to blend into his chair, but the King would not have it. “Now, I believe it is time for a song.”

“Well, let’s get this over with,” whined the Queen. “I hope you play better than you speak.”

Pollen closed his eyes tight and began the song which had won such rave reviews. He played the first notes, the same notes he had toiled over for weeks beforehand. Then the song stopped. He couldn’t remember it. The magic that had blessed his lungs and his fingers was gone suddenly, as if it were never there. And he never realized how naked he could feel without his staff paper. Luckily, the Queen had nothing awful to say about the brevity of his composition.

“Sometimes I forget how loathsome an instrument the flute is,” she started. “And where’s the power in it? Sir Gilbert, now there’s a composer. Have you heard his latest? He’s writing an ode, you know.”

“Mamma...” Merci quipped in, “Sir Gilbert’s a much more experienced composer than Pollen, it’s not really fair to compare them.”

“Not enough brass,” stressed the Queen. “Pure and simple. My ears cannot abide anything that isn’t brass. It’s not even in rondo form.”

Liam wiped his face with his napkin. “I thought it was wonderful. I may be alone in this, but I enjoy hearing a change for once.” He gave his mother an accusing stare and stood up. “I must excuse myself.”

He grabbed for his plate to lift it, but was stopped by his mother.

“Liam, really, you’ve been on the road too long. We have servants for that.”

“My apologies, mother.” He politely pushed his chair in and left the room.

The King moved from his chair too. “Well, I think we should all retire for now, what do we say? Mr. Kean, thank you for sharing your talents tonight.” He glanced sternly to his wife. “Dear?”

“Yes. Yes. Share your talents.” She stood, only watching the top of Pollen’s head. “Oh, Pollen, would you mind clearing the table before you go?”

To the north,

Deep in Hydex prison, two boys had been separated from the light of day for quite some time. There was no real way to tell how long they’d been in there. And Lido hadn’t heard from Seth since the first night they were here. He wouldn’t have believed it happened, but fresh bread rolls appeared next to that crack in the wall every now and then. Until that stopped.

Coren was hungry. He had a large body to keep alive. He didn’t trust Lido about the bread.

“Next time the guards come to feed us, I’m taking all of it.”

“It’s poisoned, you can’t.”

“How do you know? Cuz some voice in the wall told you?”

Lido tried to say something back, but he met with a terrifying grimace from Coren. He had never seen anything like it, at least not from him. Then again, he had never seen a hungry Montan before.

No bread came for some time, and Lido soon forgot about Coren’s malady and thought of the problem they shared. Since their arrival, they had been constantly teased about a man named Brenner. Although, from what the guards were saying, it was unsure if Brenner was actually a man. Mutated and deranged, he was the Faction’s primary interrogator. They say he was covered in hair, he had fangs or tusks instead of normal teeth, in all, he was on the border of

being a beast. Lido wasn't sure what they would be asked, but according to the guards, and several prisoners, he would have to answer quickly. Brenner liked to mutilate his inquisitions. That could've meant a number of things. The most obvious being his ears. Lido thought about how painful it would be to have his ears removed, or clipped.

The last he heard, from one of the guards, who loved to countdown Lido's final days, he had about two days left. Brenner was visiting the Jekra camp, doing a bulk interrogation, something he enjoyed rather much, but word was sent ahead, and he was on his way.

Coren said that no amount of torture could compare to his hunger. He was very adamant about eating. Finally, Coren's relief came.

The prisoners' ears perked up. Guards could be heard descending the stairs. With a look of determination in his eye, Coren fought back the prisoners fiercely, shouting and growling and punching, until they feared him.

"My turn," he yelled when he reached the door, turning to face the frightened inmates.

"You got that right," sneered a guard behind him, as his hands were put in shackles and they pulled him through the door.

"Get his friend too," shouted another. "Brenner says he's in a hurry."

The boys were hoarded upstairs, swords to their backs. This was it, thought Lido. The guard at the end of the hall opened a wooden door and the boys were thrown in.

Across the room, a tall figure in a dark hood and cloak stood facing away from them, leaning over a tray of sharp looking objects.

"Undo their shackles," growled a sinister, yet surprisingly humane voice. The guards did as they were told. "Now LEAVE." Hiding their fear as much as possible, the guards scurried out into the hall.

"You're gonna get it now," they laughed as the door slammed shut.

It was now the two boys and a large, scary man-thing. They hadn't realized it, but their backs were pressed against the wall, and were it not made of stone, they would have pressed themselves straight through it.

A grotesque, hairy hand protruded from the cloak and pointed back behind him. "Montan, sit in the corner."

Slowly working his way along the wall, Coren slid into the corner and sat with his knees between his arms.

"Lido, come here." Though afraid, Lido did as he was told, as if some strange form of bravery had overtaken him. He saw the hairy hands grab a jar of something, perhaps some sort of corrosive poison, or flesh-eating ants from a scary part of the world.

The figure turned around quickly, revealing his doggish face. He had a long furry snout, pointed ears that stood up, and big, dark eyes. "Scream."

Lido released a quick, panicked "Agh" as the dog man pulled a wet brush from the jar and splashed it across Lido's chest.

"What is this?" Lido cried.

"Plum sauce," answered the dog man, casually. "Scream again."

Lido screamed as another splash flew over him. "Are you gonna eat me?"

"I won't if you scream." Lido screamed again, over the splash of the plum sauce.

In the corner, Coren's nose was savoring the sweet aroma of the plum sauce. The dog man noticed this and grabbed a roll from his tray, dipped it in the sauce and tossed it to Coren.

"You're next dough boy."

"What's going on?" asked Lido. "Are you Brenner?"

"Name's Seth (scream)." Splash. "I'm here to rescue you."

Once the fear was gone, Seth was actually a rather nice looking dog man. His face was more like that of a housepet, or maybe a wolf, but rather nice looking indeed. For a dog. He quickly explained the situation over the sounds of Lido and Coren being tortured. They had found his tunnel (an inexcusable mistake on his part, he said), so a backup had to be invented, and fast. The Faction is notoriously cheap about disposing of the various corpses that appear as a byproduct of their prison system. So if the boys appeared to be dead, they'd just be added to the pile of trash waiting to be taken out by the local trashman. He was easy enough to bribe, the tough part would be getting the boys killed without actually killing them.

“Then I remembered stories about Brenner, but let me tell you, he looks nothing like a dog. He’s just an ugly, hairy man.”

When the boys were sufficiently mutilated with plum sauce and tears in their clothing, Seth called for the guards in the hall.

“They’re done for.”

One of the guards popped his head in and quickly removed it. “Uck. You clean up your own mess.”

“Fine, get me a death cart.”

Pollen cleared the table (and ended up washing the dishes) as quickly as he could muster, then burst back into the dining hall, hoping to catch the Princess before she left, but he was just not quick enough. There wasn’t a soul to be found in the castle, it seemed, just the random guard. And he learned not to bother speaking with the guards. None were as friendly as Maxim was, in fact, it didn’t seem that any of the others could speak, or they simply refused to. He had been escorted from the guest quarters and at this point had no idea of how to get back there. He probably couldn’t even find the front door, if he planned to just walk back home, and the thought crossed his mind frequently.

As he scampered wildly through the meandering halls, he slowly began to pick up voices. Like a light in a tunnel, the promise of company or at least some dialogue called to him, showing little detail but promising the world. He could soon hear voices, indistinct at first, but growing increasingly unfamiliar as he wove through the hallways, some closer, some farther from the voices.

“...he’s a wild card. It took quite a toll... but with his Divine Knowledge... may work out to our advantage.”

“I can take care of things on my end. Have no qualms about that.”

“If you say it, I will believe.”

Finally, he could see at the end of a hallway a bright glow beneath a double door frame. He approached it and peeked through the crack to witness the two speakers in a familiar embrace – hands clasped as if shaking, free arms reaching around each other’s back. It took a moment’s calculation (and the observation of the transported dinner) to identify the men as Ferio, the Prince, and Marathon, the tall Faction soldier. Ferio was the first to notice Pollen, and his demeanor was not welcoming.

“What is the meaning of this?” he scowled, beginning to march in his direction.

“I’m sorry, your sir... I was lost...”

The other man, Marathon, interrupted the Prince’s advance. “Ferio, you have lived too long in these walls, and have forgotten what a labyrinth your childhood home is to a visitor.” He turned his attention to Pollen. “You... the savior of Nebarra’s Princess. I will send one of my own guard to escort you anywhere you need to be... Fin?”

He called to the area just outside the door, a young guard, about Maxim’s age entered the study. “Private, could you please bring this young man to the guest wing?”

“Of course, Your Blessed Swiftness.”

Marathon gave them both a friendly wave as they turned and trotted down the hall.

Pollen felt mildly at ease, but still felt the latch of the lock behind him as a sign of being closed out.

The Faction soldier led him briskly toward a strange alcove that Pollen had overlooked before, which turned out to be a spiral staircase. As they approached, he looked at Pollen with a friendly smile, something truly genuine that he felt he hadn't seen all day. "I remember my first visit here," he said reassuringly. "These walls all blend together."

"Oh, I didn't realize you could talk."

"Of course I can, I'm not just a walking suit of armor. I believe this is your room."

The walk felt embarrassingly short for Pollen, who had been wandering for what seemed like an hour, but now, less than a hundred steps from the study, he was back at the guest room Ada had delivered him to during the brighter half of the day.

"My name is Fin," the Private said, his warm green eyes reflecting the first bit of humanity Pollen had felt in this castle. "If you need anything, let me know. I'll try to make myself easy to find."

"I appreciate it," Pollen said, trying not to sound shocked. "Good night."

With a salute and a spin, Fin trounced down the hall and back into the nearly-camouflaged stairwell.