

Port and Porter

“Porter, old mate,” Stilton said, a hand on his ring of keys and a grin ear to ear, “how have you been? It’s been years since I’ve seen you.”

“I’m not your *mate*,” Porter said, his head hung low, so no one could see the whites of his eyes. He’d say it’s because he was trying to be mysterious, but he just wanted to hide the tears fighting to cling to his lashes. He had been handcuffed to a wooden post for hours now, but lost count after the sun went down. A pinch in his stomach grew to a proper cramp, and he thought he might get sick if he shouted.

“Mate,” Stilton said again, this time emphasizing the t-sound, “you’re a right old fool, you know that, don’tcha? What were you doing in the captain’s private room, huh? Did’ja think we wouldn’t capture ya? Did’ja think you’d get away?”

“Well, honestly, yes. I did,” Porter said, lifting his eyes ever so slightly to get a look at Stilton’s black, mud-covered boots and sweat-stained pants. Bits of straw and clumped brown organic material clung to the bottom of his sole and left faint marks on the straw covered floor. The odor made him flare his nostrils.

“You never were that smart. You’re not getting away this time. Adelost is onto you. He’s coming here right now to teach you a lesson. He’s going to make an example out of you,” he said, kneeling down just inches out of Porter’s reach. His wired beard, a patchy red and brown, reeked like rotten food and the taste of sick hit the back of Porter’s mouth. He jolted back, slammed his back into the post, and doubled over again from the stitch in his side.

Stilton grabbed his shoulders and pushed Porter’s neck back like he wanted to snap it. A dull thud rang through the room, then faded to heavy breathing.

“You’ll address Adelost as ‘Honorable Captain of the King’s Guard’, you hear me? If not,” Stilton pressed his grease coated forehead to Porter’s ear, taking care to dig his nails into the soft flesh under his jaw at the same time, “I’ll take these here keys and throw them into the Dotted River for the murk to devour. Then I’ll come back and do things that will make you beg me to cut off your arms.”

“Get off him, Stilton,” a voice said, dissolving the tension, “and stand up.”

“Honorable Captain of the King’s Guard,” Stilton said, and threw himself on the floor into a dramatic bow. “As you can see, we have apprehended the thief who broke into your office. May I suggest we leave him in here, and throw away the key?”

“Stilton, return to your post. You are no longer needed,” Adelost said, his voice steady and commanding like the King’s itself. He held out his hand, his eyes on the keys in his subordinate’s hand.

“But Honorable Captain of the--”

“Leave, Stilton. I won’t ask you a third time.” Adelost took the heel of his boot, and pushed the still kneeling soldier towards the door, but was met with little resistance as Stilton stood, handed over the keys, and exited the room backwards. Adelost closed the cell door, and turned to look at Porter, who had not raised his head to look at him, but who only focused on the sounds of the hay as it crunched under the captain’s armored boots.

“Is it true that you’re the one who broke into my room? That you maneuvered your way past the guards, past the king’s chamber itself, and picked the lock triple barrel lock on my door?” To hear the accusation aloud, step by step, brought a quiet pride to Porter, and the ache in his side lessened because of it. It’s hard to imagine that he did get that far, and in less than ten minutes no less.

“His *Honorable Captain of the King’s Guard* has no proof of anything,” Porter said, still not looking up. A silence lingered behind the words, and for a brief moment, he thought that the words never escaped his mind, that Adelost hadn’t heard him, but the sharp unsheathing of a dagger at the Captain’s side deflated that idea.

“Do you think you’d be here if we had no proof? Is that the kind of kingdom you think King Roquefort runs, one that sentences thieves to death on a whim?” Adelost knelt down to force himself into Porter’s line of sight.

“Is that your clever way of saying you’re going to kill me?” Porter looked up, and let his eyes tunnel into Adelost’s. He tried to keep an expression of stone on his face, and succeeded in steadying his lip, but the weight of the tears in his eyes grew too heavy for his lashes, and a tear skidded down his dirtied cheek.

“I know it was you because I was there. I saw you enter, tip toe over my cobblestone floor, and rummage through my desk. I have reason to believe you were after this,” Adelost said. Held in the Captain’s gloved hands, just feet away was a rolled parchment sealed with wax, imprinted with the King’s crest. The ache in his side grew at the sight of it – that was exactly what he was trying to steal before the blunt edge slammed against his head, and sent everything to black.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Porter lied, returning his gaze to Adelost’s deep hazel eyes. There was no way that he was there, inside the room or outside it. The coast was clear, of that he was positive. Plus, the room offered no area to hide in, and the floor was made of wooden planks, not cobblestone. Yet to say any of this out loud would confirm that not only was the Captain lying, but that he was too.

“If you don’t know what I’m talking about, then you won’t mind if I just…” Adelost said, walking over to the door, reaching for something out of sight, and coming back with the lit candle, “burn this parchment.”

All at once, Porter could feel the muscles in his face betray him. His eyes widened, his mouth opened, and a sound unlike something farm cattle would make emerged from deep in his throat. It was too late to pretend it hadn’t happened. Adelost was smiling at him, the shadow of the flame flickering on his cheek.

“Please,” Porter said, “stop. Just release me from this jail cell, and--”

“And do what?” Adelost said. “Do you want me to just *give* this to you and let you skedaddle off like a rodent just to go steal someone else’s Scroll of Passage? How,” he said, his voice rising with each word, “would that make sense?” His face molted from young, patient and bored, to the lined grimace worn by much older men. “You think me a fool.”

“I think you’re wasting your time thinking of me as a traitor, or thief, or a danger. Don’t you have anything else to do, or does the King give you so much free time that now you’re just bored. Why don’t you just kidnap some other innocent people and wave fire in their faces too, so you’ll have something to preoccupy you?”

The weight of Adelost’s full backhand collided with the side of Porter’s skull, and it took a few blinks before he was able to see straight. The ringing didn’t shake off so easily.

“What would a *thief* know about someone in my position? Think what you want of me, I was going to give you a chance to repent for your sins against me and the King, but instead, I think you’d be best dying here in this shit-filled cell.”

The Captain took up the dagger in his hand. He lunged for Porter, arms outstretched and ready to dig his blade wherever it might land. He just didn’t account on what he’d do if he missed. At the last moment, Porter used his feet to rotate himself around the pole. By mere inches, he avoided the blade. In one swinging motion, Porter swung out his leg and used all his might to knock Adelost off balance. The dagger fell out of one hand. The keys and burning candle fell from the other. The straw was set ablaze.

Part of Adelost’s brilliant red cape had fire eating away at the edging. He ripped it from his shoulders, and threw it to the ground. Yet as he stomped to extinguish the flames in one spot, the rest of the straw was engulfed. Heat radiated in the small cell, and in all the commotion, Porter noticed a glimmering jewel hidden in the smoke – the keys.

“You fool! Look at what you’ve done. Guards! Guards!” Adelost called, running out the door, and down the hallway.

As the last of Adelost disappeared, Porter used his foot to drag the keys closer. Inch by scalding inch, he maneuvered the metal ring around the pole and to his hands. He set to work, ignoring the nips and crackles of the flames closing in. He couldn’t help but blame himself. This is all his fault, getting caught and now nearly burning to death. If he can escape, they’re going to have a bounty on his head until the day he dies, or worse.