

McCallister Chronicles

*Based on J.M. Harrison's
Cartheim's Cross*

AP Schreckenberger

*Night Suite
Book 2 - Episode 20*

A drop of sweat meandered along Ashton's brow as the teen made his way towards Luka's study. Neither event made much sense to him. Autumn's chill had already swept over Tistal's borders, and in all his years at the castle – *and despite his change of heart* – the princess had never blessed him with an official summons.

Hunter tossed the dissenter aside as he reached the iron gate. It was hard to recount the number of times he had snuck away to this dead end to stare aimlessly at the wandering lines of metal. There he was again, tracing the contours with his gaze, to finally break history's repetition, claim his dream, and see the mysteries that lurked behind the patterns. The dissenters returned as a shiver rolled up his spine. His toes curled to the latch's growl, and he squinted as the cold beast roared.

"Noisy, isn't it?" Lukainy asked as her warmth parted the imaginary creature. "Now stop standing there like an idiot," she continued without waiting for an answer. "I already have one too many to deal with. The suspense is just killing him. He's not very good at hiding surprises, and the whole coronation thing is making it worse."

"What are you talking about?" Ashton murmured as he followed the royal. The writ was confusing enough, but her words and tone perplexed the cadet even more. Against the dreary days of sorrow, he saw a princess that simply blossomed beside a rainbow of stained-glass lights. Perhaps the stories had been true after all. He had heard the swelling tales that King Ereint had been saved but figured they were merely misdirected bits of pity or remorse. He had seen Marrok beside herself with grief and weakened by despair. There was no crying damsel in his presence. Something had changed...

"My father's last action as ruler of this land was to bestow the title of prince to Wing." She smiled and took hold of Hunter's wrist before leading him through the towering stacks. "Even during his final moments in Armistice, he took the time to do something that would only benefit me. You have no idea how thankful I am that Harmony got to him in time."

"Milady, there have been rumors circulating that your father is still alive and that your mother's whereabouts have been determined. Forgive my prodding, but it would put my mind at ease if I knew the truth."

Lukainy nodded as she dragged Ashton around a shelf's corner. "They are absolutely true. Harmony sent my father to another world. He's safe, but it is unlikely he will ever return. We need to move forward, which is a great segue to what brings you here today." Beaming, she paused and peered back at the boy as his body quivered with curiosity. "But you'll have to talk to Wing about that."

Beyond the books, pages and volumes, Wing fidgeted as Daisuke fussed with his clothes. “These are ridiculous,” McCallister commented, staring at his outstretched arm. Lines of gold and red darted along the dulled silver wears. The regal garments, elegant hides which Rekk had used as one of his social disguises, clung to the knight’s skin.

“You’re just not used to them,” Dai replied as his hands steered a pair of bulky pads to a more comfortable position. “People are going to want to see the Peasant King, so you’ll have to suck it up and play the part.” He smirked and chuckled. “After all, we can’t parade you around as Sparky, now can we?”

Wing groaned at his blade’s sharp wit. “It’s prince, you know?” he countered. “And even that is not my thing...”

“Peasant King sounds a hell of a lot better than prince, though. It’s how they view you too. It matters, and it does suit you.” The living sword tugged at the gold and purple cape cascading from McCallister’s shoulders and brushed the emblem that adorned its center. “As does the phoenix.”

The cadet pressed his gloved fingertips to the back of his head and sighed. “I don’t know. It just feels like I’m pretending...” Wing jumped as Dai snapped a pair of belts around his thigh.

“I don’t think you’re pretending. Ereint did it for obvious reasons. Just accept it and quit being a little bitch about it. Besides,” he spoke while pointing to Lukainy and Ashton, “it’s time to perform your first official duty.” The razor pressed his lips towards his partner’s ear and whispered, “Start acting kingly.”

Steps away, Luka could do nothing to disguise her lust. Her eyes had widened for the spectacle, and a sheepish smile had slipped upon her countenance as though her thoughts alone had done something wrong. He appeared strong, commanding, regal... excluding – of course – those rough-around-the-edges features that defined his story.

Hunter’s response, while equally pronounced, followed an entirely different vector. His mouth agape, the teen was undoubtedly astonished by a concept that teetered dangerously above the chasm of the unfathomable. His rival, the poor boy that received a childhood’s worth of ridicule, had been made an heir.

“You’re actually going to tell him then?” A sparkle of excitement licked the lady’s irides. “I’m glad. It makes it far more fitting and dramatic.”

Ash straightened his posture and clenched his fists. “Would you two just tell me what the hell I’m doing here?” he asked with a raspy, exhausted timbre. “The anxiety...”

“Would you shut your pompous, highborn face?” Wing countered after he stepped towards his classmate. He returned Hunter’s annoyed expression with a laugh and proceeded. “I don’t think you’re going to be mad at me for very long. It turns out that a recently implemented Tistalian royal tradition has created a problem.

“Since an heir has duties that stretch beyond an individual person, it seems fitting that familiars given such a promotion should appoint a worthy replacement.” Luka watched as Wing spoke, and she bit her lower lip in anticipation of the delivery to come. Her love’s voice was saturated with Trigger’s cocky characteristics, which made Ashton’s nervous jerks and twitches all the more enjoyable to observe. “Of course, I’m not going anywhere, and I’ll still serve her as I have. Since I’m now her prince though, I need to find a suitable, qualified person to take the position as her personal knight.”

“What are you saying?” the noble questioned, tension ripping through his arms as Wing slapped and palmed a deltoid. The prince-to-be drew obnoxiously close to his old adversary. A few inches separated their foreheads when a glimmering fang appeared from behind

McCallister's receding lip. It, along with those ochre annuli, shimmered under the confidence of the Battle Flame.

"You wouldn't happen to know someone who fits that description, would you?" He paused and let the question float through Hunter's mind. "And yes, I am looking for some of that kiddie arrogance in your answer."

Derrick and Kouenza reluctantly made their way to Lukainy's study. Necessity and duty drove them to the secluded library, but for their own reasons, neither wanted to face the princess directly. The former had buried his guilt in work, and the latter refused to accept an underperforming substitute as his master. It was clear, however, that Defy could no longer conceal the depth of his discovery.

When the pair parted the doors to the chamber, the princess was already there to greet them. "You two make quite a commotion," she said. "You almost managed to interrupt a touching knighting ceremony with Wing, Ashton, and Daisuke, but I guess you did make it easier for me."

"Ceremony? Daisuke? Easier?" D asked quietly as his line of sight drifted towards the floor. "I didn't know there was a knighting planned, but I take it that Wing was able to revive Daizer?"

"My father made Wing a prince before Harmony sent him off, and considering all of the additional responsibilities connected with such a declaration, Wing decided to pass his commission to Ashton as a thank you for all of the hard work. Regarding your second question, it appears that restoring a soul-forge is an identity-changing, life-threatening ordeal – of which I was conveniently made unaware. Fortunately, with some help from the crew that accompanied Wing's father, Wing was able to restore Dai, and both are doing just fine." Luka stopped, having made a measurement of the disbelief that colonized the men's faces. "A lot has happened, so I'm glad you came on your own. There's something else you need..."

"He killed your dad, didn't he?" Alsyne interjected. "I could feel it. When I was doing those horrible things to you..." On the verge of choking up, D fell silent. Even with all of his experiences, he could not wrap his brain around the monstrous affliction he had spread to the House of Marrok. There were no words that could make amends, and even if there were, he could not – in good conscience – produce the air to carry them.

"He tried and failed." Lukainy broke his solemn mood and glared at her soldier. "That's not what I need you to know. I want you to stop wallowing in grief. It wasn't you. It was him. Harmony arrived in time to save my father's soul. She was waiting within my mother this whole time. Both of them may be gone from this world for good, but at least they are safe, as am I.

"Do you see me trembling in fear because of your presence? Do you see me cowering before you like a broken victim? Do you see me fleeing my castle? Don't act like I'm that weak or that naïve. I knew there was more to you poking around Mahina than just an interest in some papers. You were avoiding me and this talk when it should have been immediately obvious that I didn't blame you for what happened."

"I still could have done something," Derrick replied emphatically. "Even if you don't blame me, that doesn't change the fact that I did nothing."

"What would you have done?" Lukainy retorted. "Would you have rather ended up like my father? Harmony would not have been around to save you. Don't forget that he could have attacked Lara as punishment before Dai was there to protect her. Maybe you just want to hear me

say I forgive you. Well, that's too bad because I don't forgive people when there is nothing to forgive.

"You cannot change the past, but you're still alive to change the future. If you're going to continue drowning yourself in sorrow, then you had best make it up to me by coping in ways that don't involve avoiding everyone who gives a shit about you. You're not the only one who felt at fault, D. Everyone there needed saving, and others got hurt playing hero."

"Your Highness..." D sighed, slightly succumbing to Luky's compassion. "I'm grateful that you still trust me as a friend, and I will try to repay my debt."

"Good!" The commanding sting that had saturated Marrok's voice vanished. "I'm guessing that your search at Mahina yielded some useful information. You should go talk to Wing about it." She turned her attention to Kouenza. "I have another matter that requires some mediation."

The legendary soul-forged scoffed at the notion and began to follow D into the recesses of the reading room. "Where do you think you're going?" Lukainy asked as her fingers wrapped around Kouen's arm. "My business is with you."

The giant weapon halted his march and slowly turned his head to gaze into the eyes of the stubborn pest. "I have nothing to say to you," he replied flatly, "but I do have some words for that brat of yours. I am not meant to be your sword, so I suggest you release my arm at once."

"Or what?" Marrok quipped. With a quick flick of her head, she dismissed the cautious Alsyne. "Do you intend to strike me down? You told me that you had no intention of serving a weak master. As the ruler of this country, there is absolutely no way I am going to let that slide. I understand that you don't respect Wing's decision, so I'll override it with a more lucrative offer. Train me for one month. If I don't reach your expectations, then I'll order him to take you back; but if I succeed, then you're mine."

"Why would I ever agree to such a worthless proposal?" Kouenza laughed and jerked his arm from the lady's grip. "You're not a fighter. You're a princess, and just like Lutti, you're incapable of learning your damn place. Do him a favor and just stay the hell out of the way." The bainite razor moved his gigantic open hand towards Lukainy's breasts. If she would not accept reason, then he would push her into the shadows himself.

What he found, however, was far from an awaiting darkness. In an instant, the serene study was transformed by an overwhelming density of cobalt flares and azure bolts. He recognized the former as Lutti's flame, but he knew not the identity of the lighter shades. They surrounded Luka's unyielding body, erupted from her essence in riveting swarms, and produced a tangible pressure that left his digits shaking.

Kouenza had seen this effect before – *in a world prefaced by once upon a time*. Doubt and wonder caressed his thoughts as the sight uncovered a horde of misplaced memories. This power was *her* cherished treasure, a gateway that could reveal one's unbound potential. It was *her* dawn, and yet somehow, it was a gift now possessed by Lukainy de Marrok.

His focus battled through the thundering shots and burning arcs until the soul-forged finally managed to see the phoenix key trapped behind his spread digits. Its presence pitched those scavenged anamneses from the emotional heights of love and lust to the realm of reality. She had come back to show him what he needed to see. With a grunt, he pulled his quivering palm from the charm, turned his back towards the perplexed princess, and inhaled the resulting tranquility.

"I'm not done with you!" the girl blurted, her words falling on somewhat deaf ears. Kouenza brushed them aside and pondered the exclusive vision he had been allowed to observe.

If she's able to be worn... Having weighed the consequences, he grimaced. While the blade's loyalty to Trigger was absolute, he could not ignore such untapped power. He also could not snub a request that came from *her*, for the two of them shared one vow that he would not dare break. His iron knuckles popped as he compressed his fists, and the realization sat ready at the tip of his tongue – *along with lingering aura of L.L.'s prediction*. “We'll start tomorrow morning then.”

“What in Aurora's name are those?” Ashton exclaimed after Derrick unfurled scroll after scroll upon the walnut tabletop.

The Enchantment Flame had retrieved the detailed technical drawings from a pouch in his cloak. Each freshly revealed image stunned the mesmerized Hunter and alarmed the stern-faced Wing. “This is what Conrad was after?” McCallister asked, his serious tone even drawing Ashton's attention.

The rival could not remember a single instance in which Wing looked more lost in thought. His gaze did not leave the tabletop, and his hands pushed paper after paper from the surface until only four remained. Noise, aside from the steady cadence of tumbling parchments, had been completely swallowed by the Peasant King's demeanor, and Hunter could not help but feel the tugs of claustrophobia and terror amidst the rare and unusual void. “Wing...” he spoke again, hoping the stillness would crack.

“It's His world,” the knight replied while motioning to two of the images. “Take these to Peter, D. Tell him to bring in as much help as he can get. We're going to need a lot of units and even more metal balls to go with them. As for the other two, it would be best if I took care of them myself.”

Alsyne was surprised by his friend's reaction. He did not foresee that Wing would have any knowledge of the death machines that Kouenza ardently despised. “You do know what these are, right?”

“You saw them when you came for me, didn't you?” Daisuke interrupted. “These things are definitely not from this world. Are you sure it's wise to use them here?”

“I don't want to make them here, and I certainly won't be the one using them. However, if that snake knows what they are and intends to build them, then we have to do something to ensure the survival of both Cartheim and Tistal. These designs are similar to Ector's weapon state, but they clearly don't require a fundamental flame to use. These chemical equations... Well, what better way is there to ensure our survival than putting a substitute Battle Flame in the hands of our soldiers?”

A sly grin spread Rekk's lips as he lifted himself over Wing's shoulder. “So that's what you're planning. Still, we won't have the time to outfit the entire army, and it's doubtful that the nobility will give up their weapons for something new.”

“They aren't for the nobility,” Ash concluded. “They'll be for the volunteers. We've been trained in archery and swordsmanship for years. There is no way that commoners can match the experience and skill we've gained in just one winter. They'd be slaughtered like hogtied lambs thrown to wolves. Am I correct?”

“That's the idea.” Wing stopped and winced at the jagged fragment that slashed his natural recollections. For a brief moment, he could feel the pain that was to come and the suffering that these abominations to Armistice would unleash. “But I am afraid of what will happen to those who fight this war without them, especially if Conrad is able to do a better job than we can.”

“We’ll do our best,” Alsyne added. “That’s all we can do.” There had only been a few times over the course of their lives that Derrick had seen Wing drift into such a reflective trance. Each shared one common thread – *an almost inconsolable worry regarding matters the future*. “And we won’t lose our resolve.” He nudged his friend before scooping up the pair of scrolls from the table. “I’ll take these to Peter, and when I return, we’ll catch up some more.

“Before I go though, let me tell you something about Conrad that might lift your spirits just a little bit. He only has himself. He only cares about himself. At the end of the day, his only friends are those he controls. He does not live in reality, just the confines of his warped imagination. You have your princess. You have your duty, and you have your honor. I, well, I have myself back, and I have forgiveness. These aren’t things I’ll soon forget, and they are the reasons why I know we’ll win.”