

## Pickle's Story

Ferdinand spurred Pickle lightly in an attempt to get him up the hill faster. The mule snorted in protest and continued on at the same steady pace.

“Oh, yes,” said Ferdinand, “please do take your time. However, I feel I should remind you, as you take in the stunning vistas of Samport Pass, that we are on the run from both Arturo's men and the Duke's army.”

The scrub-choked path followed a bend in the cliff-side. Pickle slowed and picked his way around it. “Of course, you have nothing to fear. You're just a victim in all this, I suppose? One mule caught up in the schemes of the nefarious Ferdinand: provocateur, ne'er-do-well, and debt-dodger?”

Behind them, Ferdinand could see the distance they'd covered. Frustrating as he was, Pickle had gotten him a long ways today. The path wound down the cleft in the grey mountainside. There were miles of rock, punctuated by tufts of small, hardy plants. Ferdinand whistled nervously. Pickle suddenly pulled up and brayed loudly, nearly sending the rider and his pack over the front of the saddle.

“There's nothing there, you stupid brute!”

Pickle remained where he was, swaying his head from side to side. Ferdinand kicked him again and he obligingly returned to his same pace.

“Now I have a mule that is not only slow, but crazy. Excellent.”

The next day was slower, and Ferdinand spent much of it walking. He left the pack on top of Pickle. “You know, I'm supposed to have a steed, in these situations. You wouldn't see Roland crossing the mountains with a smelly mule. Though, if I was a knight, there's no way a horse would be able to carry all that stolen gold, never mind the armour and what have you. We're lucky to have each other, I suppose.”

While Ferdinand was taking a rest, Pickle found a stream with tough little apples growing near it. He pulled them off and nearly swallowed them whole. When Ferdinand came and reached for one, Pickle whinny-brayed and kicked out at the man.

“Eh! You'll need to share. I couldn't fit much food into that bag.” He reached slowly for another one while patting the black mule's neck. This seemed to placate Pickle, though he could have been biding his time until the next attack, for all that Ferdinand could see. The animal's glossy eyes were deceptively simple-looking. “You are an insidious grifter, aren't you Pickle?”

The following day, Ferdinand and Pickle crossed the summit of the pass. The trail opened onto a sweeping view of the foothills. “When we get to the village down there,” said Ferdinand, “I'm going to sell you. Did you know that, you poor mongrel? I'm not going to be able to fence silver serving trays off of your back like some peddler.”

“You won't be able to fence any of that,” came a voice from above, “unless you play your part right.”

Ferdinand and Pickle stopped short. The man perched on the rocks above them had a crossbow trained on them. Ferdinand knew it had to be one of Arturo's thugs; probably a local, judging by how fast he'd made it up here. There was a daring and adventurous way to solve this, and a safe and simple one. Ferdinand looked to his mule and recalled that he was not a knight, and Pickle was not a warhorse.

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“Ferdinand made it through Samport Pass with nothing but his ugly face, some of the Duke's gold, and a mule named Pickle. I swear the bastard can't even screw up when he tries.”

“They say Ferdinand's mule can fly. But he had to promise his soul to the devil before it would show him the trick. I heard it from Pepe, who bought some of his gold rings. 'No choice,' Ferdinand had said, 'if I didn't do it, I'd have died up there.'”

“You can't go by what Ferdinand says, but apparently he had to dump half of what he stole back in the pass when he was attacked. He said he would have dumped the whole thing but the mule insisted on its own share.”

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Ferdinand was leaving the small town in the foothills with Pickle on a lead behind him. He talked over his shoulder while the wind shook the soft trees. The land around them was bursting with green compared to the trails they'd walked a few days before. “Thanks again,” he said, “I hope you don't mind the embellishments. Don't tell anyone the truth and I won't add the part about you slipping on that one slope. Shameful for a mule, really.”

Ferdinand and Pickle were heading away from the town of Samport, where the Duke's men would soon arrive. Ferdinand hoped that the townsfolk would be clever enough to hide the gold they'd gotten.

The duo moved east, now laden with food, wine, and proper travel gear. The plan had been to get out of the mountains all together and head to Toulouse, but with most of his wealth in the hands of the mountain bandit or Samport, he was forced to stop over in Andorra. It was a backwards place, and not as far from Arturo as he would have liked, but Ferdinand had conjured a profit up from smaller places.

“Did I ever tell you,” he said to Pickle as the bird and insect noises brought the day to a close, “about my time when I sold fish to three drunks in a sea-side village? That was marvellous. They weren't even my fish.”

They spent a night under the roof of a herder's shelter. The rain had come fast and heavy, and Pickle was especially unwilling to haul Ferdinand or his goods when wet.

"It's just as well you don't like the rain, Pickle," said Ferdinand as he laid out some hay for the mule, "you smell terrible once you get wet. I've met back-alley cutthroats with a more charming odour."

Pickle snorted, moved to the other side of the open structure and began eating some dried grain from a feed bag. He was, Ferdinand noted, now upwind, and the stench was terrible.

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"...and they say that the Beast of San Luca can strike you mute with its hideous smell," said Ferdinand to a gaggle of children in that had gathered around the brightly clothed man in Fort Callais.

"Obviously you've never smelled it then," came a deep, mocking voice from behind him. The children laughed and Ferdinand turned to see a powerful man dressed like a mercenary.

"No, I was too clever for that, my large friend. I stopped my nose with flowers and honey." Turning back to the children, he continued, "But that didn't help me when Pickle, the Beast, decided that I was to be his servant for the long night. I was forced to wait on him as if he were a king. Bowing and serving him the finest wines in the land."

The large man let Ferdinand continue for a while, then waved his hand dismissively. The children groaned but obeyed.

"Thank you sir," said Ferdinand, "You saved me. I'm afraid the children of soldiers

are harder to impress than regular village brats. They've already heard stories of bloodshed from their fathers. I'm forced to be a little stranger just to keep their ears turned my way. I had little hope of bringing such a bizarre tale to a satisfying end."

The man grunted and moved in front of him, blocking him from the street. "I don't doubt that you do well with strange and bizarre. But that's not what I'm here about, Ferdinand."

Ferdinand dusted himself off and stood up, making it quite clear how much smaller he was than the mercenary. He hadn't told anyone his real name since he'd come to Andorra. "I have to say, I'm intrigued and honoured that you know my name. But I'd ask that you not mention it around here. I've heard that Arturo has his filthy claws in this place. Some of the swords are loyal to him and not the crown."

"That would be a pity," said the armed man flatly, "but maybe running into Arturo's men wouldn't be so bad for someone that was also on the run from a Duke. Surely a pleasant chat with the Knave of Dice would be preferable to being paraded through Barcelona in stocks."

Ferdinand clenched his hands and cursed the mouth that brought him all his troubles. "You're right, of course. You're also not the average sword-for-hire; far too pleasant and quick. May I ask your name?"

"Esteban," he said, making it clear that he was unimpressed by shameless flattery - and probably bribes too, thought Ferdinand.

"Pleasure to meet you. It would be foolish to try to run, correct?"

"Quite correct," The man relaxed slightly and directed Ferdinand towards a small building down the street.

“Before I go, smart-sword, I'd like to stop in at the stables. You see, I have a very particular mule right now, and I'll have to take care of him before what, I imagine, will be a very philosophical discussion about the existence of a debt between myself and Arturo.”

The man nodded, “We've heard about the mule. Perhaps you can discuss that as well. A flying mule would go a long way to covering your debt.” The joke was followed by a mirthless smile.

In the stables, Ferdinand found the young hostler that had taken Pickle when he'd first arrived. The sandy-haired youth was picking bits of hay from his clothes. When he saw Ferdinand, he stuck out a grungy finger.

“You! That animal you gave me is a monster.”

“Particular tastes, is all. I was wondering about another night, in fact.” He smiled as best he could, given the menacing armed man with him.

The hostler almost protested, but was unable to turn away coin. “Alright, but if it kicks me again I'm putting it out. The thing behaves like it's damned royalty.”

Ferdinand felt a little tug at the back of his mind. He tried to focus on how he was going to avoid getting beaten and robbed by Arturo's men, but the tug was insistent. It wasn't the first time he'd followed a hunch against his better judgement.

“I should take a look at him. He probably needs some attention from his master.” Esteban scoffed but nodded at Ferdinand when he looked to him for permission. As Ferdinand had hoped, the mercenary was as patient as he was even-tempered.

The hostler screwed up his face at Ferdinand, “Didn't he bite your hand when you

passed me the reins before?"

"Just a little game," he said, as he purposely refrained from rubbing the raw bite mark.

They were all led into the stall where Pickle was. He snorted nervously. Slipping into the stall, Ferdinand patted Pickle, who stamped, narrowly missing his master's feet.

"See, he's not so bad. Now, I don't know much of mules, so I had a question for you. What is this cutting on his ear? It looks so deliberate, perhaps someone has mistreated him? I'd certainly be angry if someone had cut part of my ear." Ferdinand sounded as vapid as he could, so the hostler leaned in, hoping for an opportunity to put the foolish tinker in his place.

But his eyes went wide when he saw that particular marking on Pickle's ear. "This is the Duke's mark." He stared in shock at both Ferdinand and Esteban, trying to express with his gaping mouth just how serious this was. For his part, Esteban remained unflappable -- Ferdinand was impressed they'd found such a perfect man to bring him in.

"Thief! Horse Thief! Help!" called the boy as he snapped out of his shock. There was a burst of activity in the stables as all the hands came running to see. Then the shouts carried out wider, and Ferdinand was sure he could hear the heavy jangle of a soldier on the way.

Esteban evidently heard it as well, as his calmness melted slightly and he glowered at Ferdinand.

Ferdinand merely tipped his head at him. "You see? Arturo wouldn't have wanted him anyway."

“This is a remarkably bad idea.”

“I understand,” he replied, waiting for Esteban to leave, which he did, knowing that the Duke's justice would be quicker and harsher against him.

As soon as Esteban had slipped out, Ferdinand sprung into action, throwing wide as many stall doors as he could. The sandy-haired boy lunged for Pickle, but getting between the mule and the open door was a mistake – he was knocked aside and nearly trampled by the Beast of San Luca. Before the stablemen could rein in the animals, Ferdinand was atop Pickle and galloping away with an armful of bags.

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“Did you hear? Pickle and Ferdinand made it out of the jail in Fort Callais! He was arrested for theft but Pickle broke him out with one kick!”

“That's not how it happened. The mule was taken in for witchcraft. While the soldiers tried to figure out where to keep him, Ferdinand slipped in through a window and they disappeared in a puff of smoke.”

“I heard it was Arturo's man that tried to take him in, but Pickle could smell the danger and warned Ferdinand. Why, I would have killed to have a mule that could smell lies with me when I was trading with the Moors last month.”

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“I hope you know some French,” Ferdinand said to Pickle as they walked in the warm rain on their way to Toulouse. “I've learned the language, but you'll need to get used to it. That way you can disobey me and the grooms properly. Wouldn't want to accidentally follow a command, hey boy?”

Ferdinand camped with some other travellers on a rise overlooking a small river.



“You can say what you will about the French,” he remarked while removing packs from Pickle, “but most of the people I know wouldn't break bread around a fire with strangers. And for good reason: they'd be likely to have their throats slit by morning.”

Pickle snorted, presumably at Ferdinand's taste in company, but otherwise let it drop.

“Keep your opinions to yourself. I'm off to beat some Frenchmen at cards.”

At night, a terrible screeching woke Ferdinand and the rest of the camp. It took him a moment to recognize the shriek of a panicked mule, but once he did, he bolted from his bed and began calling out.

He came to the tree where he'd left Pickle and saw two cloaked men around the mule. One held the reins high while the other wielded a small curved knife. The one with the knife tried to get close while avoiding kicks.

“Get away!” shouted Ferdinand as he ran across the soft grass towards the men.

All at once, the man with the knife drove the blade into the mule's neck and dragged it across. The mule's legs spasmed, knocking the man away, but the strength faded from the creature in a frightening wash of blood. Even in the moonlight, Ferdinand could see the dark stains on the men's clothes and the ground. They turned and ran, with Ferdinand bellowing after them. Once in the brush around the water, it was harder to follow. After minutes of stumbling, swearing, and getting stuck in the mud, he realized that they must have made their escape.

He returned to the tree and found most of the travellers standing around. A few murmured consoling words at Ferdinand, but most stood silent.

“What did they do to you, boy?” he said, sniffing in an effort to keep back tears. He knelt beside the mule and patted its dead flank. The air stank from the hot blood. The night was clear, and he could see the animal's dead stare reflecting the light.

Then he saw the unmarked ears. Struck by the strangeness of what had just happened, he couldn't do anything, just left his hand laying there on this other mule's body. Slowly, he stood and looked around. Pickle had surely been tied up here, and alone (for he despised being too close to other animals).

Ferdinand called out, “Whose mule is this?” There was no reply, only some confused and wary glances. “Pardon me, but this isn't my mule. Did anyone see Pickle, my mule? Whose mule is this?”

No matter how he asked, he remained incomprehensible. Several of the travellers assumed him to be a madman who had wandered the roads too long and was now driven over the edge by the death of his mule.

The next day, he left early in an attempt to catch up with whoever had stolen Pickle. He had a fair guess they were heading to Pierre-Paul, a man renowned for his ability to fence anything stolen. Pierre-Paul was, in fact, the reason that Ferdinand had kept one piece of the Duke's collection with him. Now, he thought bitterly, he'd be trading one bit of ducal property for another.

When he reached Toulouse, he saw that though the plague was gone, the city still bore its scars. The streets were empty of children; the only ones he saw at all were very young and still clinging to their mothers' skirts. Everyone but the fat nobility that had waited out the death in the country still had a hungry look in their eyes. There was food enough, it seemed, but they were all aware of how quickly that could change. He noted that the docks were lively still, and the new bridge was incredible, like a shining crown across the river.

Ferdinand arrived at Pierre-Paul's "shop" later than he'd hoped, but still probably earlier than most of people looking to sell stolen goods. He was escorted by a bodyguard into a well-furnished room on the second story with a small window looking out over the street. After several minutes, Pierre-Paul arrived and introduced himself in Spanish.

Ferdinand bowed slightly, "Very nice to meet you. I wish more of your countrymen spoke as well as you. It's rather hard to be discreet about seeking you out when I can barely be understood."

The man sat in the other chair, quite close to Ferdinand, and stroked his moustache as if the point was worth pondering.

"I was expecting you. You must understand: your reputation precedes you. "

"Why, that's very humbling..."

"Please, let's discuss what you're here for."

Ferdinand fidgeted in annoyance. He disliked people who weren't willing to have a decent conversation, even as preamble to business. And it had been several days since he'd spoken to anyone in Spanish (aside from Pickle).

"Alright then. You're a busy man, I imagine. I'm here about a mule that's been stolen."

Pierre-Paul cracked a smile and leaned back, "Come on now, I'd like to think an accomplished thief knows that I can't discuss items that may or may not have passed through my hands. My reputation depends on people being able to sell things discreetly."

*Well,* thought Ferdinand, *at least he knows how to leave an opening for flattery.* "I

would never assume anything but the utmost professionalism from you.” Pierre-Paul nodded, expecting and appreciating the response, and waited for something more. Ferdinand continued, “However, if someone approached you with an item you thought might be too noisy and troublesome to bother with, and you were to discuss it, there would be no harm. Certainly, people that bring attention to your doorstep aren't extended the same privileges as those who bring the Duke's gold?”

At this Pierre-Paul chuckled, “You're as long-winded as they say. And that mule must truly be magic for you to offer up what, I think, is the last of your goods.”

Ferdinand frowned, “It has become a costly animal. Perhaps this will fetch more than just information.” He reached into the bag he had brought and pulled out a gold necklace, as fine and lustrous as the mistress that it had been intended for. Pierre-Paul hummed appreciatively.

“Well done, Ferdinand. That will pay for my words and more. But these are not normal men you're going after. They looked mad, to me. Like... magicians or alchemists. Be careful.”

“Thank you. I'll need your words now and later, in fact. Wish me luck.”

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Ferdinand knocked on the front door of the manor that Pierre-Paul had pointed him towards. Its grounds were gone wild and all but one room was dark. It looked like another casualty of the plague. Still, the words of Esteban echoed through his head as he contemplated walking right into a den of black magic-wielding thieves: *This is a remarkably bad idea.*

*I'd like to be known as remarkable,* he thought as footsteps approached the door.

The door opened enough for a man's filthy face to poke out. He raised an eyebrow, but didn't even ask a customary question.

*What happens now?* The question seemed to hang in the air between the two of them.

"I am Arturo. I'm here for the mule."

The man's eyebrows furrowed alarmingly, "Huh? Get out of here. They don't want anyone bothering them until after sunrise."

Ferdinand recalled his brief stint on the stage and summoned his most imperious voice, the one that had cowed a packed house when he played Alexander the Great - granted, it could have been him drunkenly swinging his sword into the set as well -- "Listen, you bleating milksop, you tell the men in there that the Knave of Dice is outside, come all the way from Barcelona, to make you rich in exchange for that beast!"

With that, Ferdinand stepped back from the door as if he couldn't care less about getting inside, angrily swiping his cloak to his side. The guard gaped for a moment, then closed his mouth and disappeared into the vast hall, beckoning the rude Spaniard to follow him.

Ferdinand felt that Arturo wouldn't deign to follow an off-hand gesture like that from a glorified French lookout, so he waited until the man had to stop at the top of the stairs and then casually entered.

From behind, he could see the guard fidget nervously as he neared the large iron-braced door at the base of the stairs. He managed to get next to it, but couldn't bring himself to touch the black metal handle. He turned sideways to allow Ferdinand through.

"I don't care who you are. I'm not going to interrupt whatever is going on in there. I won't have my soul burned black by what they do."

"Right, I'm sure the angels will sing your praises now. I'll be fine from here. Get back to the door and make sure no one disturbs us."

The Frenchman almost started to bow and then thought better of it and hurried back up the stairs. Ferdinand smirked as he left, then prepared himself for what awaited behind the door.

He opened it without knocking, leaning on the braggadocio of his Alexander the Great-via-Arturo impression to quell his fears.

Inside, the air was thick with smoke from candles. Their flames illuminated the mortared stone walls of the once-impressive storeroom. Pickle was snorting and stamping in the middle of a chalked symbol on the ground. Two men were holding his reins, watching the door as Ferdinand stepped in. They both had on expensive, sumptuous robes, but their eyes had the wild look of men who'd been travelling hard or staying up for days on end. They wordlessly spread apart to flank Ferdinand and put their hands on the long daggers waiting in their belts.

"Please," he said as he held out his hands, "I'm unarmed and I've only come to make a deal. If you're not interested in getting rich, I'll leave." Ferdinand knew that he had little chance of getting away now that he had seen them, but it seemed like the confident thing to say.

Pickle swung his head towards the new arrival now that Ferdinand had spoken. He gave an impatient snort, but then one of the robed men jerked his reins.

"Who are you?" said the man, hand still on his dagger, "What is the deal?"

Ferdinand forced himself to relax and enter the room, even though it put the quiet

one behind his shoulder. "My name is Arturo, and that mule there is worth a great deal to me." The strange man raised his eyebrows at the name, and Ferdinand continued, "I don't know how you heard of its magic, but I imagine it was partly due to that fool Ferdinand."

The man nodded, then stayed silent for a few long moments. Sweat beaded at Ferdinand's temples as he wondered if this was merely a signal for the other one to slip a knife between his ribs. After a few tense seconds, the man spoke, "My name is Charles. And if you know of Ferdinand and Pickle, then you know that we can't give him up. Not easily anyway."

Ferdinand started pacing, using it as an excuse to examine the room. He spotted the barrel ramp and cellar doors they must have used to get Pickle in. They were barred, and with one knife still dangerously close to his back, he knew that a speedy escape wasn't a possibility. "Well, I don't think anything to do with that mule is easy. Case in point: if you keep him, you'll get caught tonight by soldiers, well before you could finish..." he let a dismissive gesture at the drawing on the ground finish his sentence.

A strong hand gripped his shoulder from behind and Charles took a step forward in anger, "You called the king's men here?"

"No, but they will be on their way. Ferdinand has kicked up enough racket about the two 'wizards' that stole his mule. And perhaps a helpful citizen named Esteban will be able to point them towards this mansion."

The man's eyes narrowed, and the grip on Ferdinand's shoulder didn't loosen. Ferdinand used all his will to tell himself that he was Arturo, a man who was used to negotiating with sharp knives about the room.

"So, you think you can get away with Pickle while we can't?" the man finally asked.

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“I heard Arturo was all the way in Toulouse no more than three days ago. He used that magic mule, Pickle, to fly back for the monthly collections.”

“Pierre-Paul said that Arturo came to him wanting to fence a soul that Pickle had brought back from Hell. I wouldn't believe it, but Jean-Christophe saw the mule, and it was all black, like it had been in rolling in the ashes of the pit.”

“They say that Pickle actually taught Arturo all the secrets of being a thief, and that's why he had to kill Ferdinand to get him back.”

On a rainy roadside, a cloaked traveller patted his own mule's neck, “That mule sounds like too much trouble. Does Arturo still have him?”

“I'm not sure,” said the other traveller, “the Duke is after him now, since the mule should be his by right. Pickle better be as magical as they say; I'd sure want a trick or two up my sleeve if the Duke and his army were after me.”

“Oh yes,” said the traveller, “I'm sure he's quite magical enough.”

The End