

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 13: A Prince's Penalty

Argrave looked up at two great stone owls, hanging over the entrance to the Order's hub in Mateth like gargoyles that were a quarter as scary. Argrave thought that owls were far too rotund and bizarre to ever be as scary as the other birds.

"Just wait out here, if you would," Argrave directed Galamon. "I think they only let Acolytes and higher inside the Order itself. Annoying, but what can you do?"

"Understood," said Galamon.

Argrave bit his lip a little. "Just find a quiet place. I'm sure some ignorant people might be troubled by a Veidimen standing right out front the—"

"I know," Galamon interrupted.

After a nod, wave, and a wink, Argrave entered the Order's Mateth branch. As long as he had one of the badges of the Order—his was a copper owl marking him as an Acolyte, kept in his leather gear's chest pocket—he could enter the premises freely. Without the badge, one would be restricted by some particularly powerful enchantments.

This place was much less busy than the Tower of the Gray Owl. The Tower was a bona fide school, with instructors and students abounding. The branches throughout the major cities in Berendar were more like libraries, with only minimal services needed by wizards. Mostly, it referred members of the Order to private businesses that would fulfill their arcane needs.

Argrave ducked beneath the doorframe and stepped into the administrative office, where a brunette woman busily tended to papers. She looked up when she saw Argrave approach.

"How may I help you, sir?" she asked drearily.

"Hello, Miriam. Nice to see you again." Argrave said, recognizing her. "I am here to inquire about the results of the Acolyte graduations."

"O-oh," she stuttered, coming to attention. Argrave wondered why for a minute, only to catch her looking up at his face. *What is she...? Oh. I know her name, but she doesn't*

*know mine. She thinks she forgot we met before. I see.* Argrave suppressed a smile with his gloved hand. He'd stumbled onto a fun new hobby—making people uncomfortable by knowing random details about them.

"The results arrived by owl early this morning. I can tell you the results, but you'll have to go see Bern to get a Wizard's badge." She shifted some papers aside and pulled out a slightly crinkled parchment. "That is, if you passed, sir."

"And? Did I?" Argrave pressed gleefully.

"Erm..." Miriam's eyes darted to the paper, and at Argrave's face. He could practically hear the gears turn in her head, desperately trying to remember a name she'd never heard. "Perhaps you'd best look for yourself, sir." She handed the paper to him, escaping the pitfall Argrave had set up. He clicked his tongue and took the paper.

Argrave didn't need to look for long before he found his name. It was at the very top of the paper, beneath a label glamorously decorated with gold and stars reading, 'Special Consideration.' A few other names were below and above his—Mina of Veden, Reichard, and Svetlana of Quadreign. All of them were powerful spellcaster characters in 'Heroes of Berendar.'

"Special consideration," Argrave said, angling the paper. "What does this mean for me?"

"Oh. I suppose I should be congratulating you!" Miriam answered. "Acolytes entered for 'Special Consideration' have submitted something that has value to the Order beyond a mere advancement from Acolyte to Wizard. Some of the High Wizards of the Order are taking the time to evaluate its precise usefulness to reward you appropriately."

Argrave put his hand to his chin. *High Wizards are those capable of B-rank magic... He felt a nugget of worry festering in his heart. You need A-rank blood magic to learn [Blood Infusion], and I left plenty out of my concept of [Blood Infusion]. I don't think they'll be able to complete the research independently ... Ugh. I suppose some positive attention is what I wanted, in part, but...*

"I can still get my recognition as a Wizard, right?" Argrave asked, brows furrowing.

Miriam crossed her hands atop her desk. "Unfortunately, until the process is finished, that can't be granted."

"That's annoying." Argrave handed the paper back to Miriam. "Look at me, so special, barred from getting the only thing I came here for..."

*I wanted to buy some things to prepare for the druids with the remainder of the money I made selling that horse. I can't purchase from some sellers without the badge of a Wizard of the Gray Owl.* Argrave lost himself in thought at this wrench in his plan.

"Perhaps I can help with that, little brother," came a warm, pleasant voice from behind Argrave. Chills ran up Argrave's spine the second he processed who it belonged to.

Argrave turned his head very slowly. A man leaned against the doorframe. He was tall, lithe, and well-built. His face had a strong resemblance to Argrave's, though it was far less gaunt. He had obsidian hair and bright blue eyes. His clothing was black, highlighted with gold and studded with gems tastefully. On his collar, sleeves, and shoulders, a sewn symbol depicted a golden snake weaved around a sword—the symbol of the House of Vasquer.

His name was Induen of Vasquer, eldest son of King Felipe III and heir to the throne. He was also the last person Argrave wished to speak to, in this life or the next.

In Argrave's haste to stand, the chair he sat on creaked loudly. He placed his hand to his chest and said quickly, "Prince Induen."

Perhaps Induen was fond of Argrave's troubled haste, for he smiled a little. "Maybe I shouldn't call you 'little' brother anymore, seeing as you're taller than even me," he joked with all the geniality a normal, sane older brother might possess. Argrave wasn't fooled for a second.

"...one of my blessings, Prince Induen," Argrave responded after a pause. The words were insincere. Being this tall was terribly inconvenient, as a matter of fact.

"So it is," Induen agreed with a nod. He stood from the doorframe. "Come, now. We should speak in private. I believe I can help you regarding that Wizard's badge you need."

Argrave froze up a little. Induen was terrifying because, like most of his siblings, he was incredibly arbitrary. Worse yet, he was both a powerful warrior and a great mage. He was a High Wizard in the Order of the Gray Owl, and well on the track to mastering A-rank magic.

"Thank you for even considering it, Prince Induen," Argrave flattered. Being with Induen would be dangerous but refusing him would be even more so. He was petty. Unlike his other siblings, though, his revenge was more insidious. He enjoyed torturing people psychologically. Argrave considered if this encounter was karma for his slight teasing of Miriam.

Induen walked out of the administrative office and led the two of them to a room on the second floor. Two royal guards stood, a man and a woman, both guarding the room diligently. Their gold armor shone resplendently, shining both because of the metal and the powerful enchantments inlaid atop it. That armor could resist much of the damage caused by magic and furthermore strengthened their physical capabilities. Even without the armor, the royal guards were very powerful, Argrave knew. They could probably bend steel.

Argrave and Induen entered the room. It was the quarters of the manager of the Mateth branch of the Order, and the branch manager stood off to the side in grey-white robes, hands clasped behind his back. The royal guards followed behind them and closed the door.

"I'm quite annoyed, Argrave," began Induen, the endearing term of 'little brother' dropped now that they were in privacy. "After all the trouble I went out in choosing a gift for you, I find that you've returned it to the shop."

Argrave walked a little closer, standing beside the chair across from the desk without sitting. "What do you want me to say, Prince Induen? The gift did not fit. I've grown much since you last saw me."

"Don't get cute with me," Induen retorted, sitting down in the branch manager's chair. He gestured to the seat beside Argrave, commanding, "Sit."

*At least he gives me a chance to talk. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's talking.* Argrave thought. After obeying Induen's command to sit, Argrave waited patiently for Induen to continue.

Induen leaned back in the chair casually. "Even if you did not want it, you shouldn't have returned it." His icy blue eyes stared Argrave down. "It makes me question if you were trying to trample on my goodwill."

"I wouldn't dare, Prince Induen," Argrave said, holding out his hands. "I simply came to know during my time at the Tower of the Gray Owl that Nikoletta was no threat to your succession. She is not a materialistic person."

Induen took a deep breath, then exhaled. He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the branch manager's desk. "Do you remember when I killed your mother?"

Argrave was a bit taken aback by the question, and he sat in stunned silence for a few seconds. This was a tidbit of lore that Argrave did not know. Fortunately, Induen's question was rhetorical.

"My mother died giving birth to me. Growing up, our father told me, 'Love makes a man weak. Without your mother, you will be stronger,'" Induen said, lowering his voice in impression of King Felipe III. "Our mothers are the most loving creatures in our lives."

Their love makes us weak. I thought to teach you that lesson, as was my duty as the elder brother.”

*What complete nonsense*, Argrave thought. *You just get off to killing people’s parents in front of them.* One of the other main character’s story revolved around seeking revenge for their parents. Induen’s primary pleasure in life was orphaning children while they watched.

“Have you fallen in love with Nikoletta of Monticci, brother?” Induen asked, low and intently.

Argrave frowned. “Of course not. She’s my cousin. First cousin, at that.” *And she’s a messy person, not to mention a goody-two-shoes.*

“Are you sure?” Induen asked again. “Because that’s the ONLY REASON I COULD EVEN BEGIN TO CONSIDER...!” Induen slammed his fist on the desk and inhaled deeply, then muttered quietly, “...how you could act so naively.” Induen stood quickly, walking around the desk to stand above Argrave.

“Nikoletta is not the problem. Nikoletta is the weapon,” he explained gently, as though to a child. “Her cause can be heralded by others—people like her father, or the other nobles. If she is seen as upstanding, that causes problems for the peace in this Kingdom of Vasquer.” Induen clenched his hands into fists. “If you take their weapon from them, they must use their fists. You see my fists?”

Argrave’s head swum and his vision went white. He felt a terrible pain and his mind struggled to focus. It was only when he found his face was on the ground that he realized that he’d been struck. He tried to move his jaw, but it felt terribly ajar. Something roughly gripped his arm, and then he was placed back on the chair.

His ears were ringing, but he saw Induen speaking to the branch manager about something. The man walked over, and Argrave flinched away. A spell matrix appeared in the air in front of the branch manager’s hand, and Argrave felt his jaw moving. It was a deeply uncomfortable thing, but it was barely noticeable in front of the pain.

The pain and the tinnitus slowly faded away as the branch manager’s healing magic did its work, and Induen’s voice was audible again.

“...the punishment to chopping off some fingers once I heard your research was of high quality. Later, though, when I’d heard of the embarrassment you made the Margrave suffer, I reduced it to just that. Be thankful, brother, for my mercy.”

Argrave stroked his jaw. He pulled away his hand and saw blood on the leather gloves. Some blood dripped onto his legs, and he felt an overpowering urge to vomit. He had

never been hit like that before. He was certain his cheekbone had been shattered, his jaw had been dislocated, and his nose had broken. The healing magic had fixed it, but the blood remained.

Induen sat down again. "Do not deliberately disobey me again, Argrave. Are we clear?" He paused, waiting for an answer, and then repeated more deliberately, "Are. We clear?"

"...yes," he answered quietly.

"Wipe off your face," Induen commanded. "It's unsightly."

Argrave retrieved his handkerchief from his gear's pockets, wetting it with water magic and quietly wiping his face off. His head was a whirlwind of fear battling with intense anger.

"Now that the unpleasant part of the conversation has concluded, I can talk about something that may please you more. Your badge as a Wizard—I will have the branch manager give it to you." Induen snapped, and the branch manager stepped forward.

"Give me your hand," he said.

Argrave mutely obeyed. The branch manager placed a steel badge depicting an owl in Argrave's palm. Some magic flowed through the air like a tangible white thread, and subtle inscriptions on the badge's surface started to glow white. The process was done quickly, and the branch manager wiped some sweat off his brow.

"There. It's done. Do not lose it," the man said gruffly, without any respect. He walked back to where he had been standing.

"That is done, then. Congratulations, brother," Induen said with a warm smile. "But that can hardly be called a reward. Though I'm sure the Order will reward you appropriately for the research, my insider in the Tower says that even the Tower Master has taken an interest in your particular thesis. What's more, you made the Margrave suffer a major blow to his prestige. I'm told he lost a precious horse."

Induen stood once more, and Argrave tensed involuntarily. "Though you are my brother, you are still a bastard—technically a commoner, given your mother's lowly origins. I think that should be rectified." He snapped his finger. "Rita, if you would."

The female royal guard walked forward and handed Induen a set of documents. Induen weighed them in his hands, then offered them to Argrave. "My father and I are doubtless to be busy with the Margrave's little protest in the coming days, so we cannot name you

a noble immediately. But this... well, this is your estate, brother. A seaside castle—a rather famous location.”