

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 16: Firebrand and the Cat

Elias trudged up the hill leading to the Monticci estate with heavy steps. Embarrassingly, he had been caught by Argrave's escort in seconds. He still recalled the giant of a man cornering him, staring him down with those pure white eyes of his. They had the same cold steel glint that he saw in his father's eyes, sometimes—a war veteran, a man of many battles.

But at least that unfortunate encounter told Elias that Argrave's escort was not someone from Vasquer. None of Vasquer's royalty had white eyes. He looked more a mercenary than a knight. Elias was unsure what Argrave intended to do. Consequently, he decided to take the matter directly to Duke Enrico.

He stopped a fair distance away from the gated wall leading to House Monticci's grandiose estate. Unlike most noble houses in the kingdom of Vasquer, House Monticci resided in a mansion—the city of Mateth was a fortress in and of itself, and House Monticci always prided itself on treating the commonfolk fairer than most houses. What better way to symbolize that than to live in the same area as they?

Elias straightened his clothes and walked up to the gate. Two knights stood on guard, and they watched him passively. A blue swordfish, the symbol of House Monticci, decorated their shield and breastplate. Elias walked to them, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a seal bearing the golden lion of House Parbon.

"I am Elias of House Parbon, heir to Margrave Reinhardt," he greeted the knights levelly. "I would speak to Duke Enrico on urgent matters."

The knights out front of the gate straightened. They looked at each other, each trying to puzzle out how to respond. The first to speak wasn't the knights, though.

"Woah, hey," came a higher pitched voice from behind the gate. Elias stepped to the side and peered into the estate. Mina walked up to the gate and grabbed the bars. "It's Elias. Wow, guess the Margrave sent you personally, huh?"

"Mina," Elias greeted. "I came to speak to the duke."

At the gate, one of the knights decided to head into the estate, presumably to bring the news of Elias' arrival and decide whether or not he should be allowed in.

"Why would that be, I wonder?" she asked sarcastically. "Missing a prize horse? Angry dad? Maybe a little bit of both?"

Elias paused, not wishing to admit he'd come here without his father's permission. He decided to change the subject. "And why are you here, and not in Count Elgar's territory?"

"Pfft." She scoffed, and then climbed up the fence until she sat atop one of the stone pillars between the metal bars. Her golden hair reflected the sunlight brilliantly. "I doubt the ninth child—a daughter, especially—will be missed sorely. Nicky's a lot more fun than any of my family, anyhow."

"I see." Elias nodded, and then repeated what he'd told to the knights. "I need to speak to the duke."

"About what?" Mina pressed.

"...my uncle's imprisonment," he said after hesitating.

"Not about Argrave?" She said amusedly. "You're not so good at lying, you know."

Elias didn't respond.

"Come on. Don't be so mute. If it *is* about Argrave, I might be able to help a little."

Elias raised a brow. He decided to test the waters, if only just. "He met with Prince Induen, did he not?"

"Yep," Mina said with a smile. "He and Induen met in the Order of the Gray Owl's branch here at Mateth, and then Grave walked out caked in poorly-cleaned blood. Nicky thinks that he got punished for returning the thesis Induen stole from her."

"That's nonsense," Elias dismissed immediately. "He probably staged the whole thing to earn your trust."

"Sheesh. And Nicky said *I* was paranoid." Mina stood atop the pillar and jumped down in front of Elias. "Considering we stumbled into him on accident, I doubt it. And his general vibe... was weird," she said ponderingly.

"He's a man of ill character," Elias insisted. "He crippled my sister years ago. He stole my father's horse with his silver tongue."

Mina laughed. "What, he talked your father into letting him go free with a 6950-gold horse?"

“No, he...” Elias paused, unable to remember the details of what his father had said. “It was stolen.”

“Well, your father stole him.” She poked Elias’ chest. “And he was ready to kill Nicky’s escort if he didn’t comply. I consider it justice. Hilarious justice, at that. I still laugh when I think about it.”

Elias stared at Mina’s yellow eyes, considering how to proceed. Nikoletta was a person of good character. Mina had a reputation as a trickster, but if she was friends with Nikoletta, she could not be disreputable. Elias decided to be honest.

“I watched him leave town with some giant man—a mercenary or a knight, maybe. I tried to follow them, but his escort spotted me in mere minutes. He was a powerful man. Argrave’s clearly not going to be idle, and he has something to hide.”

Mina tilted her head. “Grave was talking about the Baretta Troupe Auction, but he suddenly left on ‘urgent business.’ Some kind of magic item was glowing.” Mina sighed. “Listen, Elias, I’ll be honest with you—Nicky has already made up her mind to give Grave some trust. He had the opportunity to cause great friction between Parbon, Monticci, and Veden, but he instead decided to go with the Margrave to avoid bloodshed.

“After seeing him all shaken after talking to Induen, she’s only more committed to that trust. Even if she knew something, I doubt she’d tell you.” Mina shook her head.

Elias turned away, sighing and falling into thought.

“But...!” Mina continued, raising a finger. “I’ve seen Nikoletta spend fortunes on acts of misplaced charity. She’s given a life’s earnings to your average marketplace swindler. She’s misplaced her trust thousands of times before. She’s trusting. I think Grave isn’t such a bad guy, but he’s still a Vasquer.”

“What are you getting at?” Elias asked, turning back.

“I’m a lot better at keeping out of sight than you, especially with my illusion magic. With a dad like mine, you learn very quickly that being unseen is better than standing out. I can even help keep you out of sight. I want to trust Argrave, but I also like to give my trust carefully. Even if he likes to make fun of me, Nicky needs more reliable friends, and he hasn’t let her down yet.”

“I used some minor illusion magic. Didn’t seem to faze Argrave’s escort,” Elias dismissed.

“Did you use C-rank illusion magic?” Mina beamed.

Elias furrowed his brows. "You've already reached C-rank?"

"What can I say?" she asked boastfully. "'Special consideration' for my thesis, C-rank magic at the young age of 19... Of course, Nicky says I should focus on other fields of magic, but elemental magic and stuff like that is boring."

"And you're willing to help me find out what he's up to?" Elias sought to confirm.

"Like I said, I need to confirm he's trustworthy." Mina crossed her arms. "I might've done it alone, but now that you're snooping around, I can't help myself."

The knight that had moved to the estate returned. He walked to Elias and bowed. "Young lord Parbon. The duke said that he is willing to receive you."

"Course, if you bother Nicky and her dad, the offers off the table," Mina said. "So, what'll it be, Mr. Firebrand?"

"What? Why?" Elias asked, confused.

"See, this is why you're terrible at sneaking about. No sense of covertness." She stretched her hand up and flicked Elias' forehead. "I won't explain myself."

Elias frowned, considering briefly if he was being deceived. After deliberating for a long time, he said to the guard, "Tell the duke that the matter resolved itself, and he needn't meet with me."

Mina smiled. "Alright, neato. Let's see if he's a snake in the grass or a mouse on the lawn, Mr. Firebrand." She walked past him, arms behind her head.

Elias trailed behind, calling out, "Why are you calling me that?"

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Despite Argrave claiming that their days of preparation would be less hectic, Galamon was worked tirelessly. As a vampire, Galamon did not need sleep as long as he remained fully sated. Argrave simply refused to sleep, working through the night and sleeping in small bursts of two or three hours. During the day, Argrave would venture on shopping trips. He seemed to know the city perfectly, and moreover, he knew where everything that he needed was. The young man had access to some ingredients Galamon could not hope to get due to Argrave's status as a Wizard of the Gray Owl.

At night, Argrave would alternate between trying to advance his magic to C-rank and working on a project he deemed important. It was during those hours that he drove Galamon to brew poisons and potions. Though Argrave briefly tried to brew the potions

himself, he declared that 'his wrists were too flimsy for this work,' and furthermore that the act itself was 'terribly unclean and altogether unpleasant.' Galamon could not disagree on the second account.

Galamon was no stranger to alchemy. Sometimes, poisons were needed to dispatch a particularly hardy target. More often, one needed potions for healing, or for an edge in battle. That stated, Argrave's knowledge of alchemy surprised even the veteran snow elf. Though Argrave was of little help in the brewing process, he knew the ingredients very well, and Galamon learned many new recipes. Some of them were frighteningly effective and surprisingly cheap.

At some point, the innkeeper kicked them out, complaining of the terrible smell brought about by the brewing. Argrave speedily moved them into an abandoned house, somehow managing to find a hidden key that unlocked the back door. Galamon could not help but wonder if Erlebnis was in the man's ears at all times, whispering him all of the secrets in the world.

Argrave was not solely inhuman, though. He cooked for himself, and frequently spoke of how he missed making certain meals and eating spicy food. Most often, he simply forgot to eat, so absorbed he was in his tasks. Despite his efforts, he struggled to reach C-rank magic.

The crimson-haired man, whom Argrave referred to only as the 'self-righteous German Shepherd in human skin,' seemed to have abandoned the notion of following them; Galamon did not see him again. Their days passed by in peace, barring the occasional nightly outing Galamon took to obtain more blood. It was oddly nice to have one that knew his secret of vampirism, despite Argrave's incessant jokes about it.

The more they prepared for the assault on the Veidimen druids, the more comfortable Galamon became with the task. Argrave did not seem an inexperienced brat—indeed, his insights into the assault surprised Galamon at times. He dared not grow arrogant, though; Tirros the Tempestuous was famous in Veiden, and he could not be taken lightly.

Like this, the days passed steadily onwards. Soon enough, a week had gone by. It was the day that Argrave had designated they would move on the druid's haven.