

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 2: Unsocial Visit

Argrave stared at a plaque on the side of the wall. It read 'Nikoletta of Monticci.' He carried a stack of documents wrapped by a few strings in his right hand. He felt calm. All of the faces that he saw in the Tower he recognized. Indeed, there was nothing to suggest that anything had changed from the original 'Heroes of Berendar' in terms of setting. He had even gleaned the date from passing conversation. It was a month before Acolytes had to submit their research to the Order, and therefore, near a month and a half before the game began in earnest.

While cleaning, he had found a peculiarly well-hidden stack of papers, which now rested in his hands. In the original plot, Induen of Vasquer, Argrave's half-brother and heir to the throne, used his influence within the Order to steal Nikoletta's thesis. When her research was stolen, she presumed it lost, and consequently tried to remake it hastily. The remake was deemed a shabby copy of the original copy Argrave held—thus, Nikoletta was expelled.

It would do him no good to gain the enmity of one of the main characters. Nikoletta was the daughter of a duke. Argrave adjusted the stack of papers pulled his gloves tighter across his fingers. Then, he raised his hand to the oaken door and knocked thrice.

He looked around as time passed. People stared at him, he noticed, but they refused to meet his eyes. His reputation was already quite bad, it seemed. After receiving no answer, Argrave knocked again.

More time passed. Argrave wondered if she might be out. He knocked one last time.

The door swung open, and he was greeted by a fierce glare from a very disheveled-looking black-haired woman. Nikoletta had not been expecting his presence, evidently, and she lifted her head up very slowly to look up at him.

"Cousin," he greeted calmly. Come what may, Argrave always had confidence in his words.

"U-uh..." she fixed her hair and stood with a straighter posture. "Hello, Argrave. I thought you were my friend... forgive my appearance."

"I am not your friend," Argrave noted. "How hurtful."

"That's... erm." She took a step back. "I didn—"

"I kid," Argrave interrupted. "You were expecting Mina of Veden, I presume. That one always seems to hang around you."

Nikoletta stared at him blankly, eyes wide. Her eyes were a dark, rich pink. Argrave found the color pretty.

"May I come in?" Argrave asked when she did not speak.

Argrave's words brought her back to attention. "Now isn't a good time. I'm in the middle of something," she said firmly, grasping the door as though to shut it.

Argrave had a notion as to what that 'something' was—frantically trying to recreate the research that had been stolen from her.

"I would not come here for a social visit," Argrave said cryptically.

Nikoletta's hand fell away from the door and she stepped back. She looked at what Argrave was holding, scrutinizing him carefully. After some time, she pushed the door open and gestured. "Come in."

Argrave nodded and stepped forward. He failed to duck low enough to pass beneath the door and bumped his forehead. He cleared his throat in the awkwardness that followed, and then proceeded onward into her dorm room.

Her room was quite messy, but then Argrave had been expecting it to be so. Nikoletta was a playable character, so her personality was somewhat determined by player choice. By and large, though, she had consistent personality traits. She had been disorganized in the game, too. That these details aligned made Argrave more confident.

Books were scattered everywhere. Crumpled parchments lined the floor. Research materials and equipment were plastered all over the place. Perhaps the only saving grace of this den of wretchedness was the lack of half-eaten food. Besides Nikoletta's bed and desk, there was one set of furniture in the room—two couches parallel to each other, a low-lying table in between them.

Nikoletta walked past Argrave and picked up a stack of books, clearing room for the two to sit.

"Have a seat," she gestured.

Argrave stared at the couch like it was a snarling dog, a blank look in his dead gray eyes.

“I will stand.” Argrave held out a hand to refuse. “I will not take much of your time, so you can resume what you were doing in short order. Though... I suspect you will not need to.”

Nikoletta glared at him, gaze flitting between the wrapped documents in his hand and his eyes. She wasn't slow-witted—he had given enough hints for her to piece things together. She, too, refused to sit.

“Here.” Argrave held the documents out, tired of dancing around the issue. “Your stolen research.”

“Damn it all, you bastard!” she shouted, tearing them from his hands. “I knew it. I knew that you stole it!” She guarded them in her arms delicately.

“Well, I am a bastard in a literal sense,” Argrave conceded, pulling his gloves tighter as he stepped back. “Figuratively, though, I must disagree. I also did not steal your thesis.”

“Ohoh,” she half-laughed. “You didn't steal these papers. You just happened to find them. How am I to believe that?”

“Half-right.” Argrave shook his head. “I did not steal them. They were given to me by Induen. My half-brother, your cousin, the heir presumptive of Vasquer. You may know him, he's rather famous.”

She walked a fair distance away and set down the papers on her desk angrily. “You expect me to believe the crown prince took off with my dissertation?”

Argrave shook his head again. “No, I imagine he has people for that; thieves and such. Why would he do it himself?”

“I can't believe someone like you is my cousin,” she said, entirely ignoring his words. “If I—”

“Be quiet for a moment,” Argrave said loudly, calm yet firm. Nikoletta tensed at his voice. “Think. Use your head. Jog your noggin.” He tapped his forehead. “I wouldn't be returning this if I was at fault. I'm not one for a guilty conscience, and even if I was, I'd use a subtler method.”

Nikoletta stepped forward, crossing her arms. She sized up Argrave, then sighed and sat at the couch. “You're right. I'll listen.”

Argrave clasped his hands together. “As I said, Induen gave that to me as a gift. It doesn't fit, so I'm returning it.”

“My thesis has been missing for a long while,” Nikoletta countered. “Why return it now?”

Argrave stepped a little closer. “Look at it from my view. It’s a gift, but it comes with an implication. He wishes to use me as an Acolyte within the order to suppress you—to suppress House Monticci. There is no greater stain to your house’s honor and legitimacy than expulsion. If I keep it, I anger Duke Enrico. If I return it, I anger Induen, heir to the throne. Is it any wonder I would deliberate on this matter?”

Nikoletta stared at Argrave, her frown slowly deepening. “But why would Induen try and suppress one of the king’s faithful vassals? We’ve never antagonized the royal family.”

“Because of your mother.” Argrave pointed at her face. “Being descended from my aunt, King Felipe’s sister, marks you as one of very few with a legitimate claim to the throne of Vasquer.”

With his point spoken, Argrave took a second to breathe. “My... father,” he said reluctantly, “is old. Succession is a pertinent issue. Induen is a paranoid man who prefers to crush problems before they arise. But I am no bludgeon, and I will not trample you for my own success or Vasquer’s success. Above all, I do not need it.”

Nikoletta turned her head away and rubbed her eyes. Argrave noticed only then how tired she looked. Eventually, she lifted her head and mumbled, “...it’s plausible, but... I... don’t know what to think.”

Argrave shrugged. “Then don’t think. Mark me as the culprit, if you wish. But what was yours once is yours again, and that is ultimately the end to the matter. I didn’t come to ask for a favor or broker a deal. I merely came to do what is right.”

Her dark pink eyes locked with his gaze, and both were silent for a time. Then, she nodded. “I don’t know if I can thank you, not for this.”

“How disappointing. I was expecting a tear-filled expression of utmost gratitude,” Argrave said drolly. “If I can suggest something, though—buy an enchanted lockbox. They’re designed to keep things safe, especially precious things that might determine your future livelihood. Gemstones, important documents, things of that sort.”

“I know what a lockbox is,” she said in irritation. “Just...”

“Go?” Argrave finished her sentence, already turning around. “If you insist.”

He reached for the doorknob to leave, but Nikoletta called out, “Wait.”

“Something more you need to ask?” Argrave said patiently.

“Did you...” Nikoletta looked back at the stack of neatly wrapped papers. “Did you read it? My thesis, that is.”

Argrave turned away from the door and considered how to answer that question. In the game, the player never had the opportunity to dissect the text thoroughly. It was summarized, but nothing more.

“...not thoroughly, but yes,” Argrave said vaguely. “It was about the dynamics of wind-type elemental magic, no?”

“Yes, it was,” she answered quickly, eyes fixed on him. Some time passed, and then she held her hands out. “And?”

“And what?” Argrave tilted his head, confused.

“What did you think?” she insisted, frustrated he wasn’t understanding.

Argrave snorted. “Wind magic doesn’t consume much of your magic, it’s fast-acting, but it lacks the power the other elements have.”

Nikoletta threw her hands up in frustration. “Sounds like you’re just repeating what the teachers have been telling us.”

“No,” Argrave disagreed. He shifted on his feet. “Every element has its place. Wind magic, for instance, utterly invalidates bows, crossbows, and other such ranged projectiles. Fire magic is good for chaos and destruction. Water magic is the most neutral of them all, but it has uses outside of combat, and it counters fire nicely. Earth magic, too—” Argrave paused, realizing he was caught up in talking. “Why am I still here? I have things to do.”

“Wait,” Nikoletta said once more as he reached for the doorknob again.

“I said this wasn’t a social visit...” Argrave muttered to himself.

“One more thing,” Nikoletta assured. She enjoyed talking about magic, evidently; she became a mage for a reason. “What about electric magic?”

Argrave smiled. “It’s the best, naturally. Fast-moving, destructive, accurate, and debilitating. What’s not to love? The only demerit is its magic expenditure. But there are ways around that, of course.”

“So is that—”

“As much as I would love to talk more, I really must go. I’ll leave you with this; be careful. As the heir to Duke Enrico, you have many friends, and as many enemies.” Argrave pointed at her.

He opened the door and walked out the door, but he forgot to duck once more. He slammed his head against the top of the doorframe and staggered a little, before slamming the door shut behind him.