

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 3: Choosing Between Boredom and Suffering

Nikoletta stared at the closed door a long time after Argrave had left. Her mind was disturbed by a thousand thoughts. She had not interacted with her cousin much at all. He was the bastard of the royal family, and she the sole daughter of the Duke of Monticci. Even if they were both in the Order of the Gray Owl, there had been little occasion for them to interact. The only situation she recalled was three years ago when she was seventeen.

That said, he was nothing like she remembered.

Previously, he had been a reticent and awkward teenager. Though he had the same tall, skinny body that made one question if he was starving himself, his actions now had a neat dignity. *Perhaps some of that awkwardness remains*, Nikoletta thought as she recalled him banging his head. It was oddly endearing, though.

She shook her head to get out of her stupor, and then turned to the documents Argrave had delivered. She'd still yet to verify if it was truly what she'd lost. She tore off the neatly wrapped strings and pulled off page after page, checking if everything was as she remembered it. After she had got to the end of it, her knees buckled and she collapsed to the table, chuckling.

"It's all there. It's really all there." She kept laughing like a maniac for a time as she felt the burden of the world lift from her shoulders.

She had been in a desperate panic the past few days trying to recreate this. Now, her cousin, whom she had only dislike of and firmly believed to be someone of ill character, had simply handed it to her.

"I don't get him," she said aloud.

Was he trying to win her favor? Certainly, as the daughter of Duke Enrico, Nikoletta was someone worthy of befriending for material gain. She always kept that in mind for all of her interactions, and it had saved her much heartache throughout the years.

I suppose it doesn't matter now that I have this. I just have to be cautious of him in the future. She looked at her papers with a smile. *Though... maybe I could get Mina to do some investigating...* Nikoletta stood again. She had a month of free time now that she

had her dissertation back. Perhaps she didn't need to take Argrave's word. Perhaps she could find out the truth of the matter on her own.

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Argrave wiped his slightly red forehead with his black handkerchief. Door frames were probably not especially dirty, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Especially so if I'm sickly... Argrave noted. A medieval world was not a clean place. Many cities lacked sewers, the people seldom washed, and the standards of living were generally lower. At the very least, healing mages abated some of that uncleanness. Nevertheless, Argrave was unsettled by the prospect of touching people, and pulled his gloves tighter over his hands.

Argrave returned to his dorm without issue. This time, he had the foresight to duck, and avoided hitting his head an embarrassing third time. Once inside, he stared at the room.

What now?

Out of habit, Argrave walked into the room and began cleaning things up. He had already cleaned, but the room was not spotless. He dusted with a piece of cloth and organized the books by size.

Perhaps I should just leave. Accept expulsion from the Order of the Gray Owl.

Completing the research would be a tedious thing, and even if Argrave put in a full effort, he was not confident in success. He had read every in-game book and written thorough articles on the magic lore, yet there was still a gulf between fiction and reality. Argrave conjured some sparks on his finger— E- rank elemental magic—and though *performing* magic came naturally, theory and research might not.

At the same time, being in the Order of the Gray Owl was restricting. Before one received status as a full-fledged Wizard, it was somewhat like a monastic order. One would discard their family name during their stay, and further could not hold lands or receive incomes. They were barred from coming and going freely. Most Mage Orders were like that to ensure some semblance of political neutrality.

Argrave noticed some books off a shelf and stacked them up in his arms to transfer them back onto the shelf. The simple act of moving books winded him, much to his embarrassment. He sat down to gather himself.

No. Leaving would be imprudent. Respect lost is difficult to regain—the former Argrave already saddled me with a terrible reputation, and if I make it any worse, it will be difficult to have mobility where I need it. I must stay within the Order. Besides, I might

take this month to sort out my strengths, decide my course of action, and identify the various ticking time-bombs this world has left near the royal bastard Argrave.

Argrave most preferred well-organized plans. That applied doubly so if the matter involved himself—or, rather, his new self. He would need to identify problems both present and future and decide a course of action to correct them. Boons could be handled in the same way—identify them and decide how to obtain them.

Argrave sat at his desk and began planning for his future. It was not so different from planning for college, he supposed. Only...

No, don't get distracted.

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After a long day of planning and drafting, Argrave tried to sleep. The height would have been an issue, but the former Argrave had laid two beds side-by-side to accommodate his larger frame, and he could lie soundly. Indeed, despite the medieval nature of his environment, things were quite comfortable for him. He could find no issue on that front for sleeping.

The issue was an overactive mind.

As Argrave stared at the ceiling, the questions he had been able to ignore most of the day welled up. What exactly was happening? Had he died—the former person who he was, at least? He remembered nothing of what he had been doing before this, and the days blended together.

He tried to suppress his meandering mind and will himself to sleep, staying totally still in the cool night air. He tried some mental exercises to have sleep wash over him, but it was fruitless. The questions kept coming unbidden. Perhaps his mother was crying over a casket at the moment. Maybe he had simply vanished—would anyone notice if he had? Hobbyist wiki editors weren't exactly socialites, and he was no exception. Perhaps none of this was real at all. Maybe...

Forget this.

Argrave sat up and threw the covers off. He quickly put on the neatly folded robe he'd set beside his bed and made for the door. He retrieved a small glass orb attached to a piece of metal from the sconce beside the door. He willed a bit of his magic inside it, and it lit up.

The great room outside his dorm in the Tower of the Gray Owl was well-lit, but there was neither smoke from torches nor warmth from fire. The mages used magic lamps

identical to the one he held to light the place. As skinny as he was, Argrave was quite cold, and he held his gloved hands beneath the long sleeves of his robe.

Despite how late the night was, people were still out. His gaze wandered to the window, where a giant red moon illuminated the stone in uneven red moonbeams matching the shape of the windows. There was a massive crater in the center of it, making it look like a giant red eye in the sky, watching all that occurred below.

Argrave stopped in his tracks and stared at the moon so unfamiliar to the one he knew. He felt a chill on his spine. Seeing this moon, his mind accepted a fact that he had been subconsciously denying. He was not who he used to be, nor was he where he used to be. This was a different realm—a different world. Maybe it would be stranger if he were not unnerved. Existential questions like these were natural. The fact that he had avoided them for so long was only because he had kept his mind busy.

As I need to do now. Keep busy. Keep moving.

After pulling the robe's hood over his head, Argrave headed for the circular room in the center of the tower. It was host to an elevator of sorts. That circular room was the only way to descend or ascend floors, and he intended to head to the library to gather the things necessary to begin the creation of his thesis.

As Argrave neared the elevator, he heard quiet footsteps rapidly approaching him from behind. He turned in time to pull his shoulders away from a hand, and they gripped air. A rather well-built man stood there, correcting his posture after his bid to grab Argrave failed.

The man had short red hair and bright eyes of the same color. His handsome tan face reflected the light from the magic lamp Argrave held. He was a fair bit shorter than Argrave, but still quite tall. He was certainly broader than Argrave, the gray robes of the Order clinging tightly to his robust frame. Argrave recognized him very well.

"Elias," Argrave greeted, taking a step back and illuminating the man with the glowing orb he held. He had rather hoped to avoid speaking with this man, but it was probably unavoidable. Elias of Parbon was the son of a margrave who had an irreconcilable grudge against Argrave. For good reason, granted.

In the original game, if the player chose Nikoletta, they would hunt down Argrave for vengeance during the story. If not, Elias gave the player the sidequest to investigate and consequently slay Argrave of Vasquer, who had turned to human experimentation.

"Elias," the man in question repeated Argrave's greeting. "Not your typical response to seeing me. What, did I shock you? Catch you doing something illicit?"

"If going to the library is a crime," Argrave nodded.

Elias tilted his head up, staring at Argrave in the eyes. "The library, is it? At such a late time."

Argrave sighed, feeling short on account of recent annoyances. "What, perhaps you wish to tuck me in and sing me a lullaby till I fall asleep? Your concern is touching, but stop wasting my time."

Elias did not break his gaze. "I told you when you came here that I would be keeping an eye on you. Have you—"

"Fine. Need I remind you that keeping an eye on me is wholly different from bothering me? You can watch as much as you like, though I would prefer it be at a distance... and silently." Argrave turned around and walked into the central room.

He questioned briefly if he was being rash, but Argrave did not expect to have much conflict or interaction with Elias in the future. Their differences were difficult to set aside. He could only avoid him.

Innumerable stone platforms floated over a very long drop. They had symbols inscribed on the top, and a strange purple light bordered them. If one were to try and jump, they'd find intense winds barring them from moving beyond the door. Instead, one would turn into the right and input where they intended to go into the keypad-like interface.

Argrave pressed the button for the second floor, and with nary a sound, all of the stone platforms in the room began to shift. If this had been the game, he would have been holding W, pushing his character forward against the barrier while waiting impatiently for the platform to appear. Now, it was all rather wondrous. Elias stood a fair bit behind Argrave, watching with brows furrowed.

The stone platform appeared, and the barrier barring him from walking forward fell away with an audible *pop*. Argrave stepped on the platform. His shoes suddenly seized, and he found his soles stuck to the platform. Then, the platform began moving downwards, twisting around the innumerable other platforms—some empty, some containing other students or wizards.

It was a trivial thing, perhaps, but it was nonetheless thrilling to Argrave. With his previous issues forgotten, a smile rose to his face unbidden. Above, Elias had also boarded a platform. Argrave's smile faded a little, and he shook his head on the route to the library.