

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 4: Hot Nights, Cool Looks

Argrave scanned the bookshelf, holding the ensconced magic lamp up to the titles as he walked by in search of the tomes that he needed. In his periphery, he could spot a dash of red hair—the self-righteous Elias of Parbon. He was keeping an eye on Argrave just as he promised. He kept his distance, so Argrave could not complain overmuch.

The library of the Order of the Gray Owl was very grand. Argrave estimated the bookshelves to be around twenty feet tall. Some wizards and students were reading late into the night at the tables set out, and many more were patrolling the halls, guarding the precious books and helping those who needed help.

Argrave had been here many times before in ‘Heroes of Berendar’ and knew this library better than them, so he did not need their help. Books moved about daily in a library, though, so he would need to search for what he needed. He started to accrue a small pile of books in his arms. They felt heavy, far heavier than they had any right being.

So *weak*, Argrave thought as he stared at his arms.

“Elias,” Argrave called out. The man in question walked towards him slowly.

“I thought you said not to bother you,” Elias spoke, tone cold.

“You are no bother. Have higher self-esteem.” Argrave stared at Elias.

He sighed in defeat. “What do you want?”

“Look at my arms—like bamboo, though not half as strong. In contrast, there is you—justice lover, protector of the weak, with arms as thick as my legs. Look how my arms tremble carrying these books. Perhaps you could help the weak right now?”

Elias stared at him. His red eyes were quite cold, and his expression remained stern.

“What are you doing?”

“Pardon?” asked Argrave.

“I said, what are you doing?” Elias repeated. He pointed at Argrave. “You crippled my sister. You wish to talk about weak?” He pushed his finger into Argrave’s arm, pushing

him slightly. “She will never walk again. She doesn’t smile like she used to. And for what? Because she denied a betrothal to you, a royal bastard? Or perhaps just because you’re sick?”

“Don’t quip and jape like we’re good friends. I detest you. I suffer your presence so that you won’t be able to torment others. I know your nature, and I’m trying my best to make sure no one else will.”

Argrave stared Elias in the eye for a time, the tension in the library palpable. Eventually, Argrave nodded. “You are right. I apologize for being facetious. I am... unskilled at detecting how other people feel. And regarding your sister...”

Elias’ gaze hardened when Argrave mentioned her.

“I apologize. Sincerely.” Argrave bowed, back straining beneath the weight of the books he’d stacked in his arms.

Elias scoffed. “You always maintained it was an accident. A horse gone out of control,” he said contemptuously. “Why would you apologize if that were the case?”

“The fact that it was my fault does not change. I cannot change that, nor can I fix past mistakes. All I have is my words. So, I reiterate—I apologize.”

Elias’ breathing quickened for a few moments as though he were angered, and he finally tore his gaze away from Argrave’s own. Argrave turned back to the bookshelf, prepared to resume his task. Unexpectedly, the books he was holding were yanked from his grasp. Elias held them, grinding his teeth as he refused to meet Argrave’s eye.

*He really is too kind for his own good.*

Argrave was not presumptuous enough to stack yet more books on top of what Elias had already taken, but he collected the remainder of the books that he needed in short order. They were all books about fundamental magic—beginner level work to introduce a prospective reader into the world of magic. Elias seemed to be confused, but if he had questions, they went unasked.

After, the two of them went to the library desk. The wizard there, a portly old man, glanced at the books.

“Did you fin—”

“Yes,” Argrave interrupted. “I found everything. This is all.”

The librarian straightened his back, and then quickly wrote down the books Argrave was borrowing. Argrave sympathized briefly as he waited—it could not be easy to keep inventory with pen and paper as they had to in medieval times.

With everything in order, the two took the path back to Argrave's room. Elias seemed to be internally questioning why he was even bothering doing this, but Argrave did not prod at him further with bad jokes. He did not wish to be left carrying these books alone, after all.

Argrave pushed open the door to his room, adjusting the books precariously as he did so. He remembered to duck his head beneath the door frame this time around. He put the magic lamp back in its spot, and then turned to look at the room.

*Something is askew*, Argrave noted immediately. Things were not as neat as he left them. Some books had been moved, set aside, and some of his papers had been splayed out haphazardly over the edge, threatening to fall to the floor. Argrave always kept things neat. He would not have left his room like this.

*There was an intruder. Or perhaps... there still is an intruder.*

Elias walked past Argrave and set the books down, the wood creaking slightly beneath their weight. He placed a hand atop them and sighed, shaking his head as though disbelieving of what he had just done. When Elias saw that Argrave was standing there unmoving, he watched perplexedly.

"What is it?" Elias asked.

"Nothing," Argrave said, the words drawing him out of his stupor. He walked to the table and set his stack of books down beside Elias'.

"These books... they're beginner books. Why would an Acolyte near the end of his term need a beginner's books, I wonder?" Elias questioned.

"Stupidity, typically. A slow learner." Argrave said drolly. "For my case, it is related to research."

"Hmph." Elias shook his head, evidently giving no credence to Argrave's words. "Fine. I should note, though, that teaching magic to one outside of the Order of the Gray Owl without express permission is a punishable offense."

Argrave walked back to the open door, partially blocking it with his body. "Yes, yes, I understand. I have nothing to hide."

Elias took his hand off the books. He walked to the door, and Argrave let him pass before quickly blocking off the door again with his large frame. Elias looked at him strangely.

“What are you...?” he asked, trailing off.

“What?” Argrave asked, feigning innocence.

Elias looked beyond Argrave into the room, but eventually shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Elias,” Argrave called out. “Thank you.”

Elias stared Argrave in the eyes, staying silent. His crimson eyes were cold. Eventually, he turned away.

“Your thesis is about mending irreparably broken bones, no? For your sister,” Argrave called out, recalling a detail.

Elias had helped him despite loathing his guts—for that, Argrave could offer a little bit of knowledge he had accrued while playing ‘Heroes of Berendar.’

The red-haired man stopped, turning on his heel and walking back towards Argrave. “Who told you that?”

“It matters not,” dismissed Argrave. “But... there is a certain salamander in the hills of Vysenn. It is well-known for its ridiculously efficient regeneration. The natives of that land eat the salamanders en masse, and some suggest that is the reason they are so healthy—in particular, why their warriors seem to be able to regrow even their limbs. You may wish to investigate that.”

“Why would you know such a thing?” Elias’ stern gaze was laced with suspicion.

“I was born sickly,” Argrave said quickly, excuse prepared in advance. “I always investigate things related to health and healthiness. Why do you think I studied blood magic, the core of which is the study of vitality?”

After delivering another long wordless stare, Elias turned once more and walked away.

*Something tells me he won't make a great effort to remember what I said.* Argrave shook his head. *His loss.* Argrave walked back inside and shut the door firmly, pushing the bolt in place and turning back to his room.

*Now, I suppose I should deal with the pesky little cat in my room.*

Argrave pulled his gloves tighter as he walked to the desk. He quietly straightened the papers on his desk, and then began putting the newly acquired books on a shelf one by one. He set aside a rather thin and light book and took a seat.

Argrave closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. His heartbeat slowly quieted as he relaxed. Then, he heard it. A second set of breath—muffled as though behind cloth, but audible nonetheless. He strained his hearing to the limit until he pinpointed it. He grabbed the thin book he'd set aside.

With as much speed as he could muster with his skinny arms, he threw the book. It spun through the air. A brief shriek—a yelp, almost—echoed throughout Argrave's room, and then the book impacted with what seemed to be nothing. The air shimmered and distorted as the spell of invisibility faded.

A woman in grey robes fell backwards, struck by the spine of the book squarely in the face. She fell on top of Argrave's bed, rolling off it and collapsing ungracefully like a folded gray towel. Argrave stood and walked over leisurely. He was in no danger—he recognized this person well.

Mina of Veden flipped herself over, sitting up against the wall. She was a very small woman—five feet tall at most. She had medium-length blonde hair, bright enough to be called golden. Her eyes were green and sharp, almost cat-like. She had a thick red line on her cheek where the book had struck.

"Mina," Argrave said. "Snooping as usual, I see." He held out a hand.

Mina watched, caution written plainly on her face, and tried to reach for Argrave's hand. He had not intended to help her up, though; he bent down and retrieved the book, leaving her grasping at air. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the book down.

She stared at him incredulously, and helped herself up, huffing loudly.

"Did you assume I would help a trespasser to their feet?" Argrave tossed the book on the bed lightly and sat down. "Honestly, what were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry!" she said loudly, lowering her head. "I didn't think—"

"Did not think I would be back so quickly, or did not think I would notice you?" Argrave leaned back.

"No, no," Mina assured quickly, waving her hands. "I came to return this," she said, producing a small book and holding it in front. She continued speaking quickly, half-babbling. "When I saw that you were gone, I thought that I would just slip in and leave it

on the desk, but then I heard the door opening, and I panicked, and then I just tried to hide and slip out, but then you..." she trailed off, out of breath.

Argrave had to admit, Mina's acting was quite convincing—fortunately, he knew her character well enough to see through it. She was Nikoletta's best friend. She was also a very skilled illusion mage, a fantastic actor, and notoriously distrustful. Many players compared her to a cat—prickly, slow to trust, yet capable of deep affection nonetheless. She was a fan favorite for these reasons.

"Right, right. You rummaged through the papers on my desk to find the perfect place to return the book, I presume. And those books you took off their shelf—probably to get a sense of how I organize my books, yes? How diligent." Argrave shook his head. "The acting is good, but the excuse is as flimsy."

"No no no," she said frantically. "I know how it looks, but you have to—"

"Frankly, you should have snuck out as soon as you saw the door open. You had time. Even after, when I was blocking the door, you could have pushed past. Indecision is your issue," Argrave said, pointing. "Now, scurry on back to Nikoletta. I am tired of talking to people."

Mina sat there, wide-eyed.

"What? Did this little book here addle your senses?" Argrave weighed the book he'd thrown in his hands. "Just go." He pointed towards the door. "Nikoletta probably sent you here to spy on me, but truthfully I cannot be bothered. Just go," Argrave repeated insistently.

She opened her mouth to speak again, but no words came out. Argrave just stared blankly, finger still pointing at the door. Eventually, their stalemate ended, and Mina stood and walked to the door. She pulled back the bolt and exited quietly.

Argrave fell back onto the bed and sighed. This day had been long, but his work was truly just beginning.