

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 5: Bloody Hard Work

Argrave approached most things very methodically. His present situation, unbelievable as it was, was no different. In the month he had until the thesis submission deadline, he worked long past nightfall every single day. His diligence could be attributed both to his desire to distract himself from unpleasant existential questions and his own legitimate fascination with magic.

During this month, Argrave left his room only to eat or to retrieve what few books he needed from the library. Elias still sometimes shadowed him, but Mina avoided Argrave like a leper. It left him ample peace and quiet to thoroughly dissect things.

After considerable deliberation, Argrave set aside examining two skills: Inscription and Imbuing. They related to the creation of magic items: enchantments, in other terms. Argrave had some plans for those two skills at a later date, but it required a lot of capital that he lacked presently.

First, Argrave wrote down every elemental magic spell at or below D rank that he could remember from the original game, 'Heroes of Berendar.' Once he had them written, he tested his ability to perform them, placing a checkmark next to the ones that he could. If he knew a spell, he performed it as naturally as moving a limb. If he did not, it was like grasping at air.

Some spells seemed engraved into Argrave's body like muscle memory. He paid deep attention to what was occurring when he cast the spells. He felt a strange energy permeating his body—indescribable and mystical, yet simultaneously overwhelming and nauseating. Perhaps the nausea was a mental issue from coming into contact with the unknown, though.

Argrave identified this strange energy; it was magic, naturally.

Magic felt much like a gas roiling beneath Argrave's skin as constant as his heartbeat. Indeed, a heartbeat was an apt comparison. If he held his hand to his chest, he could feel his heartbeat; if he touched the mystical forces of magic, he could feel its presence just as consistent as his own heart. Both were always present, and one needed only a cursory search to find either.

Once Argrave had identified what spells he knew, he looked them up in the books he had borrowed from the library. There, he studied how they worked, and further how

magic worked. The process was less challenging than he thought it would be. It felt intuitive—perhaps it was because the former Argrave already knew these things.

Argrave sat at his chair, hands outstretched. He willed forth a spell-matrix—a horizontal line, nothing more. A small, constant gush of flame rushed forth. He pulled his magic away from the spell, and then morphed the matrix into a zig-zag horizontal line. A small, sparking ball appeared in his hands.

“F-rank magic. One-dimensional,” he noted, then turned back to his paper to summarize the feeling.

This one-dimensional magic could only achieve very simple things; lighting a flame, creating a spark, or blowing air no stronger than one could blow from their mouths. They were simple things, yet these lines formed the foundations of the future branches of magic.

Argrave held out his hand once more, then realized it was dangerously close to a bookshelf. He shifted the chair and pointed in a more open direction. He created another spell matrix in his hands—one with two dimensions, this time. A triangle. Fire emerged again, this time propelled forth by force rather than stagnant and in his hands.

“E-rank. Two-dimensional.” Argrave wrote down the feeling once more.

He clenched his hand, and then turned back to an open book by his side, ensuring that he’d gotten the spell matrix right. Content it was proper, he turned back.

“Now for my favorite spell... [Writhing Lightning].”

It took him a second to form the spell matrix, but once he did, it felt like a lock clicking. He willed forth the mystical force known as magic, and a jagged bolt of lightning rushed across the room. It struck his bed. Argrave watched the lightning dance across the frame and covers, and then fade away. A smile came to Argrave's face. Just as in the game, this spell transferred lightning through surfaces.

“D-rank. Three-dimensional magic.” Argrave pulled his hand back, staring at the unblemished pale skin.

It was here where complex spells that achieved multi-faceted effects manifested. Fire could be given force, allowing it to provide a concussive impact alongside the flames. Ice could spread across the floor or walls, trapping people where they stood.

And C-rank... Argrave turned his head and opened a thick book. Unlike the other books that merely had diagrams, a spell matrix formed from the book, hovering in the air. Though he stared at it, and could recognize that it existed, it was difficult to wrap his head around. It felt blurry.

C-rank was where magic departed from the mundane concepts of Earth and deviated into the mystical. A fourth dimension to a matrix. Fourth-dimensional things were only theoretical on Earth. Learning one of these spells seemed a stark barrier of steel, standing tall and firm to block his advancement.

Rather than foolhardily trying to break past that barrier, Argrave stopped in his tracks and directed his attention elsewhere: the thesis. It was a difficult thing to approach. Argrave had no illusions about himself—he could not produce original research in the brief time remaining in the month. The key point, though, was original.

An Acolyte was expected to create a thesis to become a full-fledged Wizard, yes, but their findings did not need to be entirely original. They could analyze a system or facet of magic, and that would suffice. Argrave could probably whip together something both from his days writing wiki articles and the recent studies he'd made into the magic system in his new reality.

Argrave was bent over his desk in his chair, singing a little tune as he pondered what, exactly, to write about.

"Tropical hot dog night... like two flamingos in a fruit fight..." he half-sang, half-muttered.

Suddenly, a splotch of red covered the empty parchment he sat in front of. He stared at the red drop, utterly perplexed for a moment. Then, another drop fell onto the paper. He saw where it came from this time. He raised his fingers to his upper lip. He pulled them away bloody.

"What is...?" Argrave felt nauseous for a moment at seeing blood, but he kept calm. He stood from the desk to stop bleeding all over good parchment, but the sudden movement made him feel lightheaded. He stumbled and tried to catch himself on the chair but failed. He collapsed to the floor, winded.

Argrave flipped over on his back. He reached into his robe and retrieved his black handkerchief, holding it to his nose as he tilted his head back. After a bit of catching his breath, Argrave started laughing.

"Verdammt," he said aloud, muffled and nasally beneath the handkerchief. "Guess being [Sickly] isn't just a title."

He couldn't rightly discern what had caused the nosebleed—stress, maybe, or something simpler—but a small break couldn't hurt. Maybe even a medium-sized one. Besides, he needed time to think about what he was going to write about.

After a minute or two, Argrave's arm grew sore from holding the handkerchief in front of his nose. He drew back the cloth and felt his nose. No more blood was flowing. He helped himself to his feet, ensuring that he did so slowly this time. He wiped off his face thoroughly, and then stared at the black handkerchief.

A lot of blood. Argrave held the cloth by the corners, as though it were something disgusting. He was about to throw it in the wooden hamper for laundry, but he paused. The blood reminded him of something.

Argrave—or at least, the former owner of his body—devoted his time and effort into blood magic. Most players of 'Heroes of Berendar' agreed that blood magic was very weak in the early stages of the game. Sacrificing vitality for spells was not an especially appealing prospect. Blood Magic spells were powerful and non-elemental, meaning few opponents could resist them. The spells themselves were somewhat slow, though, and few had usable effects.

Once a player achieved an A-rank in Blood Magic, they could do an optional quest to research [Blood Infusion]. This allowed players to infuse vitality into *all* spells to increase their efficacy. Low-magic spells could be repurposed into cheap, fast, and highly damaging attacks at the cost of one's vitality. [Blood Infusion] alone made learning blood magic worth it for the vast majority of mage players.

Argrave was not naïve enough to assume he could achieve [Blood Infusion] now. But his task was to make a thesis, and it did not necessarily need to be a proven idea. If he were to write a theory about [Blood Infusion], an as-of-yet undiscovered facet of blood magic... that would be more than suitable. It might help get a foot in the door for restoring the terrible reputation Argrave has.

With a smile on his face and his idea of a break entirely forgotten, Argrave tossed the bloody handkerchief into the laundry hamper and strode back to his desk.

"...can't write too much, though... someone here at the tower might figure it out before I reach A rank blood magic, discover [Blood Infusion] first... would be disastrous..." Argrave muttered.

Like this, Argrave's focus redoubled. He spent the remainder of his first month on a new plane of reality locked inside his room, avoiding both sleep and uncomfortable questions. Perhaps not much had changed from his days in college after all.

