

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 6: Hitchhiking is Dangerous

The halls of the Tower of the Gray Owl were filled to the brim with people. They were talking amongst themselves feverishly, most with some degree of relief and nervousness on their faces. Nikoletta of Monticci stood with arms crossed on an empty wall of the tower. Mina of Veden sat at her feet, leaning against the wall in exhaustion.

Nikoletta had spent the month revising the research Argrave had returned to her. Though she wished to find out if Argrave had genuinely been telling the truth—that the crown prince, Induen, had ordered her research stolen—she had no opportunity. Talking with Argrave might illuminate the situation, but she had assumed that might have been exactly what he wanted. She disliked playing into other's hands.

But the month had passed with utter silence from Argrave's end. Her friend, Mina, had been caught snooping around his room, but nothing came of it. It was all baffling. At this point, she was just curious what Argrave would submit to the Order to advance from an Acolyte to a full-fledged Wizard.

The door that Nikoletta had been keeping her eyes on swung open slowly. Argrave, wearing the same gray robes as every other Acolyte, ducked beneath the doorframe into the hall. He had been quite pale the last time she saw him, but he was deathly pale now—he looked more like a walking corpse than a man walking. His eyes were sunken with deep black marks beneath them. Despite that, he still bore himself with the same neat dignity he had a month ago.

"Gods. He looks terrible," Nikoletta said out of surprise.

Mina was roused from her exhausted state and followed Nikoletta's gaze. "Probably waited till tonight to finish his stuff like I did." Mina stood, grabbing Nikoletta's robes to help herself to her feet. "Why don't I get your sympathy?"

"You also look terrible," Nikoletta said dismissively. "Happy?"

Mina scoffed. "I wonder if he'll pass."

"Worry about yourself." Nikoletta looked down at the shorter girl.

Mina fixed her messy blonde hair. "I'm always lucky. I'm not worried."

Nikoletta frowned. "It's a written submission. You cannot get lucky."

At the far end of the hall, Argrave walked to the desk where an old man was receiving parcels. Argrave handed the man a fairly thick stack of papers, neatly wrapped in a black ribbon. After a brief exchange of words, Argrave turned away, pulling at the collar of his gray robes. His eyes scanned the room, stopping on Nikoletta. She tensed up at his gaze. His hollow gray eyes only furthered his corpse-like appearance.

*Now comes the time for the favor*, she said in her head. Argrave walked towards her with long, even strides. Mina grew alert, stepping in front of Nikoletta.

Argrave looked down on the two of them. Even skinny as he was, his height was still somewhat intimidating. Nikoletta kept her dark pink eyes fixed to his gray gaze.

"Your father is sending a carriage to take you back to Mateth," Argrave said, sparing even greetings.

It was spoken as a fact, but Nikoletta decided it was a question. "Yes, that's right. Why?"

"I need to go there. May I ride with you?"

"Not going to stay to find out the results early?" Mina asked, stepping between Nikoletta and Argrave.

"It will take a week regardless." Argrave shook his head. "There is a branch of the Order of the Gray Owl in Mateth. And above all, I am not worried overmuch about the result."

Nikoletta scrunched up her eyebrows. "Why ride with me?"

"A ducal heir's carriage will be comfortable, well-protected, and fast."

"And Nicky will be forced to listen to you," Mina said accusatorily.

Argrave grabbed at his throat with his gloved hands. "Is my voice so unpleasant to hear, Mina? How harsh." He lowered his hand and continued seriously. "At worst, you will hear my snoring. I am tired."

"The trip itself is a week," Nikoletta said. "I suspect you won't be sleeping all that time."

"You make me sound like a salesman with a shady pitch." Argrave shook his head. "I just want a free ride to the city, not through life."

There was quiet as Nikoletta thought the request over. Certainly, there was ample room on the carriage.

"I have no ulterior motive. I just wish for transportation." Argrave held his right hand in the air, swearing on it.

"Don't you have friends? Money?" Mina asked.

"Mina, stop," Nikoletta said, feeling her friend was being over-protective. She kneaded her forehead. "If I refuse, what will you do?"

"Weep, obviously," Argrave said drolly. "I'm not sure. Probably sleep a night here, eat, and then walk to Mateth. Woe is me, et cetera. It is a long journey, to be true, but I know a good route." Argrave rubbed his eyes and yawned, fatigued.

"And why do you need to go to Mateth? As a royal bastard, I would assume you have housing in the capital, not Mateth."

"Hah." Argrave chuckled. "The palace is the last place I wish to be right now. I have a great deal of things to do in and around Mateth. To sum them all up, I would say that I am preparing for the storm."

"That sounds important and yet appropriately vague," Nikoletta said with a sigh. "Fine; you may come. But I would be remiss to mention this; if I find you are lying about lacking ulterior motives, you will be cast out."

"Cast out," Argrave repeated. "How magnanimous. Thank you, Nikoletta." Argrave bowed slightly. "I will pack my things. Can't forget my hand mirror. It will be good to finally get out of this robe."

Argrave turned and walked away, heading back towards his room.

Mina stepped forward and looked at Nikoletta, shaking her head in dismay. "I'm suddenly having second thoughts about riding with you, Nicky. Why did you agree to this?"

"You of all people should know that rumors are often exaggerated. I don't know much about him, but he's at least witty."

"He hit me with a book!" Mina pointed to her face, but there was no obvious mark—it had been nearly a month, after all. Nikoletta doubted there ever had been a mark to begin with, though.

Nikoletta sighed. "If you're that insistent, I can tell him he can't come."

Mina faltered now that the burden of decision had been passed to her. She crossed her arms and stepped away for a moment, thinking. "If you're really fine with it, I suppose I'm just worrying for nothing."

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Argrave sat atop a velveteen cushion, one leg crossed over the other. They had been riding for near four days now in relative quiet. Argrave was out of the gray robes of the academy and back into 'normal' clothes. Argrave only owned black and gold clothing. The two colors were the traditional colors of House Vasquer, and the former Argrave thought himself a true member of House Vasquer despite his bastardry.

After considerable deliberation, Argrave had decided that Mateth must be his first stop. A naval invasion would be occurring there. It was hopeless to prevent, but Argrave was certain that he could stop it before it spiraled out of control. He could perhaps stop it even faster than the player could in-game. Moreover, it was one of the few places in the continent of Berendar that would not have too many big-shot characters. Altogether, a lovely starting ground.

Argrave balanced a book atop his knee, one thumb stuck in the page to keep it open as he gazed out through the carriage window. A fantasy game world was designed to be pretty, but to see it in person—it was enthralling.

He saw a lithe, ferret-like creature in the woods beyond the plains. It had big, yellow eyes. Indeed, much of the time, Argrave could only see its eyes, as its fur was all the same green as the leaves. The creature was attributed to the wind. It was called a Widlum—a mostly passive creature, but quite fierce.

"See? He's smiling like he's got some secret."

Argrave turned his head from the window and looked at the two adjacent to him. Mina was pointing her finger at him. It was a roomy carriage, but they were still quite close together. A duty of knights patrolled the windows outside, slightly behind and in front of the carriage in order to not impair the ducal heir's (and company) view.

Argrave stiffened his face, the smile he did not know he had fading quickly. He pursed his lips, somewhat annoyed to be drawn from his daydreams. "I have come to realize you are rather like a cat, Mina."

Mina straightened her back and opened her mouth to speak, but Argrave beat her to it.

"See?" Argrave pointed. "Your hairs start bristling like you've just been caught sneaking around in the dark of night, like a cat. You are slow to trust, and even to those you do like, you are not especially affectionate."

“And how would you know how I behave?” Mina asked incredulously. She tapped Nikoletta’s shoulder. “Nicky, tell him he’s wrong.”

“Well... you’re not lazy at least,” Nikoletta said half-heartedly. At that, Mina stared at her as though grievously wounded.

Argrave looked back out the window in an attempt to spot the small wind ferret once more, but the Widlum was gone. Argrave pursed his lips briefly, then turned his head back to the book. It was a book on the fourth dimension of magic—C-rank. It was the tallest barrier before Argrave’s eyes.

Mateth would suffer a full-fledged invasion soon. Argrave intended to curb its effects so that Berendar was not further weakened. For that, he needed personal strength and influence in society. Personal strength was one matter. Influence in society—well, money talks. He had a plan in mind.

Though he had some things to do in Mateth and the places near it, Argrave had to devote much of his time to study. The game was vastly different from reality. In reality, one could not kill people and monsters and suddenly become an Archmage by dumping their experience into magic skills. These things took time.

*Though... I suppose I haven’t exactly tried going on a killing spree. Maybe it is the same.*

A peculiar noise filtered through the windows of the carriage. It was like the distant rumble of thunder. As time stretched, though, the noise did not fade—instead, it seemed to be growing louder. Argrave furrowed his brows and leaned to the opposite window, pulling back the curtain. He saw a great cloud of dust in the distant hills. Argrave could vaguely see horsemen. They carried a banner of white, bearing a golden lion.

“House Parbon,” Argrave muttered.

“What?” Mina moved to the window as well, looking out. “Gods. That’s a whole host of knights.”

“You’re kidding.” Nikoletta moved to look out the window as well.

Argrave’s heart started to stir nervously. The man leading that host could only be Margrave Reinhardt, current head of House Parbon. As a Margrave, his territory lay furthest south at the border to a great desert. He was Elias’ father. Following the familial chain, that meant Argrave had crippled his daughter. Argrave closed his book and rubbed his temples with his fingers. It seems another timebomb found its way into his lap.

*Damn it. I should have remembered that Margrave Reinhardt marches to the capital on this day. All the introduction sequences for the nine characters end after this has occurred, so the player never sees it. But I changed Nikoletta's fate of expulsion and left early.*

"House Parbon are friends to House Monticci, and my father would have sent an urgent message had that changed," Nikoletta said unconcernedly. "But I wonder what this is about."

"Bruno of Parbon was imprisoned by King Felipe III," Argrave explained quietly. "The Margrave intends to secure his brother's release, undoubtedly."

Though Argrave felt his heart beating quicker, he kept his face still and his tone passive. *They don't have any reason to check this carriage. It's just a coincidence. Nothing bad is going to happen.* Argrave scooted back to the other side of the carriage and opened his book again. He found that reading was impossible when he was this stressed.

The thundering roar of the Margrave's host drew ever closer, the storm of steel and horseflesh nearing its crescendo. Nikoletta's carriage had come to a stop, yet it continued to rattle as the earth shook.

"Ridiculous..." Mina said, grabbing onto the side of the carriage for stability. "That must be every knight in House Parbon's territory."

"Lady Monticci," one of the Duke's knights said, pulling his horse beside the carriage. "The host will likely pass in front of us. They do not appear to be a threat."

Argrave almost sighed in relief, but he kept his eye on his book as though he was unconcerned.

"Thank you, Sir Rand," Nikoletta replied smoothly.

"One of the outriders is approaching," Rand followed up, craning his neck. "From the armor and horse alone, it appears to be the Margrave..."

Nikoletta scratched her chin, thinking. "Send a rider out to meet him. If he wishes to speak, have him come over."

Argrave cursed in his head. He closed his book harshly, and it let out an audible pop. He set it in the empty space beside him and crossed his legs. *I wonder if they would think it strange if I crawled on the floor and tried to hide.*

Though Argrave had already spoken to Elias, the heir of Margrave Reinhardt, he only did so because he knew Elias would be reasonable. Margrave Reinhardt, conversely,

was hotheaded and valued his family very much. He led a host of knights to protest his brother's imprisonment, after all.

Argrave had little faith that Reinhardt would be merciful in the face of the one who crippled his daughter, especially when he was already experiencing friction with the royal family of Vasquer.

It was not long before a second set of hooves came trotting beside the carriage, and a great white beast of a stallion with a bright red mane entered Argrave's view. Argrave leaned back as far as he could in the carriage, but he still saw a flash of long red hair.

*Perhaps I should have walked,* Argrave thought grimly.