

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 7: Argrave, Meet Margrave

A big, gauntleted hand reached forward and rested itself on the edge of the carriage's windows. Then, Margrave Reinhardt dismounted from his horse and stood at the side of the carriage, peering in. The Margrave had red hair like his son, though it was closer to crimson and fell past his shoulders. He had a fierce face, rough but scarless, and his frightening visage was further augmented by his eyes. They were like two rings of rubies. He wore resplendent white plate mail, a red cloak hanging from his shoulders.

Margrave Reinhardt scanned the carriage with his haunting red eyes, his gaze finally locking with Argrave's. Reinhardt's face quickly changed from neutral to scornful as he recognized him. The two held their gazes, neither willing to turn away from the other.

"Margrave Reinhardt," Nikoletta greeted quickly, unaware of the covert conflict between the two. "What brings you here with such a large host?"

The Margrave did not look at Nikoletta. "My men and I were headed to Dirracha. I thought to pay my respects to my friend's daughter, but seeing your company, I am questioning that decision."

"How rude. Mina is not that bad," Argrave said, holding the Margrave's gaze. He saw the golden-haired girl tense up at the mention of her name.

"I was not speaking to you, Vasquer," Reinhardt said coldly.

"Correct; I was speaking to you. Quite the head on this one." Argrave smiled, mustering levity to dispel his anxiety. "But you are incorrect in calling me a Vasquer. I am but a humble bastard."

Reinhardt tilted his head back, scowl deepening. He opened his mouth to speak, but Nikoletta spoke first.

"Why do you need such a large force to venture to the capital?" she said quickly, evidently hoping to divert the Margrave's attention.

Reinhardt finally looked away from Argrave, turning his head to Nikoletta. "My brother was unjustly imprisoned, his evidence of treason clearly fabricated. The king sees only steel, and so I will show him some lest he forget his place as a just ruler. And during my journey..." Reinhardt's gaze switched back to Argrave. "...who do I find but his son."

The Margrave stepped back to his horse, pulling a horn off the saddle. He blew the war horn once, and a deafening, deep noise filled the air. The thundering hooves slowed, and the carriage stopped shaking. Silence soon consumed the carriage, the faint wind and distant huffing of horses only barely breaking the now-silent road. Argrave swallowed. He had detested that noise of horses, but now it seemed quite pleasant in comparison to this eerie quiet.

“What is the meaning of this, Margrave Reinhardt?” Nikoletta maintained her posture, but Argrave could hear the nervousness in her voice.

“The Vas—the royal bastard,” Reinhardt corrected himself, stepping back beside the carriage, “should come with me.”

“I am a bit busy,” Argrave said dismissively. Mina looked at him like he was mad, but Nikoletta tried to cover his words up.

“I am not sure why you are acting this way, Margrave Reinhardt, but presently, Argrave is a guest enjoying my hospitality. In turn, he enjoys my protection.”

Argrave was taken aback by Nikoletta’s declaration. He had fully expected to be surrendered quickly. He was a bastard—protecting him meant nothing compared to earning the favor of a Margrave.

Then again, I suppose most of the main characters are good people. I shouldn’t be surprised. Still, I’m grateful, Argrave thought, sitting up a little straighter.

“You would protect this foul cur?” Reinhardt nearly spat.

“I would,” Nikoletta answered without hesitation. “The honor of House Monticci is firm. We protect those who we say we will—no more, no less. The nature of a person is irrelevant towards that pledge.”

Reinhardt stared icily at the obsidian-haired woman. “Are you sure of this decision? That House Monticci will protect the royal bastard, Argrave?”

“He is my guest, and a host should ensure their guest’s safety. Honor demands I fulfill that pledge.” Nikoletta paused, then spoke more urgently. “House Monticci and House Parbon have been close for centuries. Will you end that for an unjust abduction?”

“My brother was ‘unjustly abducted,’ and cast into the dungeons at Dirracha. If I can possess a card that may ensure his safe release, the relation between our houses means nothing.”

Mina leaned forward in the carriage, pressing her head closer to the window. “Not just House Monticci. I’m here, too—ninth child of Count Elgar, head of House Veden.”

“My answer remains the same no matter how many I offend. I cannot call myself a Margrave if I forsake an opportunity to save my brother’s life.” Reinhardt’s cold gaze bore holes in Argrave’s head. “Better yet that it be the ignoble bastard that crippled my daughter.”

“Ignoble? Oh, yes. Start a war that kills thousands for your brother. How noble.” Argrave chuckled.

“Time wastes while my brother rots,” said the Margrave, placing his hand on his sword’s pommel. “Decide how this will end.”

Nikoletta started trembling. Argrave’s own heart was pounding furiously. The time stretched out for a few seconds.

How can I make the best out of this awful hand I’ve been dealt...? Argrave thought, brain working on overdrive. He seemed to have only one choice. Perhaps it would be best if *he* made it, instead of having it made for him.

“Fine then, let us be off. Let it not be said that I am a ‘foul cur’ who stands in the way of justice.” Argrave pushed off the seat and reached for the carriage door. He grabbed the handle, but Nikoletta reached for his arm.

“Wai—what are you...?” she said, trying to grab his wrist. Argrave avoided her touch.

“I will go willingly,” Argrave shrugged. “If you defend me, at best, some of your knights will be foolishly injured in a futile defense. At worst, some will die, and this incident will cause intense friction—perhaps even war—between your two houses. That sounds... unideal. And so, I will just go.”

“But...” Mina said hesitantly.

“No no,” Argrave said, shaking his finger. “It is my choice. Place no burden on yourselves.” He grabbed the bronze hand mirror and slipped it into his breast pocket. With that, he opened the carriage door and stepped onto the roadside. His legs were quite stiff from sitting for so long, and he stretched briefly.

“Still, Nikoletta... that you would protect me despite us being essentially strangers... I will not forget it. You are a braver person than I.”

“How can you...?” Nikoletta said, trailing off. “I’m sorry, Argrave.”

“Did I not say that the burden is not on you?” Argrave shook his head.

Reinhardt kept staring at Argrave. His eyes were still cold, but there was something else... disbelief, perhaps, or more optimistically some thin veneer of respect. Then, the Margrave wordlessly walked to his horse, reaching into a saddlebag to retrieve a rope.

“Oh Christ. Am I to be hanged, drawn, and quartered?” Argrave was able to joke easier, for he found that his anxiety was fading somewhat. The choice had been made—there would be no conflict. That alone calmed his beating heart.

The Margrave held the rope out. “This is to be wrapped around your torso. I will be holding the other end. You will ride alongside me on horseback.”

“What?” Argrave frowned. “I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

“There are many hours left before nightfall,” Margrave Reinhardt said coldly. “You will learn quickly, or I will drag you.” Reinhardt walked closer with the rope, already beginning to wrap it around Argrave.

Argrave flinched away, but the Margrave soon wound a length of rope beneath Argrave’s arms. “Horses are disgusting creatures. Can’t I—ow,” Argrave trailed off as the Margrave tightened the rope fiercely. “Alright, take it easy.”

The Margrave pulled the rope tight, and then mounted back atop his stallion, brushing its crimson mane. He led it forth in a canter, pulling Argrave along. The sight of the gaunt, tall man being led about was quite pitiful. His complaints of abusing hostages and borderline slavery slowly faded away from the carriage, leaving Nikoletta and her entourage alone on the road.

One of the Margrave’s knights gave up a horse for Argrave to ride. After some fussing and fidgeting, the Margrave raised his war horn to his lips once more. He blew into it twice, and then the knights set off once again, leaving a great cloud of dust and grass behind them.

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Nikoletta opened the door to the carriage and exited, staring at the great cloud of dust slowly moving in the direction of Dirracha, the royal capital. Her mood was complicated, and that fact was etched into her face. She was glad that no blood was shed—neither Monticci nor Parbon blood.

At the same time, it came at the expense of one person. Argrave was willing to forego his own safety, walking willingly into enemy hands, if it meant that none would get hurt.

He did so all the while making stupid jokes, smirking like there wasn't a guillotine above his head.

"How can you say that I'm braver than you when you'd do something like that..."
Nikoletta muttered.

It was difficult to believe that he was of the same blood as the House of Vasquer, the family of snakes. Perhaps that was why he emphasized constantly that he was a bastard. He likely meant to show that he was nothing like the royal family.

"Nicky, we should get back on the road," Mina said, crawling through and sitting on the window. "Maybe you can talk to your father, have him intervene somehow."

Nikoletta turned back to the carriage, tidying her black hair behind her. "I don't know what good it would do. My father does not like interfering with the affairs of the royal family."

"Ugh." Mina grabbed at her hair. "If we make a lot of noise about what Argrave did for you, for *us*... maybe your father won't be able to ignore it."

"Possibly..." Nikoletta rubbed her chin, then walked towards the carriage with purpose. "I certainly won't do nothing, not after what just happened. I owe him that much."

"You owe him nothing," Mina rebutted, slipping back inside the carriage. "He's the reason this happened to begin with. This is just the right thing to do. But he's... maybe he's a better person than I thought."

Nikoletta opened the carriage door and clambered aboard. "I think you're still chapped about him comparing you to a cat. And now that it's just us two here, I can say that he's completely right about that."

"What? What is that supposed to—"

"Sir Rand," Nikoletta interrupted. "Let's begin moving again. Fast-paced. We need to return to Mateth immediately."

"Right away, Lady Nikoletta," Rand agreed, moving to the front of the caravan.

Nikoletta sat back down, stiffening when she sat on something hard. She reached beneath herself and pulled free a thick book. It was a book she was all-too familiar with, for she herself had been studying it recently. It was about the barrier between D and C-rank magic. Argrave had been reading this.

I'll be sure to return this, Nikoletta promised. Deep inside her head, Nikoletta was questioning that promise. Perhaps she would never have the chance to return the book.

Someone dying on her behalf... it had happened before.

She did not wish for it to happen again.

Maybe this time, she could do something about it before it was too late.