

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 9: Non-Illegal Robbery

It was dawn. The pale, somewhat blue light of the early morning suns began to make its way across the vast plain in front of Mateth. Subtle rainbows of refracted light dappled the landscape where the rays passed through drops of water at just the right angles. A lone rider, tiredly leaning on his horse, spurred his mount in a light canter towards the towering walls of the coastal city.

Argrave felt exhausted. A night ride was not a pleasant thing. He'd had to stop occasionally to heal his chafed-raw legs. If he had not chosen the best horse—the Margrave's horse—he doubted the creature would have lasted running all night. The moonlight had been sufficient for base navigation. If Argrave did not know his surroundings as well as he did, he further doubted he would have been able to make it without colliding into a tree or rock.

The near unending expanse of green, wet grass slowly gave way into great fields of gold wheat. Beyond them, yet more verdant fields lie—melons, orchards of plums, pears, apples. Closest to the city, and most heavily guarded, were the more arcane plants. They were few in number but varied in color, ranging from a bright, fluorescent blue to a rich black that seemed to eat the light around it.

Argrave mustered what dim vestige remained of his sleepless mind to admire the beauty of a Mateth that had yet to suffer an invasion. It was the most beautiful city in the game, according to most 'Heroes of Berendar' players. Argrave thought it looked much better in person. His eyes surely had a better resolution than the game. Higher than 1920x1080, at least. Maybe sights like these were why people bought 4k monitors.

The city itself was very pretty. Its walls must have been made out of marble; maybe it was magic fantasy marble, but it looked the same. They were stark and bare white, but statues lined the ramparts, spaced equidistantly like guardians watching over the vast fields out front the city.

Argrave slowed his horse into a pleasant trot as they rejoined the main road into Mateth. Argrave listened to the horse's breathing slowly quiet as it regained its composure. It was a great horse, to be sure—likely bred and raised specifically for the Margrave to ride.

He was very much looking forward to selling it for a king's ransom.

Argrave joined the side of a large caravan travelling into the city, carrying loads and loads of wares. He straightened his posture and started riding like a normal person, though his legs ached something fierce. He passed through the towering walls of the city without issue. The guards checked the caravan's contents, but too many people passed into Mateth to check with each traveler.

Seeing an all-too-familiar city layout, Argrave couldn't help but crack a slight grin. He led Reinhardt's stallion through the city, heading for a horse breeder that he knew of. He saw a great row of stalls holding fine horses. Argrave dismounted, walking to the front of the stables.

"Hello? Looking for the horse master," Argrave called out, voice hoarse.

"One minute, please!" a voice answered. Argrave complied. Soon enough, a somewhat fit man with braided brown hair and a beard walked out of the building and to Argrave.

"Hello. Robarr, right?" Argrave asked.

"Yes, that's correct, lord," the man answered cautiously. "Have we met before?"

"Not personally, but I know you well enough," Argrave answered, shaking his head. "You deal in horses, no?"

"That's correct, lord," Robarr nodded. "Would you like me to take care of this fine animal for you during your stay in Mateth?"

Argrave looked at the stallion. "As much as I would like to say 'yes,' I'm afraid that's not the case. I have to be selling this horse."

"Selling," Robarr repeated. "A man comes to me in ragged clothing, appearing exhausted, offering to sell a horse. Forgive me, but my first assumption is not kind."

"And why not?" Argrave asked.

"Well... and no offense, my lord, but I see an exhausted man trying to quickly sell a horse, I first assume that it's stolen."

Argrave frowned. "Stolen? Why would you think that?" he asked, incredulously. "Well... actually, come to think of it, you have a good point... but I assure you, that is simply not the case," Argrave said insistently.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is," Argrave answered firmly. "I was accosted by brigands on the way to Mateth, you see. Well, not to Mateth, but rather to Vendleber and then onwards to Dirracha. I am a recently released Acolyte from the Order of the Gray Owl, intending to return

home. I went to Mateth because it was the closest and safest place I could reach after escaping from the brigands.”

“The brigands, you say?” Robarr repeated.

“Indeed. Brigands.” Argrave nodded, straining his tired mind to its fullest. “They were mounted on horseback, and they carried a banner of white with a golden lion. I assumed they were men of House Parbon. I feel foolish, in hindsight... nonetheless, they demanded my money and my books. Once I had given them that, I seized a moment of distraction—with some help from illusion magic, you see—to escape. I must thank this fine horse for the help... but I am penniless, and I need to return to my family in Dirracha. I am forced to sell this fine creature to pay for an armed escort.”

Robarr frowned, scrutinizing Argrave. “Well, that’s...”

“Come now.” Argrave held his arms out. “These clothes are worn, true enough, but they’re custom-fitted and well-decorated. Clothes for a man of my height must be custom made, you see. I cannot claim to be from a great house, but I am a noble from the capital.”

“Your house’s name?” Robarr inquired.

“Blackgard,” Argrave answered after a moment’s pause. “Argrave of Blackgard.”

“Well...” Robarr scratched his cheek. “Gods. I feel a bit paranoid, lord. I apologize if I offended you.”

“Oh, come now.” Argrave held out a magnanimous hand. “A man of your trade has plenty of reason to fear for being sold stolen goods. My father’s horse was stolen once before—fortunately, the boy did not know how to ride, and was caught quickly.”

“Thank you, lord Argrave,” the horse master bowed a little. “Let’s see, then... this horse must be a custom breed.” Robarr walked to the horse, petting its mane. “Such a beautiful crimson mane.”

“Indeed. For generations, my family has traded in fine horseflesh.”

“I can tell.” Robarr walked around, admiring it. As it neighed. “It’s well-muscled, too. It would make a fine warhorse.”

“It was bred for as much,” Argrave nodded. He was glad he had cast off the ornamentation from House Parbon that it had been decorated with.

“Well... I can offer 3000 gold for it,” Robarr said.

Argrave squinted. “Robarr... my family does horse trading, and I have accompanied my father on many a sale. This fine horse is worth far more than a mere 3000. You could sell it for nearly ten thousand, especially on the eve of a tournament.”

The two exchanged figures for a long time. Argrave was adamant and persistent—he had bought and sold many horses in the game, and he knew that the Margrave’s was a very good horse—and Robarr eventually grew tired.

“Alright. How is this; 6950 in the form of a banknote,” Robarr proposed. “You can’t carry around so many coins, anyway.”

“We have a deal,” Argrave said with a smile, having doubled the price and then some.

Robarr shook his head. “Your family are surely horse traders. Few customers haggle as well as you.” He walked back into the building, retrieving the money.

“Here you are,” said Robarr after a time, handing the note in an unclosed envelope. Argrave checked the figure and then closed the envelope tightly.

“Wonderful,” Argrave said. “You may make a speedy profit. My father may rebuy the horse in a few weeks’ time at a generous price once I make it home.”

Robarr nodded and held out his hand. Argrave politely declined, citing that he was filthy.

Walking away, Argrave pinched the envelope tightly in his fingers. *Silver tongue spits filthy lucre. Now that I’ve got money, I’m free.* He hid the envelope deep in his breast pocket, just beside the bronze hand mirror. *Few bumps, but I made it to Mateth. Now the real fun can begin.*

#####

Nikoletta and Mina watched the streets of Mateth as the carriage rode by. The past few days, they had been discussing how exactly they were going to get their parents to take action.

“And what if that doesn’t work?” Mina pressed.

“Then we try another way,” Nikoletta answered calmly.

“Suppose nothing works?”

Nikoletta turned to her friend. “You sounded like you didn’t care a few days ago, but now you’re twice as eager as I am.”

"I-I... well, you seemed like you cared a lot. I was just trying to step up for my friend," Mina answered hastily. "Besides, the situation sounded terrible. He could be—"

"He's fine. He has to be," Nikoletta interrupted, not wishing to hear her finish that sentence. "He's witty. At the very least, he'll know how to avoid getting on the Margrave's nerves. Long enough to save his skin, maybe."

Mina leaned out the carriage's window, resting her head on her hands. "I don't know... the Margrave mentioned something about his daughter..."

Nikoletta recoiled. She recalled that line. It had been on her mind, too. "Mina, we made it back as fast as the carriage would allow. All we can do now is try."

"You're right, as always." Mina kept looking out the window, a silence settling between them. The carriage rolled onwards towards Nikoletta's father's castle.

"Hey, Nicky?" Mina said. "Do you see that horse?"

"Is now the time to think about horses?"

"No, seriously, look," Mina pointed, speaking urgently.

Nikoletta leaned to the window, following Mina's pointed finger. "Gods. Rand, stop the carriage," Nikoletta commanded promptly.

"Wait, what if it's just a—" Mina tried to say, but Nikoletta had already opened the carriage door.

"There's no way it's a coincidence. They're identical. Same red mane and everything." Nikoletta abounded from the carriage. Her legs were stiff, but she still walked as fast as she could towards the stable. She recognized the place—her father bought many horses from this stablemaster.

"Excuse me," Nikoletta said urgently, grabbing the doorframe and leaning inside the building. "I'm looking for the horse master here."

Mina joined her, staring at the horse intently as though to discern if it was real or fake.

"Just a second, please!" a male's voice responded. Soon enough, Robarr walked out of the building to greet the two.

"What can..." the man paused. "Hold a moment. You're... the young lady Monticci, no?"

"That's right," Nikoletta answered quickly. "This horse," she pointed to the red-maned white stallion. "Where did you get it?"

Robarr's eyes widened. "Oh gods. Forgive me, my lady!"

"Forgive you?" Nikoletta questioned. "Why?"

"If I had known it was the ducal famil—"

"Just answer her question," Mina interrupted.

Robarr swallowed. "I-It was sold to me a few days ago. A very tall, ragged-looking man with hair... well, hair the same color as yours, young lady Monticci, sold it. Called himself Argrave of... ehm... Blackbay, I think."

Mina laughed out loud. "No way. He really..." she turned away, laughing into her sleeve.

"Ragged-looking?" Nikoletta questioned. "Was he injured?"

"Injured?" Robarr repeated, surprised. "No, he had no visible injuries. His clothes were a bit torn, though, and he looked exhausted. He claimed he was attacked by bandits bearing the banner of House Parbon and robbed of his books and money."

Nikoletta herself was stunned speechless for a moment. She joined Mina in laughter for a brief moment.

"Err... young lady Monticci, was the horse not stolen?" asked the clueless horse master.

"Well," Nikoletta said, suppressing her laughter. "Some people may come looking for the horse. I will hand you a badge with Monticci's symbol—if they do ask about the horse and who sold it, send them to the duke's estate. Do not give them any other information."

"Oh... I-I see," Robarr said, his anxiety evidently not quelled with this news. "Was the man related to the young lady Monticci?"

"My cousin." Nikoletta smiled. "Did he mention anything else? Where he might go, for instance?"

"Ehm... he mentioned he was an Acolyte... He haggled ridiculously well," Robarr complained. "I bought the horse for 6950 gold, gave him a banknote. He mentioned hiring an armed escort and heading to his home in Dirracha."

Nikoletta shook her head and walked away. "Thank you for your time."

"Certainly, young lady," Robarr called out. "Then... the horse..."

“Keep it,” Nikoletta responded.

Mina was just ending her giggle fit as they both walked side-by-side back to the carriage, Sir Rand shortly behind them. “To think... to think that we were sitting in that carriage, brooding about what to do.”

“I wonder if he’s still around,” Nikoletta commented.

“Maybe,” Mina mused. “Mateth is safe.”

“He gets kidnapped... steals the Margrave’s horse, sells it for near enough to buy a house...” Nikoletta summarized things, marveling at the situation.

Mina started laughing again. “I think, maybe... no, I know that your cousin is a lot more fun than he looks.”