

Jackal 35

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 35: Promising Prospects

"Damn it," cursed Duke Enrico as he stared out into the distance at his domain. Now that war was upon them, he had donned his plate mail, the blue swordfish of Monticci embedded on its chest. He stood atop the walls of Mateth, right beside one of the giant marble statues, as he stared out at the rising smoke in the distance. "The boy was right, to the word."

Nikoletta stepped forward to stand beside her father, arms crossed. The two seemed like echoes of each other with their similarly decorated armor—one plate, one leather. "You could not have known. No one knew, besides him."

"And that's the mystery. How *did* he know? Perhaps the royal family's influence is greater in my domain than I expected. It's pointless to consider now... henceforth, though, I'll follow his advice." He turned back. "Knight-Commander Ryger. Command the mage battalions to center their forces near the docks, preparing to counter magic."

"At once, duke," with his voice echoing through his helmet, Ryger bowed and then moved to obey. His heavy armor clanged noisily as he sprinted.

The Duke turned back to Nikoletta. "If we should survive this, I view Argrave as your most promising marriage prospect."

"What?!" Nikoletta could not help but shout in surprise. "He's my cousin!"

"He has no force backing him, so he won't compete with you for control of the duchy when I pass. He's a bastard, so he should have no issue adopting the name of Monticci. He's a very promising mage and a brilliant strategist. He's young. Above all, you like him," the duke continued, unaffected by her outburst. "As do I."

"He—" Nikoletta paused, taking a deep breath. "You've spoken to him but once, and you 'like him?' He's a friend, nothing more. Worse yet, he's near identical to Elwind. As I said, he's already family."

"That matters little. You have no shared ancestors beyond your mother," Duke Enrico shook his head. "There should be no issues with your progeny."

At the mental image her father's words gave her, she shook her head frantically. "Father, please...!"

"No more discussions. When he returns... *if* he returns," Duke Enrico amended, "I will send the proposal."

Nikoletta opened her mouth to say more, but a voice from behind cut her off.

"Duke Enrico!" a lightly armored gatekeeper ran up, breathing hard.

"Catch your breath, then speak," the Duke commanded.

The gatekeeper did, and then he took off his helmet and wiped his face with his wrist. "Two people are trying to enter the gate, duke. One of them claims to be Knight Ryles from Barden, bringing urgent news

from the village regarding a mage. The other is a female mercenary with a giant sword seeking to help in the defense.”

“Argrave went to Barden,” Nikoletta said immediately.

“Oh!” the gatekeeper exclaimed. “That name was mentioned, young lady Monticci.”

The Duke’s expression hardened. “Take this token. Find and command a High Wizard of the Gray Owl to examine both people for magic trickery before they enter. Send Knight Ryles to me quickly.”

The gatekeeper took the token from the Duke’s hands and stared at it, bewildered by the responsibility he’d just been given. He saluted the Duke and ran off once again. The Duke retrieved a seeing glass and looked out at the coastline, watching the movements of the longships as they collided with the Duke’s caravels.

Nikoletta looked up at the statue beside them, a distinct lack of conversation settling between the two as they waited. Nikoletta tapped her finger against her elbow as though to speed up time. She could not deny she was worried. That the knight was alive was a promising thing, but the fact he returned mentioning Argrave specifically could not be a good portent.

The time stretched out for a long time, but it could not have been more than fifteen minutes before a knight rushed to them, partially covered in blood and sand and very exhausted.

“Duke Enrico,” he saluted once he’d catch his breath. “Knight Ryles. I was commanding the forces in Barden.”

“And what led you to abandon your post?” the duke questioned sharply.

“On the eve of the battle, a spellcaster came to us. He offered the name... I think it was ‘Argrave of Blackward,’ and claimed that he was the duke’s agent,” Ryles said, speaking as though he was telling a big secret. “He had the Mark of Monticci, and so I took his advice in the battle.”

“That name... I think he used that as an alias when he sold the Margrave’s horse,” Nikoletta offered.

The Duke nodded to Nikoletta and turned back to the knight. “And?” the Duke pressed.

“Later, he lured a force of metal... creatures, to the site of the battle. He used this horde to gain parley with the snow elves. He claimed he was an agent of the duke, assigned by you to stop the invasion.”

The Duke furrowed his brows, and then ran a hand through his blue hair. “What is he...? Well? What happened then?”

“He spoke to the snow elves’ leader, and they came to an agreement,” the knight hesitated as the questions did not head the direction he wanted. “I believe he intended to sail with them to return to Veiden in condition for cooperation killing the metal creatures.”

“Did you see them sail away? Defeat the metal creatures?” the duke questioned, stepping closer.

“No, I thought he seemed too close to the snow elves, so I thought...” Ryles trailed off, taken aback by the intensity.

The duke grabbed the knight's breastplate and pulled him closer. "You let Argrave fight that horde of monsters alone, and then let him sail to Veiden by himself?" He released, pushing the knight away. "Damn it. This boy... I have no idea what he's up to. And you." He pointed to the knight. "Join the garrison. You're stripped of command of Barden." The knight was rattled, and he stood there mute.

Nikoletta, too, was startled by the news. She thought back on all of Argrave's actions. Each of them had seemed bizarre and arbitrary, but ultimately, they had clear purpose. He had returned her thesis to keep Monticci's reputation intact. He had gone with the Margrave despite the dangers to keep their House's relationships stable. He had attacked the druidic scouts, alone, to bring the invasion to their attention. And now...

"Father," Nikoletta said, stepping forward. "We can't do anything for him now, anyway. He acted alone, but I've never seen him act without a plan. Realistically, what he's done doesn't change what we need to do. We need only prepare for the defense."

Duke Enrico turned back to his daughter. After a time, he nodded.

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Anneliese strode through the long wooden hall before Argrave's room, a fur sack in her right hand. She had cleaned and changed into a more fitting white-fur robe. Ahead, the door was slightly ajar, and a dim sliver of light peaked past. She started to hear noise from the room, and she slowed her footsteps and approached quieter. The noise became clearer. Argrave was singing.

"I lay here," he sung, drawing out the notes at points. "Bedridden, imprisoned in me. I'm crippled and broken, alive and not free. The sun out my window, it warms me and leaves. No calls and no visits, just me and my dreams. And I'm lonely," he embellished the last note.

Her brows were furrowed in confusion, but Anneliese could not help but smile. His singing was terrible, bluntly put. She pushed open the door and entered. He turned his head towards her. He was buried beneath white fur blankets, propped upright. His face brightened.

"She returns. She's clean." Argrave spread his arms wide as though celebrating. "You look like a Russian princess with the fancy white-fur coat. It suits you."

Anneliese walked up to him, sitting on the bedside and hefting the sack atop her legs. "What is a Russian princess?"

Argrave paused for a while, and then smiled. "People never ask those sorts of questions. They just ignore my weird words and move on, unwilling to admit their own ignorance. A Russian princess, hm?" Argrave tilted his head back. "A Russian princess would probably have fair hair, pale skin, fancy fur clothes made right in Siberia, and an undeniable dignity befitting her station."

Anneliese's amber eyes seemed to study his face for a minute. Then, she pushed the bag she was holding towards Argrave. "Here. I brought preserved fish and meat. Eating rich foods like this is the key to a speedy recovery. Healing magic cannot replace lost blood. Eating was what helped my mother grow back into good health whenever she grew ill."

"How considerate. It's been so long since I've had meat. When I was sick a few days ago, I was vomiting up everything that wasn't slush." Argrave said, voice straining as he leaned over to grab the bag. Argrave

opened the bag, pulling free thick strands of red, dried meat. He bit into it. "Hm. Like jerky, if a bit plainer and a lot tougher."

While glancing about the room, Anneliese rested her hands on her lap. Barring a few shelves with nothing on them and a window closed off with a fur blanket, the room was empty.

"The Patriarch's council listened to me briefly, and then kicked me out," Anneliese said. "I suspect a conclusion will not be reached tonight. You may be called tomorrow."

Argrave divided a piece of meat with his hands into small, bite-sized pieces. "What, you just gave your account and they booted you?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

"That's stupid. You would have the most insight on the situation." Argrave put a meat bite in his mouth and chewed on it quietly. "Perhaps I should not complain. I get to eat, after all."

She turned her head back to him. "You seem to place a lot of value on me."

Argrave paused. It sounded like an arrogant statement, but it was just her neutral observation of the situation. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' Argrave had fought against Anneliese and worked alongside Anneliese in destroying Gerechtigheit. In both scenarios, she was a very powerful person. Part of it was her high magic pool coupled with a high magic affinity. Elsewise, she simply knew a lot of good spells. He supposed that was tinting the way he treated her.

He chewed another bit of meat as he considered his response. He made sure to swallow completely before speaking, as he loathed when people spoke with their mouths full.

"You possess a fiercely inquisitive nature coupled with a good head on your shoulders. Those values combined are a formula for success. To top it off, you wield magic well, you have a talent for strategy, and you can read people like I read books." Argrave locked eyes with Anneliese. "I think those features make you exemplary. I have little doubt you will achieve great things."

"Is that so? I will remember that, then." She nodded with a faint smile. "'Achieve great things,'" she repeated, musing over the words. "A vague term, meaning different things for every person. Still... it's a nice sentiment."

"True enough. What great things call out to you?" Argrave ate another bit of meat.

Anneliese leaned back, resting her hands against the bed. "All around me, I see people planning to make a legacy." She closed her eyes. "They want to be a part of the invasion of the green lands, be a part of the legend of the snow elves. They want to start a family, leave behind the next generation. Even the spellcasters want to advance magic to another level. All wish to be remembered." She turned her head back to Argrave and opened her eyes. "They're all planning for their deaths. At least, that's what I feel."

"Kind of grim, but you're not wrong. They want to keep living, in whatever manner that might be left for them. Live on through their deeds, their words, their achievements." Argrave reached back into the bag and pulled out a strip of pink meat that smelled fishy. "Myself, I much prefer plain old living."

"Me too," Anneliese agreed quietly. "I think I just... want to know and understand the world. As much as I can. And I want to pursue that freely."

Argrave broke up the strip of fish into bits as he did the previous strip. "There's a lot to know. Berendar alone is full of mysteries. Even though I know a lot about the Veidimen, before this, I'd never been to Veiden." Argrave was about to put another bit in his mouth, but he paused. "That reminds me. There's supposed to be a big library here in Veiden, right? Full of druidic spells, deep lore, and other such fascinating things? I mean, druidic magic doesn't even *exist* on Berendar."

"It's in the capital, behind the Ice Wall, but yes." Anneliese sat up.

Argrave pursed his lips. "Do you think I could get in there? I mean, surely these deliberations will take some time, and I don't think that I'm really *urgently needed*, per se..."

Anneliese shook her head. "You must rest. You should not overstrain yourself."

"Aw, but..." Argrave trailed off.

"I have some books among my things," she said with a smile. "If you like, I can lend you some."

His grim countenance started to brighten. "Truly? Spell books, even?"

"Yes." Anneliese stood. "I'll go get them."

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Chapter 36: Leave it to Fate

Argrave adjusted the white fur coat over his leather gear, covering himself well. He had no mirror to look at himself in, so he briefly looked down and examined himself. He rapped his knuckles against the bronze hand mirror in his breast pocket, and then turned to the door. Anneliese stepped forward, handing him a simple brown cane.

Argrave took it and set it against the ground, grinding it against the wood to test it. "Thank you. Let's not leave the Patriarch waiting, even if he so graciously decreed we could come at our leisure."

Anneliese nodded, and she pushed open the door, gesturing for Argrave to proceed. He brushed his hair back with a gloved hand, and then proceeded down the hallway of the local chief's residence. Anneliese soon joined by his side, having no issue keeping up with his slow pace.

"Come to think of it, I don't even know what this city is called," Argrave commented as they walked.

"Katla," Anneliese answered. "It is the largest port for both raids and fishermen. When the winter is cruel, some warriors sail out to the sea in search of settlements to raid. Of course, now that Veiden has been united, it is the natural place for a fleet to harbor."

The two came to the set of stairs. Argrave grit his teeth and proceeded downwards slowly, the cane clicking ever so slowly. When he reached the bottom, he felt a small sense of accomplishment. He pressed forward down the main hall and soon pushed open the main doors. Light reflecting off the white snow blinded him, and he shielded his eyes as they adjusted.

As the scene spread out before him, Argrave found his eyes darting from place to place, taking in his surroundings. Snow elves worked at pushing away snow from the windows and doors. Near the partially snow-buried walls of the city, a group of hunters worked at skinning a gargantuan white cat. One hunter held open its mouth, while another pulled free the crystalline teeth decorating its jaw.

Elsewhere, a great deal of snow elves sat on the ground, holding chunks of raw Ebonice in their hands. They used a chisel and hammer to chip away at it, refining it into axe blades. When they were finished, they would hand it to another person, who attached it to a firm dark wooden stick.

Fish and meat were hung up to dry, while butchers chopped fresh meat and doused it with sea salt to preserve it. Everyone walking about was wearing some amount of fur to keep themselves warm. The vast majority of those wandering were warriors. There was a clear tension in the air—an uncertainty, especially when they saw Argrave. Doubtless everyone had heard the rumor of the mortal agent of Erlebnis. He was the only human here.

“Argrave?” asked Anneliese, puzzled by his pause.

“Ah.” Argrave gathered himself. “Sorry. Simply enjoying a new sight, a new culture. It’s one thing to read what little anecdotes exist of Veiden in Berendar. It is another to be there, in person, experiencing it. Frankly, I had thought I would be speaking to Patriarch Dras when he came to Berendar, not the other way around. Didn’t expect to render unto him. I quite like it.”

Argrave proceeded onwards, feet sinking into the snow alongside his cane. It took a great deal of effort to walk through snow, and so he slowed his pace so as not to overexert himself.

“Much of Veiden is inarable, yeah?” Argrave asked Anneliese. “Your primary sources of food are meat and fish for those reasons.”

“Yes. Even with earth magic to till the fields, crops refuse to grow, as though the land is cursed. Legends say that druidic magic was made for that reason. In recent years, though, Patriarch Dras has found ways to circumvent the poor land. We take hardy seeds from the human continent, and we sow them atop graveyards. There is no lack of dead in Veiden.”

Argrave nodded. “When you’ve got frozen soil and ornery creatures like that kitty over there rampaging about, it isn’t difficult to see why you turned to invasion, either.” Argrave kept his gaze on the white cat. “Out of curiosity, what do your parents do?”

“My father is dead. He was a hunter, but he died in battle when Patriarch Dras united the tribes. My mother is still young and she helps craft clothes of fur where she can, but she grows sick frequently. My younger sister is taking care of her.”

I thought Rowe mentioned she was born outside of Veiden... Argrave deliberated on whether to bring that up, but he did not wish to be inconsiderate.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Argrave said after pausing in the road. “I don’t mean to pry, but do you resent Dras for that?”

“Somewhat,” she nodded. “But in Veiden, one truth persists and allows us to survive, despite the environment; the tribe is more important than the individual. Patriarch Dras has made us great. Over time, I came to accept what happened.”

Argrave felt pensive after her words, and the two proceeded onwards in silence. It was a vastly different sentiment than many pursued on Earth. Most modern cultures pursued individualism and personal happiness. Putting a nation before a person... it was a foreign mindset. Maybe it was necessary in this

world. And indeed, maybe their conquest would allow peace to reign and society to develop once the embers of war had settled.

Ultimately... it's not my concern. My duty is dealing with Gerechtigheit while dealing with world-changing events as best I can.

"You should tell me of human society sometime," Anneliese interrupted his thoughts. "Knights and chivalry, enchanted items, illusion magic... none exist in Veiden."

Argrave smiled. "I certainly can." He paused. "Although, I have to return to Berendar soon for my next task. No rest for the wicked, you know the rules."

If Anneliese was dispirited by his answer, she did not show it, answering quickly, "I assumed as much." She caught Argrave's sleeve, pointing. "This way."

Argrave changed direction to where she was pointing. She led him to a large house where a great many Veidimen warriors stood out front. When the snow elves saw him, they tensed. The effect he had as the purported 'mortal agent of Erlebnis' was quite astonishing. He would be sure to use this card in the future. Hopefully, he wouldn't awake one morning to a long-armed creature admonishing him for his misuse of the title.

"The Patriarch awaits inside," one of the guards said, pushing open the door and dipping his head slightly in a show of respect.

Argrave nodded back, and then proceeded inside. Anneliese followed, and then the door was shut behind them. Ahead, Dras sat at a desk, holding a quill above some leathery parchment that was certainly not paper. Just as many guards stood behind Dras as there were outside.

"In walks the agent of the omniscient," Dras greeted, setting his quill aside and leaning back in his chair.

"Erlebnis just reads frequently. No omniscience involved. Such is the power of a well-read god."

The Patriarch chuckled. "You've given me the worst headache I've had in years. Maybe the worst headache ever. I was the primary proponent of this invasion, rousing the warrior's blood in what remained of the conquered tribes. Now, to reverse sides?" Dras tapped his temple and shook his head. "It was a sleepless night."

"And what is the outcome? To be determined?" Argrave paused, lowering his head. "Or will I need to do something drastic?"

Dras' white eyes locked onto Argrave. "You are awfully bold. Even the best of my warriors and mages do not speak so candidly, threatening to cause trouble in my tribe."

"If there's one thing I am, it's honest," Argrave lied, glad that Anneliese was not looking at him presently.

The Patriarch clicked his tongue. "You should thank Rowe. He was so desperate to prove you wrong, he tried every method he could think of to poke a hole in what you had said. When he found that everything supported you, he threatened to have Crystal Wind eat anyone who dissented. I started to question who really led the tribe."

“So this means...?”

“It should be obvious,” Dras said, rubbing his eyes. “The invasion will cease.”

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. He felt like he’d just won a tournament, or maybe a lottery. His body shook a little, but he quickly got himself under control.

“God damn,” Argrave said aloud. “The fruits of my labor have offered a savior.”

If this were a speedrun to stop the Veidimen invasion, I’d be sitting pretty with the Any% world record. Mateth stays standing. Duke Enrico lives. Nikoletta is spared losing her father.

“But...!” the Patriarch tapped his desk. “As far as I’m concerned, the invasion is merely delayed in the wake of the Tenebrous Reaper, Gerechtigkeits. We will offer full support in defense of the world, when the time of his descent comes.”

“That’s more than I could ask for. Even being neutral is a great boon,” Argrave commended, pleased beyond measure.

“That said, the attack on Mateth will continue as planned. If Gerechtigkeits manifests on Berendar, as seems to be the case, it will be convenient to have the armies land at a safe port.” Dras leaned back in his chair, watching Argrave.

Argrave’s face twisted. “What? You’re still going to try and seize Mateth?”

“Yes.” Dras nodded intently. “Regardless of the outcome, the invasion will cease. I will leave things in the hand of Veid. Let Her dictate what should happen; if Mateth should stay in human hands or fall to the Veidimen.”

Argrave stood, mouth agape for a second. “But that’s just a pointless waste of life, both for Veiden and for the humans!”

Patriarch Dras sat unmoving. “As I said, Veid will dictate the outcome. And frankly, this was the only compromise the more militant chiefs would relent to. It serves as a demonstration that the choice isn’t merely cold feet. I suspect it will happen today. The orders were sent out this morning.”

Argrave stared at Dras with brows furrowed, running the scenario in his head. As things clicked into place, he confronted an unpleasant reality.

Frankly, it would be better for me if Veiden did seize Mateth. They are my staunchest allies, and their forces are among the strongest in the game. I could use their might for future conflicts. The populace within Mateth was never badly affected by the invasion past the initial assault—many of the services and merchants would remain open to me. At worst, I lose the money from selling Foamspire.

Argrave looked to the ground, turning around. *But how am I to speak to Nikoletta? To Mina? Hell, even to that German Shepherd, Elias? Even if it only has been a brief time, I want to keep those ties.* Argrave paused as his thoughts took a darker turn. *And that’s only if they live.*

Argrave turned the gears in his head as fast as they would go, trying to come up with some way to change this outcome. He could not warn them—he had no way of doing so. He could not explain the

situation, and even if he could, he could not ask Duke Enrico to abandon his city. When he asked himself how to convince Dras, his mind came up blank.

Almost instinctually, Argrave reached into his breast pocket and pulled free the bronze hand mirror. He studied it, sealing away his emotions.

What I want stopped being important two months ago. I have to stop Gerechtigheit, for my own sake just as much as the world's. Any advantage counts.

He turned back to Patriarch Dras. "Leave it to fate, then," he nodded slowly, stowing away the mirror once more.

"I hope you say that truly, and don't intend to do anything drastic as you mentioned earlier," Dras cautioned.

"No. As you said, it would be a strategic advantage for the future."

Dras looked a little surprised, but he hid it quickly. "Then that is all. I will promulgate this fact in the days to come, but for now, you are among the first to know. Oh, and I had a question."

"Yes?" Argrave prompted.

"How is Galamon?" Dras leaned in.

Argrave smiled. "He doesn't talk about himself much, but I think he's the same as ever. You know how he is. The strong, silent type."

Patriarch Dras laughed knowingly. "Yes, if it's like that, then he is well. I hope you treat him well. Despite what transpired, he is still a dear friend to me. I hope to never see him again."

"What a bizarre arrangement of sentences," Argrave commented. "But such is the fate of an Exile. A fascinating bit of Veiden's culture. Even the outcasts are still loved, mostly."

"Indeed," Dras nodded. "You're free to roam, as I don't think you're a considerable threat. Rowe would probably enjoy speaking to you, even if he won't admit it. And if you wish to, you might visit Galamon's family. His son was too young to join the invasion, but his wife has been a tremendous help in making clothing. I am sure they would be pleased to hear of him."

Argrave nodded. "Both of those things sound very interesting," he said.

Truly, Argrave's mind was on Mateth. He felt a black pit in his stomach. What he was doing was pragmatic. It would be a good thing if they lost, he told himself. But in his heart, he hoped they prevailed.

"Patriarch," said Anneliese, stepping forth. "I had a request."

"Certainly. I can at least hear you out, considering who you brought to me."

She placed her hand on her heart. "I would like to travel with Argrave in order to help deal with Gerechtigheit."

Argrave turned his head and widened his eyes in surprise. The Patriarch, too, was taken aback.

The future chief strategist of Veiden wants to come with me? Argrave dialogued internally. Well, the invasion is ceasing... she'll have no opportunities to grow in that manner. And if she's with me... well, I can raise her into a damned magic monster. She's got crazy talent.

Argrave chimed in, "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

He was never one to pass up an opportunity.