

Jackal Among Snakes

- Chapter 1: Valhalla-Bound at the Speed of Sound

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In the middle of a vast plain, a single, well-travelled dirt road led to a tower. The tower was circular and made wholly of a dark gray stone, and it stood hundreds, if not a thousand feet tall. Stained glass windows dotted its side at points. Its walls were inscribed, giving the stark gray building depth it otherwise lacked. If one were to stare for a while, they could see faint trails of light dancing along the engravings. They were the dim afterglow of enchantments that kept such a piece of architecture standing.

On one of the floors in the middle of the colossal structure, a set of gray eyes stared out the stained-glass window, peering at the sun. Or rather, the suns—dual balls of fire stood high in the sky, partially shielded by clouds. One star was white, the other orange. The white star was the smaller of the two.

The owner of the gray eyes was a remarkably tall man with wavy obsidian-color hair. He sat cross-legged at a window-side table, a bronze hand mirror hanging loosely from his idle hand. He wore drab gray robes that looked to be made of burlap. An owl had been sewn onto the shoulders of his garments. The robes covered his figure well, but his pale bony fingers and gaunt face betrayed a skinny physique. Despite his gauntness, though, he was quite handsome.

The man's name was Argrave. Staring at these two suns in the sky, he was rather confident he had gone through the five stages of grief in the past few hours: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance.

The subject of his grief was himself—or rather, his past life.

Argrave's first reaction, denial, could perhaps be considered ordinary when awakening in a body wholly unfamiliar to him. These long, skinny legs and these harsh, steely eyes must have been the result of an overactive subconscious, he was sure. Alternate realities were merely theories without evidence. This 'transmigration' must be a fever dream induced by... well, fever, naturally.

But reality refused to change, and he was forced to confront a fact; he had transmigrated into a game, namely, 'Heroes of Berendar.'

In the 'anger' phase of grief, Argrave stewed over what he had left. He was just a college student—a college student midway through his studies, at that. His life was just

beginning. Now, he was here? He was in a miserable world where most of the cities lack basic sanitation?

But Argrave had always been a calm person in his past life, and his anger faded quickly.

Argrave third tried to bargain in his process of grief. He pleaded to whatever existence had taken him here to take him back—or better yet, to give him a different character. Why had he transmigrated into this game, ‘Heroes of Berendar?’ Why had he transmigrated into Argrave of Vasquer, a person all but universally reviled? Argrave of Vasquer was a bastard of the royal family, not some noble scion. He was but a minor NPC in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ and one who met a very unpleasant end regardless of the player’s interference.

But Argrave’s pleas went unanswered, and his situation did not change.

Argrave fourth sank into the most infamous stage of grief: depression. He had gone from a college student to a miserable, sickly, and altogether worthless villain. Many people felt a good degree of ill-will towards him. The fact that it was his favorite game did little to curb his mental anguish. Even if he wished to enjoy the world of ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ he would need to navigate away from the thousand pitfalls Argrave had by his feet.

To his fortune, the worst of the five stages came and went quickly.

Argrave fifth entered a tranquil acceptance. This was his life. He was in a bad position, sure, but in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ his future prospects were limitless. That could be said for everyone, of course, but having those prospects and knowing how to use them was different. Argrave knew more about this world than most of its denizens, after all.

Some would call Argrave in his former life a ‘lore master,’ or perhaps a ‘master of esoteric knowledge.’ Most preferred the term, ‘weird nerd that fills out game wikis.’ Some people had to be martyrs, delving through the game for thousands of hours to fill out wiki articles that future players would use. Argrave was one such underappreciated saint. He was the primary contributor to the ‘Heroes of Berendar’ wiki.

One might think this extensive knowledge would reassure Argrave. Instead, it only served as fuel for his dread.

A game, especially an open-world action RPG like ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ used conflict to make players have fun. ‘Heroes of Berendar’ was fun, indeed; it had great wars, foul monsters, ancient calamities and gods, and other such ‘fun’ gameplay. The game was a grim gothic fantasy.

Yet another detail bothered Argrave more. The game had nine pre-made characters to select from, each with varying styles. One could make a custom character, too. Their personalities were all different, as were the paths they took to confront the final boss, Gerechtigkeits. Only one thing remained consistent, no matter which of them the player selected.

Argrave lifted the bronze hand mirror on the table. He didn't see his gray eyes looking back at him. Instead, a familiar sight greeted him.

The bronze hand mirror was how the player viewed their stats. So much had been ripped away; he could not see his attributes, for instance, nor his health and fatigue. The menu had been stripped of all but the basics.

This simple mirror was the heaviest thing Argrave had ever held. Without fail, this little mirror followed the player through every second of 'Heroes of Berendar.' It was a companion to importance, a symbol, unwittingly, to duty. The player decided the fate of many things in the continent of Berendar, through their action or inaction. Invasions, civil wars, plagues, monster incursions, and above all, looming like a guillotine, the ancient calamity Gerechtigkeits.

The player decided how this world would end up. And the player always had the very bronze hand mirror Argrave held.

His grip tightened around the hand mirror. Suddenly, he threw it aside. It bounced against the wall, ringing quietly, and then slid across the floor while spinning. He watched it as it spun, twirling wildly about like some twisted game of 'spin the bottle.' It stopped pointing at Argrave's bed.

Argrave leaned against the table, kneading his forehead as he stared at the mirror. He chuckled to himself and shook his head.

"Throwing tantrums like I'm a child. What is this?" He stood from the chair and walked over to pick up the mirror. He picked it up, and then walked to the bed where he cleaned it off with the white bedsheet. He gazed at the simple menu in the mirror, walking to the window where the dual suns still stood outside. He could remember those traits and skills displayed on the menu by heart. He had written many of their articles on the wiki.

Argrave sighed and sat on the windowsill. The former Argrave was not untalented. [Intelligent] was a very good trait: it increased all skill gains by 25%. It was worse than [Quick] or [Genius], but such traits were rarer than rare, and no original main character possessed it. What's more, a High in [Magic Affinity] was a godsend for a mage character. These extreme blessings were combated by the [Weak] and [Sickly] traits. [Weak] was fixable if he exercised and ate properly. [Sickly] made doing so impossible.

That trait could not be removed by ordinary means. He would never be a warrior—not for a long, long time, at least.

Fortunately, Argrave had no intention of being a warrior. He disliked touching people, and doubly so touching blood. The path of magic suited him.

“Jesus Christ. I’m considering things. I guess this is really happening.” He lowered the mirror and stared outside. “Player one’s inserting his coin. He’s getting ready for a flawless, deathless playthrough.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. A half-laugh, half-scoff came from his lips. “Who am I kidding? I’m Valhalla-bound at the speed of sound.”

Argrave looked at the hand mirror once more. He studied the handle, the back of it. Then, his hand clenched again—this time, not to throw, but to hold tight.

“I have to go forward. If I do nothing... everything will fall apart.” Argrave smiled at the mirror, though there was no reflection. “Who knows? Maybe there’s a third ‘continue.’ Can’t imagine I’ll have a heavier burden the third go of things.”

When Argrave stood this time, he did so with a vigor he lacked previously. He looked around his room, genuinely taking in his surroundings for the first time. Between this stuffy robe and the books and papers strewn all about, Argrave could confidently deduce that, at present, he was still an Acolyte in the Order of the Gray Owl—in other terms, he was still in training to become a full-fledged Wizard of the Order.

Argrave of Vasquer was a Wizard from the game’s beginning, meaning the game had not begun yet. If that was the case, his list of enemies would not be so large. In particular, Argrave had not irreparably damaged his relationship with one of the nine playable characters, Nikoletta of Monticci. An Acolyte had to submit a thesis to graduate from an Acolyte to a Wizard, and Argrave had possession of Nikoletta’s as part of the royal family’s conspiracy. *Think about that later*, Argrave dismissed.

Argrave found a pair of black gloves in the drawer and pulled them on. There was a symbol on the back of the gloves—a golden snake curling around a sword. It was the symbol of House Vasquer, the royal family. Argrave was a bastard of that family.

“It’s like a cursed mark,” Argrave commented. “I think my family is the most likely to kill me.”

I need information, Argrave reflected. I need to find out how much time I have to plan, and I need to get my bearings. I need to assess the situation and proceed calmly. A well-formed plan is the foundation to success. The one who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.

With a clear direction in his head, Argrave looked around the room once more. Papers were strewn everywhere, books and food were laid about without any regard, and nothing was in order.

“First, I should clean. Will help me think, plan,” Argrave muttered. “And then... I act.”