

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 11: Lion Cub's First Hunt

Elias alighted from the carriage at the gates of Vendleber, scanning the small town's streets thoroughly. He had removed the gray robe of the Order of the Gray Owl, instead donning the traditional white and gold of his House Parbon. After searching the streets for a time for the banner bearing the golden lion, he walked to the men guarding the gate.

"Excuse me," Elias asked, touching one guard's shoulder lightly. "Have you seen a large party of horsemen come through here with the banner of House Parbon?"

The guard jumped a little, and then looked up at Elias. "Errm... yes, we did. The lord told us to... well, I probably shouldn't say," the guard stopped himself.

Elias frowned. "Are they here, then?"

"Aye," the guard nodded. "Most of them are camping outside the walls. I think they let a few stay in the inn on the western side of town, though." The guard pointed. "The Rattled Rain, it's called."

"Thank you," said Elias, retrieving a gold coin and handing it to the guard.

"Oh..!" the guard brightened. Elias turned and strode quickly to where the guard had pointed. "Thank you!" the guard yelled out, but Elias paid it little heed.

Half-running through the streets, Elias kept an eye on the wooden signs hanging above doorways. Once he spotted the Rattled Rain, he paused, catching his breath before entering the doorway. Some familiar faces turned to meet him—some of his father's knights.

"Lucain. Mystle," Elias greeted, walking towards them. "Where's---"

"Elias," a deep voice echoed through the inn. Elias turned his head towards the stairs, watching as his father slowly walked down into the inn's common room. He looked disheveled, his long red hair splayed out across his plate mail in thick, greasy strands.

"Father," Elias said, moving to greet him. "I came as soon as I heard that you had left Parbon."

“Why are you here?” Margrave Reinhardt asked angrily. “You’re supposed to be in the Tower of the Gray Owl.”

“My term as a student is over,” Elias explained quickly. He held out a steel badge that bore an owl on it. “I’m a Wizard of the Gray Owl, now. My research was admissible.”

Reinhardt prodded his chest with a finger, sending Elias back a step. “And so you come here, instead of heading back to Parbon?”

“I should stand idly by while you go to help my uncle?” Elias spoke, matching his father’s bravado.

Reinhardt grit his teeth for a minute. Then, he stepped forward, hugging his son tightly. After a moment, they pulled away. The Margrave kept a firm grip on Elias’ shoulders. “Congratulations, Elias. I did not think a son of mine would ever become a Wizard, but that doesn’t change the fact that I am proud.”

Elias smiled slightly. It seemed a rare expression on both of the men’s faces. They sat at one of the tables in the corner, alone.

“In truth, I didn’t think I would be able to find you at Vendleber. I assumed you would already have started onwards to Dirracha.”

“I wanted to. We ran into trouble. A cunning snake,” Reinhardt said resentfully. “I knew I should have taken my wyvern instead of a horse...”

Elias placed his hands on the table, looking at his father as he slouched on the table. “Trouble with such a large host in tow? Was it one of the king’s eldest sons?”

“No. Argrave, the royal bastard.” The Margrave looked to his hands, a grim and wrathful look settled on his face.

“What?” Elias asked incredulously. He’d seen his father have that expression before, but it was only after a great defeat. “But he’s... I don’t believe he’s even reached C-rank magic, yet. How...?”

“His magic was hardly relevant. But his words... even thinking back, he led me by the nose like a fool. He was travelling with the Duke of Monticci’s daughter and... a child of House Veden. I forget who.”

“Mina,” Elias filled in the blanks.

“Right.” Reinhardt nodded. “I thought to take him as a hostage. He came willingly. It made me let my guard down. The whole way, he complained about horses and hating

them. He played my temper, stoked my doubts, made himself appear weak, and ingrained his hatred of horses into my head... I thought to punish him by having him sleep next to the horses." The Margrave grit his teeth. "Probably what he wanted the whole time. From there... he frenzied them. A firepit and illusion magic, they said. He stole my horse, rode towards the coast. The men spent hours getting the mounts back in order." Reinhardt slammed the table slightly.

Elias leaned back in the chair, holding his hand to his chin.

"He has the cunning natural to the House of Vasquer. Their banner bears a snake, and it suits them. That one is a snake with a silver tongue," Reinhardt brooded. "The men were up for hours chasing horses. They need rest, as do the horses. We'll head to Dirracha tomorrow. If you're to come with me, you should sleep. Some rooms are available upstairs. We rented out the whole inn."

"Right," Elias said absentmindedly. "You said Argrave rode towards the coast? Mateth? You must've sent someone after him."

"Probably Mateth, yes." Reinhardt straightened, leaning back in the chair until the plate he was wearing creaked. "The Duke's daughter seemed willing to protect him. He'll head towards there, seek protection. I didn't bother sending anyone. By the time I knew he was gone, it was far too late to send anyone after him. He stole the best horse we had, my Redsnow. I had to borrow one of my knight's horses."

"I see," said Elias, a hint of frustration on his tone. "You should go and sleep. I have far too much energy left to sleep just yet, and I've not eaten."

"The innkeeper makes decent food. Ask her," Reinhardt said, handing Elias a few gold coins from a pouch. "We'll wake early tomorrow. And son," the Margrave paused.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you came." Reinhardt patted his shoulder and walked up the stairs.

"Ah..." Elias did not know how to answer. He watched his father's red hair fade out of view, and then the rest of the knights followed close behind him. Elias stayed in the common room. The innkeeper sat at a barstool at the other side of the room.

After a few minutes had passed, Elias stood and left the Rattled Rain. He walked towards the gate of the city. The suns were just beginning to fade. He saw a few of his father's knights and followed them.

After exiting Vendleber, Elias saw a few horses stabled up. Elias approached without issue, as most of the knights recognized his crimson hair common in House Parbon.

The horses seemed thoroughly guarded, but the knights wouldn't dare impede the Margrave's heir.

Elias scanned the horses, looking for the one that looked most suitable. He spotted the one that looked the fastest and strongest, and walked to it.

"Erm... young lord Elias," one of the knights interrupted. "It's an honor to see you, but...?"

"My father gave me something to deliver," Elias explained. "I need a horse posthaste."

"Oh!" the knight said. "In that case, pardon me." He bowed and walked away.

Elias got atop the horse, and after a few minutes of adjustment, set off into a canter. When they were far enough away, he urged the horse into a gallop.

*I'm sorry, father. I won't be of much help to you in the capital—more a hindrance. I should head to Mateth, find Argrave. Mete out punishment... or at least, try and find Redsnow.*

In the back of his head, Elias couldn't help but acknowledge the fact that his sister was the first thing on his mind. In truth, Elias felt he was blindly stumbling forward towards some vague attempt at a vengeance he didn't even know how to enact. He suppressed his doubts and rode onwards towards Mateth.

Coincidentally and entirely unbeknownst to Elias, the horse he had taken was the one that the Margrave Reinhardt had borrowed to replace his white stallion.

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It was midday. Argrave stood at the docks in Mateth, staring up at one of the buildings with his back facing the sea. He kept his gaze fixed on a pigeon. He had the distinct feeling that he was locking gazes with it. It stayed a fair distance away from the seagulls, refusing to eat or travel.

*I'll need to do something about these pigeons soon,* Argrave thought.

Argrave turned his head away and walked from the docks. He had secured one card to play against the coming tides. Gerechtigkeits was coming. No matter what the player did in 'Heroes of Berendar,' his summoning was inevitable. He was the millennial auditor for the world's continued existence. His name was German for 'justice'—he was the test offered by the world itself to determine if it was worthy of existing, or if a new one was necessary. Fantasy Darwinism, in essence.

As was natural with ancient calamities, Gerechtigkeits' method of judgement was through strength.

Mateth, probably the richest city in the continent of Berendar and the capital of the Dukedom of Monticci, would soon suffer an unexpected invasion. This problem would be exacerbated by the impending civil war and the succession crisis caused by the death of King Felipe III. None of those events had happened yet, but they were inevitable, guided to happen by innumerable factors. Personal strength alone could not defeat the ancient calamity. One would need an army.

*Feels like Rodney King. Can't we all just get along?* Argrave sighed, weaving his way through this city he knew all-too-well. He grabbed the bronze hand mirror in his breast pocket to remind himself of his duty.

The invaders coming to Mateth came from a land overseas. The people in Berendar called them 'snow elves,' which was a fitting term going off appearance alone. They were elven in appearance and descent, but they had many differences from the forest-dwellers far in the south. Their skin was paler, their hairs were lighter, and they were much larger. They called themselves Veidimen. Their nation was Veiden. They followed a Patriarch, who was the head of the innumerable conquered tribes.

Some of the snow elves inhabited Berendar already, having been exiled from Veiden. Others simply sought greener pastures. Argrave found them quite interesting. Theirs was a militaristic, honor-focused society excelling in warfare. Contracts were almost sacred exchanges in their culture. At the same time, they were uncompromising enemies who viewed conquest as an inevitability and a duty vested by their god.

Argrave was planning on meeting one of those snow elves. He was an exile and a mercenary. Even with Erlebnis' Blessing of Supercession, Argrave needed some concrete and reliable protection. Quite frankly, he didn't fancy his chances in a fight against most anyone.

A Veidimen mercenary could always be trusted, despite racist sentiments persisting throughout Berendar. They would never forsake a contract for a higher-paying enemy, even if that enemy was the Patriarch of Veiden. They believed their goddess would condemn them to their version of the underworld—and perhaps She would. Argrave was counting on that loyalty.

Argrave came to a stop at a certain establishment in Mateth. The building looked seedy—it was decrepit, unmarked, and Argrave pulled his gloves a little tighter as he looked at it. He did not wish to linger here long, to say the least. He grabbed the iron ring that marked the door gingerly and pulled it open.

Raucous noise filled Argrave's ears at once. He entered into the building and closed the door. Argrave caught many gazes—he presumed (and hoped) because of his height—but most were too busy with their own food and drink to do anything more than look.

Argrave's eyes scanned the room. He looked at the Veidimen mercenary's usual spot, but no one sat there. He grew disappointed and uneasy.

In his peripheries, he saw a familiar black helmet modelled after the Vikings and a large greatsword leaning against one of the wall's pillars. Argrave smiled, weaving through the crowd while trying his best not to touch anyone. He stepped over some spilled drink and came to stand over precisely the man he'd been looking for.

"Galamon?" Argrave asked.

The man in question lifted his head up slowly. He had a mane of white hair that looked like fine silk, falling far past his sharp ears and broad shoulders. His face was firm and stoic, his skin far paler than Argrave's. He had near entirely white eyes, the iris separated from the sclera by only a thin black line. In stark contrast to his features, he wore black armor. It was mostly plate, yet gray fur covered the shoulders. The snow elf had been sharpening a dagger with a whetstone.

"It is you," Argrave nodded when his question went unanswered. "Wonderful. I'd like to hire you."

Galamon scanned Argrave quickly with his eyes. Then, he pointed to the opposite chair with his dagger. "Sit." The snow elf's voice was deep and guttural, enough to make the faint of heart tremble in their boots.

Argrave made sure the chair had nothing spilt on it, then sat as he was directed. He was unoffended by Galamon's brief command. This was simply the man's nature. Galamon retrieved a flask in his pouch and took a drink. That might deter a prospective employer, seeing their mercenary drink so casually.

It wasn't whisky, though. It was blood. Galamon was exiled from Veiden because he was a vampire.

Argrave placed his hands on the table, crossing them over each other. "I have an employment offer for you. Mercenary work."