

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 14: A Prince's Prize

Argrave took the documents Induen was offering him. He tore the small red strip keeping them bound and took a look at the contents. A seaside castle was, by its location alone, more valuable than most inland estates. Once he saw the name on the deed, though, Argrave couldn't help but smile.

Foamspire. Hah. A fitting gift from Induen. It's like a bright red apple that's rotten once you bite in, or a block of gold that's lead on the inside.

"I see you're pleased," said Induen, noticing Argrave's smile. "I hope that you realize, just as the punishments for disobeying me are great, so are the rewards for being loyal. And I hope, further, that this meeting demonstrates you can hide *nothing* from me."

Argrave looked up from the deed, already proving Induen wrong as he hid his amusement. *He really suits the banner he bears; the snake on his cuffs, that's him to a T. He's a good manipulator. But knowing his nature is precisely what one needs to escape the web he weaves.*

"I never expected that I'd own Foamspire. I've heard tell of it—a castle of marble at the top of a great sea arch. It serves as a lighthouse for sailors to the nearby town and has quite formidable defenses. One could house near a thousand knights there. One can see the ocean stretch for miles atop it. And it's said to be warm all year round—a regular Xanadu on this mortal realm." Argrave talked it up like it was a sales pitch.

And a castle that's fated to fall into the ocean this year. How wonderful.

Argrave held the deed close. "Thank you, Prince Induen." *Now that I've shown some worth to him—cleverness, magical talent—he'll try to win me over to his side. This 'rich castle' is fated to be rubble in the sea in not a few months, and he knows that.*

"If you're pleased, that is enough." Induen nodded and walked to the door. "Truth be told, you did something of a service to the House of Vasquer. Facing the wrath of both Parbon and Monticci would be... more difficult. They have many friends."

"Then I will do my best to ensure that Monticci stays neutral, or even loyal, in the days to come," Argrave swore. It was not technically a lie. He didn't wish for Monticci to join the impending civil war. They had to focus their powers on the Veidimen.

Induen nodded. “Good. But you should remember that Nikoletta’s fate will not change. Discard any delusions that might be festering.”

Argrave nodded. Induen and the royal knights walked swiftly out of the door. Only once it was shut did he let his expression relax. He stood, casting a glance at the branch manager.

“Thank you for healing me, Elbert.” Argrave commented. Even if the man had been brusque, greeting rudeness with rudeness only bred enmity. Besides, he didn’t wish to leave alongside Prince Induen.

The branch manager raised an eyebrow. “Don’t thank me. I was merely showing deference to the Prince and a fellow High Wizard of the Order.”

Argrave wiped his bloodied glove off with the handkerchief. “You still did it. That counts for something.”

Elbert moved to his desk. “Get out, then.”

Complying, Argrave walked back out into the hall. He opened the door to an empty hall, save two familiar people—Nikoletta and Mina. They were both watching the stairway, presumably because the heir to the throne had just walked by out of the blue. Nikoletta wore a shoulder bag and a fancy blue dress complete with resplendent jewelry, while Mina had donned more casual leather gear bereft of accessories.

“Nikoletta. Good timing. I wanted to ask you about a book I left on your carriage,” Argrave said casually, in part to dispel his own mood of gloom.

Mina started and looked in his direction. “Wha-oh. It’s you, Grave. You—”

Mina paused, her face slowly freezing up. Nikoletta turned to face him calmly, but soon enough her face was just as perturbed.

“Grave?” Argrave pressed Mina. “Is that your nickname for me? Better than ‘Gravy,’ I suppose. Disgusting food. Bland, slimy. Okay with bread, I’ll admit,” Argrave rambled.

“Argrave, you... why are you all bloody?” Nikoletta reached a tentative hand forward.

“More importantly,” Argrave diverted cheerfully, stepping away from her hand, “Why exactly are you two here?”

“We thought we’d find you here, because you’d mentioned—” Nikoletta trailed off. “No, I don’t think this is more important. What happened to you? Not to mention the blood, you look pale... even more than usual. And much skinnier.”

"Who can say, really," Argrave dismissed vaguely. "Anyway, back to that book..."

"No, back to the blood, Grave!" Mina interjected. "Your brother just walked by. Don't think—"

"I'm fine, aren't I?" Argrave held his arms wide. "No injuries, no scratches. My handsome face is still handsome." He caressed his chin. "For all you know, I just got through eating someone alive."

Argrave couldn't be sure Induen didn't have people listening in. The crown prince had learned what Argrave had been up to very quickly—it stood to reason he had an extensive network of people willing and ready to hand whatever secrets they heard straight up to Induen. The branch manager Elbert was one such example.

"If you don't want to talk about it, fine," Nikoletta said, a bit of coldness seeping into her tone.

"It's not that I don't want to," Argrave said. "Perhaps at another time, another place," he tried to hint subtly. "I'm simply preoccupied."

"Preoccupied? Are you kidding me?" Nikoletta asked incredulously.

Mina tugged on her friend's blue sleeve and said lightly, "Nicky." She leaned forward and whispered something in Nikoletta's ear. Argrave could feel a faint pulse of magic around Mina's mouth. It was probably an illusion spell of some kind designed to mask words.

"Ah... I'm sorry, Argrave. I shouldn't pry," Nikoletta said, trying to sound conciliatory in light of her misinterpretation. "As for that book... here." Nikoletta reached the shoulder bag and pulled out the familiar book.

Argrave's face lit up. He took it and nearly wiped it off with his handkerchief before remembering it was soaked in his blood. "Never thought Mina would catch on quicker than you, Nikoletta."

Mina frowned. "What does that—"

"How auspicious, this book," Argrave interrupted. "I would hate to lose the first book I took out of the Tower." Argrave bowed. "Thank you for keeping it for me."

Mina's yellow eyes seemed to spark with anger, and she fumed silently in the background as Nikoletta crossed her arms. "I am glad I was able to return it to you. I feared I would not be able to. People that like to bear their burden alone tend to end in an early grave," she said pointedly.

"Oh, yes. This burden on my back is wearing at my spine," Argrave said drolly. "I assure you; I'm doing fine."

Nikoletta shook her head. "Your other luggage is at my father's estate. I can take you to it, if you please."

"Keep it. It's all clothes. You can take it out and stare at it when you miss me, which is sure to happen often."

"I'm going to throw it out," she answered without missing a beat.

"At least sell it," Argrave protested. "Those clothes have to be worth something. A paltry sum to you, to be fair, but for royal bastards like myself..." Argrave paused. "On that matter, I have a favor to ask. We aren't on your carriage, so I think it's permissible." Argrave looked at Mina, but she didn't seem bothered. He briefly wondered if she was starting to warm up to him.

Nikoletta frowned. "It depends on what it is."

"Nothing major, or at least I think not. I was simply wondering if it would be possible to get access to the Baretta Troupe Auction."

The Baretta Troupe Auction was full of high rollers with plenty of money to throw around. A player required a certain level of fame to participate without a recommendation. Usually, one could only get that recommendation during a certain quest. Argrave hoped to circumvent that.

"If it's just that..." Nikoletta took a second to consider. "Why, has something there caught your eye?"

Argrave shook his head. "The opposite. I have something rather eye-catching to show the world. I would sell it normally, but it fetches a bit too much for a street vendor." He tapped the deed to Foamspire against his leg.

Nikoletta paced about, scratching her chin. "Putting something up for exhibit is a bit..."

Argrave felt sudden chills. Then, he learned something he did not know before.

Erlebnis wishes to speak with me.

He came to know this as clearly as if someone had shouted it into his ears. He reached for one of his pockets and pulled free the red stone disc the emissary of Erlebnis had given him. It was pulsing ever so slowly, as constant as the tides on the ocean. Argrave couldn't help but grin.

"I must go." Argrave started walking away.

"Wait, what are you...?" Nikoletta exclaimed, surprised.

"Urgent business. We can talk later in greater detail. For now, I have to go."

Looks like I get my trump card a bit faster than I thought.

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Elias leaned over the edge of a wooden balcony, gazing at the courtyard in front of the Mateth branch of the Order of the Gray Owl. He had found his father's horse at one of the many horse breeders in Mateth, and the stablemaster referred him to Duke Enrico of Monticci. As much as he wanted to seize the animal right then and there, the horse master had the duke's seal, and he did not wish to enrage Duke Enrico by acting out of turn in his territory.

Argrave's behavior in the Tower had been much different than what Elias was accustomed to, but that only redoubled his loathing. That the royal bastard had humiliated his father so, played him like a fool with his words... it affirmed Elias' doubt of the sincerity of the words that they'd exchanged in the Tower of the Gray Owl. *A salamander in the hills of Vysenn to cure my sister... what nonsense.*

Elias had seen Prince Induen come and leave. Just after him came Nikoletta of Monticci, shadowed by her friend, Mina of Veden.

If there was one place Argrave was likely to come to, it would be this Mateth branch of the Order. Unlike Elias, after turning in his research Argrave had left the Tower of the Gray Owl immediately. In order to graduate from Acolyte to Wizard of the Gray Owl, he would need to head to one of the various branches of the Order of the Gray Owl in prominent cities.

Though Elias had acted rashly and moved to Mateth as fast as the horse would take him, he was not entirely certain of what he should do—furthermore, he did not know what he *could* do in the tightly guarded city of Mateth. His gut simply screamed that it was the right thing to do. His intuition was usually on point. His father, Reinhardt, had said that it was a trait shared by most of House Parbon.

Elias saw someone heads taller than most nearby leave the Order's branch. As he looked further, he distinguished that it was a man in dark leather gear with obsidian hair. *Argrave. Has to be.* Elias watched further, confirming the person's identity.

He's talking to someone, Elias thought, taking mental notes. *They're tall... black armor, very well-built. Weapons look expensive, possibly enchanted. A mercenary, maybe, but more likely an incognito knight. Given the height, it might even be someone from House*

Vasquer—perhaps Orion, though that's unlikely. The man is far too showy to move quietly with Argrave.

Then, the two walked off into the streets in long strides. Elias stopped leaning on the balcony, watching as they carried off down the street. It would be easy to follow them, given their size. They could be spotted miles away.

I'm not sure what they're doing... but I can at least try to find out. I can't be noticed.