

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 8: Sun Tzu Teaches Horseplay

“What an unpleasant trip...” Argrave complained aloud, sitting atop a rock as he cleaned off his clothes with water magic. Dust, dirt, grass, and worse covered his clothes. His upper legs had been chafed raw, probably because of poor posture. He had dealt with that as best he could with healing magic. Across from Argrave, the Margrave Reinhardt hammered in poles to set up a tent. The last bit of sunlight was fading, and so they were setting up camp.

In truth, Argrave loathed complaining so much, but all words served a purpose. Reinhardt was an impulsive and wrathful man, but he was also honorable and charitable. He would never abuse a hostage. Like Sun Tzu said, “If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant.”

“I’m in way over my head...” Argrave muttered. “What do I know about enemies... third-year college student... disgraceful...”

The Margrave’s white stallion neighed at Argrave as though to comfort him, red mane flowing in the wind. Argrave flinched and stared at it for a time. The longer he stared, the more his expression softened. Slowly, a smirk entered his face, and he looked back at Reinhardt.

“I thought horses were disgusting before. I see now that I’m right. Don’t know why you ride these things. Disgusting,” Argrave said loudly at Reinhardt.

Reinhardt paused, holding the hammer he was using to nail the tent’s stakes tight in hand and gazing at Argrave.

“Look at them,” Argrave pointed. “They defecate randomly, like giant toddlers. Filthy. Unclean. Their mouths are strange, like some foul cross between a mole, an antelope, and a human.”

“Then tomorrow, you can walk,” Reinhardt said coldly. He turned back and started hammering once more, deep into the grassy soil.

“Alright. Better than being stuck atop a horse,” Argrave agreed readily. “Of course, we won’t make it to Dirracha as quickly. How tragic.”

Reinhardt did not look over. “Never said we’d slow for you.”

“If I show up bloody and beaten, I’m sure King Felipe will show abundant mercy to your brother,” Argrave bluffed. In truth, King Felipe would probably smile if he saw Argrave battered.

The Margrave did not respond. He picked up another stake—it looked to be the final one—and bent over to jam it in the ground.

“I am not entirely sure what you hope to achieve with this. You bringing me with you is not giving you a bargaining chip—you’re carrying a lit barrel of gunpowder.” Argrave watched Reinhardt. Evidently, the man had decided simply to ignore him.

“When we arrive and you tell the king that you’re keeping me as a ‘guest,’ he certainly will not scrape and bow and release your brother Bruno like nothing happened. He’ll view it as an affront to House Vasquer, like you... killed his favorite dog or something. I’m not worth enough to him. Maybe if I was the crown prince, Induen, or that holy fool Orion, he might take the situation seriously. But then, they wouldn’t come with you willingly. And unlike me, they could probably escape from your little knightly order.”

“You’re good with your words. If you don’t wish to lose your tongue, keep it still,” Reinhardt threatened.

“Empty threats,” Argrave called out, though his heart did drop into his stomach briefly. His mind wandered as he wondered if healing magic could regrow tongues. He grew nauseous as he thought of the blood.

Argrave stood, having finished cleaning his black clothes. He could not mend the rips, but such was life. “Have you ever paused to consider why exactly King Felipe imprisoned your brother?” Argrave held a finger out. “And before you get angry at me, I’m not suggesting he was legitimately plotting treason.”

Reinhardt walked over to Argrave. The Margrave was a little shorter than Argrave, but he certainly did not feel smaller in full plate with a robust body. His ruby-like eyes were unshaking.

“Your brother was one of many stewards in Dirracha. Even if he had been planning treason, without your help, there is little he could have done. Bluntly put, besides being related to you, he is not important. King Felipe is not aiming for him. He is aiming for you. He is trying to incite a reaction, knowing your impulsivity and your direct manner of handling things.”

“A king wants his subjects to rebel. Hah.” Reinhardt chuckled, but it sounded forced to Argrave’s ears. “I overestimated your reasoning.”

Argrave held his arms wide and shrugged. “Laugh if you will. House Parbon has been growing wealthier. New mines have been recently discovered on your land, you have a growing city, and lastly, a good seat—your Lionsun Castle. A king would be wholly justified in seizing those rich lands if his subject were to rebel.”

Reinhardt walked away from Argrave and grabbed a folded tarp. He waved it, unfolding it, and then cast it over the poles that he’d just hammered into the ground.

“King Felipe has trueborn sons besides Induen, the youngest of whom is just coming of age. He wishes to secure lands, incomes, and a future for Orion of Vasquer, that holy fool. A great warrior, maybe even better than you, at the age of 24. A fitting lord for the lands of Parbon... in the king’s eyes, at least.”

Reinhardt stepped back, looking at the tent he’d built with his hands on his hips. Argrave walked a little closer until he felt the pull of the rope wrapped around his torso. The Margrave had seen fit to tie him to a rock, like some sort of animal.

Argrave crossed his arms and watched. “Do you really think the king would balk at starting and suppressing a small rebellion to increase his own powerbase? You are his vassal, true enough, but you only serve him because of your honor and perceived duty.”

Reinhardt looked to Argrave. “Do not presume to know me or my intentions.”

“I’ll ‘presume to know’ King Felipe III, at the very least.” Argrave pointed to his chest. “When we arrive and he learns that I am captive, he’ll feign anger, indignance. Then, he—or perhaps my brother, Induen—will order me killed. They’ll pin that killing on you!”

Argrave spoke with complete confidence, because that was precisely one of the ways Argrave had died throughout the course of ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ It had not been Reinhardt keeping him captive, but rather one of the main characters—Ruleo, a rogue-type character. Another timebomb Argrave had to find and deal with.

“Enough of this,” Reinhardt snapped. He moved to Argrave and grabbed the rope, untying it from the rock and yanking it forward. He led him inside the tent and tied him to one of the thicker posts. “You will wait here while I stable my horse. I will bring back a horse blanket for you, and you will sleep on the grass.”

“A horse blanket? I should share a quilt with a *horse*? First you tie me to a post, and now you bury me beneath animal accessories? Just let me freeze. Better than being reduced to a beast—most of all a filthy, unclean beast like a horse.”

Reinhardt paused tying the knot around the post. He stared at Argrave, breathing deep and heavy, wrath brewing in his chest like a great storm. He furiously untied the knot, then yanked it, sending Argrave stumbling as he rushed off in a tizzy.

“I tried to be gracious, as a true knight should be to a hostage.” Reinhardt spoke loudly as he walked outside the tent, drawing the attention of many of the other knights who were setting up their own tents. “Have it your way, then.”

He grabbed the reins of his white stallion and pulled it just aside Argrave. Argrave diverted most of his attention to his feet to avoid falling. He wasn't sure that Reinhardt wouldn't simply pull him along. Some of the knights watched their passing, shaking their heads or smiling with *schadenfreude* for the loudmouth captive.

Reinhardt dragged Argrave through all of the camp, until the distinct sound of whinnying and neighing became louder and louder. The knights had constructed a makeshift stable of sorts—a few knights watched over it, huddled over a pile of wood that was likely an unlit firepit. The knights stood when they saw their Margrave dragging Argrave along.

The Margrave gave a yank on the rope and threw Argrave in front of them. Argrave collapsed to the grass, landing on his elbows as gracefully as one could manage. It hurt more than he cared to admit—his body was quite fragile.

“Look after the hostage. If he talks too much, I leave it to you to decide how to shut him up, as long as he isn't hurt.” Reinhardt led his own horse to the rest of the other horseflesh and tied its reins up neatly. “Another thing. He's to sleep right next to the horses.”

“Come on,” Argrave protested, rising to his feet. “You don't need to do this, Margrave.”

“You didn't need to speak,” the Margrave said as he walked by uncaringly. “Didn't stop you.”

Argrave stared at the Margrave as he walked away, his back facing the knights that had been assigned to look after him. If the Margrave cared to look back, he could see a faint smile lining Argrave's face.

Praise be to Sun Tzu, Argrave thought. Know thy self, know thy enemy. One battle, one victory. Far off from a thousand, but it's a start.

He felt a faint tug at the rope around his chest, and Argrave turned his head to the knights behind him. One of them had picked up the rope.

“The Margrave has given us the order,” one of the knights said, a serious-looking man with orange hair. “If you do not give us difficulties, you will not be troubled.”

Like master, like servant. The Margrave chose honorable knights. Fighting the Margrave as a spellcaster with D-rank skills? Positively suicidal. Eluding these guys, though... I just need an opportunity. And misdirection.

"I surrender," Argrave said, raising his hands in the air. "Do with me what you will."

The knights looked at each other, then eventually led Argrave to a post beside the Margrave's horse. They tied him firmly, yanking the rope tightly to make sure both the post and the knot would hold. They argued briefly about who would watch over Argrave. Eventually, they played a game of chance, and the winner stood just beside Argrave, watching him loosely. After that, they resumed their duties—fetching water for the horses, gathering wood from the distant forest for the fire.

Argrave passed the time by staring at the sky. More and more knights brought their horses to the area, leaving them to the knights assigned on stable duty. The knights watched Argrave, but he kept silent. Unlike the Margrave, he could see no benefit in provoking them. Soon, the moon was peaking above the distant mountains, half-full, bright, and still eerily red. It still gave Argrave shivers to see it.

He bided his time. The Margrave's horse grazed on the grass, its appetite seemingly unending. The moon kept rising, and the last light of dusk slowly faded away as the two suns went behind the planet. Or... Argrave frowned. He supposed this planet would be rotating around the suns. Was it even called a 'sun' anymore? It must be a different star system entirely. The people still called them 'the suns,' though.

A faint scratching entered Argrave's ears. He turned its head to its source. One of the stable knights had retrieved a piece of flint. He awkwardly used his sword as the 'steel' of the flint and steel, casting sparks onto the wood. He grunted in frustration.

"Just fetch one of the knights that knows magic," one of the men commented.

"Forget it," the knight crouching dismissed the other's comments. "We can do it ourselves. Magic isn't everything."

"The wood's too wet to catch fire. It won't work," the other reasoned. "C'mon, we can just walk into camp. Won't take long."

"I can do it," the knight stubbornly refused. He set aside his sword. "Hand me my gauntlet. I'll use it instead."

Argrave watched the exchange, head tilted.

The other knight sighed but handed him the gauntlet. The would-be fire starter put on his gauntlet and tried to snap with the flint. After a few tries, and some sparks cast, Argrave heard a distinct *snap* and some curses.

“Damn it all. The flint broke.” He threw it aside.

“I’ll get someone,” the other said in exasperation.

Argrave raised his hand. “I can help,” he yelled out.

All of the knights near the horses turned their head to Argrave, looking at him.

“I’m an Acolyte for the Order of the Gray Owl. I can start your fire,” Argrave explained further.

They all stared at him. “The Margrave wouldn’t like that, I don’t think,” the one guarding Argrave commented.

“Ah. I see.” Argrave lowered his hand. “It’s no trouble, but if you insist... I was just cold too.”

“It’s just a fire, Marsh,” the one who’d been using the flint and steel said. “We can let him sit close. Keep a good eye on him. If he was dangerous, the Margrave wouldn’t have left him to us.”

The one guarding Argrave shrugged. “Alright. But the rope stays on.”

They untied the knot and led Argrave to the fireplace. He held his hand out and used some simple F-rank magic to conjure a flame. Soon enough, the small pile of twigs and logs was set alight. Argrave sat on the grass, holding his hand out. All of the knights gathered around, letting out quiet cheers.

“Some heat. Finally,” Argrave said.

“Just before the night gets truly cold, too.” One of the knights scooted close, holding his hands out. “Thanks, kid.”

Argrave nodded. He watched the flickering flame. It brought back memories. Long camping trips, with nothing to do at nightfall but sit and stare at the flame, eating whatever sweets they’d packed with them.

He waited and waited, watching as the knights gathered around the flame. They could not fall asleep—they had Argrave to keep watch on, but more importantly, the horses. If they were to run amok... well, it would be devastating.

Coincidentally, horses feared the flames. Turning his head towards them, he saw their beady eyes reflecting the fire. All of them watched the fire cautiously. These horses were probably well used to fire, being trained and raised by humans. But illusion

magic... well, it was particularly effective on those that did not know about it. Animals knew nothing of magic.

Argrave got closer to the fire, holding his hands up. It looked as ordinary a gesture as any. Illusion magic could muddle the senses, too, but it could also make something seem larger, more intense than it actually was. All of the knights were relaxed.

It seemed as good a time as any. His heart was moving fast enough to burst from his chest, but he told himself that fortune favored the brave.

Argrave cast a spell—[Intensify,] a D-rank Illusion spell. In his eyes, nothing occurred. In everyone else's eyes, though, the flames would appear to roar to life, exploding into the air. The potent smell of smoke would fill their nostrils. The heat would intensify.

After he cast the spell, some of the knights leapt away from the fire. The most immediate reaction, though, was the horses.

They all reared on their legs and fought against what tied them to their posts. Argrave suppressed his spell, but the damage had been done and the horses spiraled out of control quickly. Animals tended to be keen towards each other's emotions, and one's reaction could incite the entire herd. Even a warhorse was not exempt from this, especially without a rider on its back.

All of the knights nearby scrambled to get the horses under control—some broke free from their bindings and galloped across the plains. Argrave stood, acting just as surprised as all the rest. He walked towards the horses in even strides, cutting his rope with an E-rank spell, [Wind Knife]. His hands shook dreadfully, but his mind was focused.

Argrave clambered atop a large white stallion with a red mane—the Margrave's horse—completely avoiding the attention of the knights, who were distracted by their primary duty of keeping the horses. Perhaps they did not even expect foul play. Argrave cut the white stallion's binding and held its head, casting another D-rank illusion spell, [Pacification.] The horse calmed and obeyed immediately.

With one quiet urge, the Margrave's horse started to gallop. Argrave was thankful that he learned how to ride today. One of the knights—the orange haired one—noticed Argrave's attempt and moved to block him.

The knight drew his sword and thrust at Argrave atop the horse. Argrave twisted his body and conjured another [Wind Knife,] just in time to knock the blade aside. The horse kept moving, slamming its body into the knight and casting him to the ground in a winded mess.

Argrave heard shouts behind him, but he kept his body low to his horse and his mind on the plains ahead. He had been through this area many times in the game before. He knew the way to Mateth. If he were to get there, he would be safe.

He heard a whistle, and saw an arrow just ahead of him on the plains. He twisted back and cast a large wind spell, [Wind Wall,] a simple, immobile barrier of wind that would stop any projectiles seeking him further. Then, he turned, lowering his body onto the horse.

The thundering hooves of the Margrave's stallion echoed in Argrave's head. He felt the only sound larger was the beating of his heart, the pounding of his blood. His whole body was shaking in dread and excitement both. He dared to look back.

The plains were empty. All that could be seen was a distant trail of smoke, and a few knights struggling to retrieve errant horses.

"Heh." Argrave said quietly, the noise lost in the wind. "Hehahaha. HAHAHAHA!" His giggles erupted into triumphant laughter. "Oh, Jesus Christ. I did it."