

JUSTICE (AND A FREE DINNER)

By NocturneWolf

"Hey, look at that wolf in the corner."

"Do you see his halberd? He's one of the rangers from the north."

"Is it safe to let him in here?"

Arias's sharp ears picked up every word floating around the old pub, but he didn't seem to care. The gray-furred canine was used to the nervous looks and the pointed fingers, which his form and conduct naturally drew to him. At well over six feet tall, he was built like a warrior and made few efforts to hide it. Apart from a light chain shirt he wore beneath a beige vest, he wore little armor, choosing to keep his well-muscled arms free to move. If that didn't attract attention to him, his long forest-green cloak and silvery halberd did instead. While it was a useful setup in the wilderness, he thought wryly, it wasn't the most subtle thing to wear in town.

Reclining in his wooden seat, he crossed one leg over the other before gnawing on a small piece of bread slowly. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the other patrons as they gawked and whispered about him, but otherwise he paid little attention to them. Instead, his gaze focused on the barkeep and the young human mother speaking to him. From the woman's demeanor and the way the bartender shrugged and shook his head, she was most likely trying to purchase some food with little success.

Arias's eyes then trailed down to her child, who clung slightly to her dress while she talked. It took him a moment to realize that the small boy was looking at the platter of food on his table, eyeing it with a hunger he was unable to hide. However, it wasn't long before the mother noticed her son's staring, and with a nervous glance at the wolf she ushered him away into a corner of the tavern.

A sudden thud at the doorway brought the chatter in the inn to a halt. Like silhouettes against the chilly night outside, three figures trotted through the open door and, with a commanding air, began to stride purposefully across the floor. Leading the group was a short rotund white mouse, whose colorful linens seemed even more out of place amongst the peasants than Arias's battle garb. The other two were obviously the rodent's bodyguards, two tall muscled foxes with tight shirts and balled fists that seemed ready to start a fight any minute.

As the mouse worked his way past the scattered tables, the townspeople stood up and in turn bowed before returning to their seats, making sure to avoid eye contact with the restless vulpines. However, Arias still saw little reason to stop his meal and failed to rise even as one of the foxes stood over him.

"You must be an outsider," he remarked with a cold sneer.

"That I am," Arias replied equally nonchalantly. He momentarily lowered his legs only to cross them again in the other direction, and action which apparently further frustrated the other canine.

"Some advice to you," the fox remarked with a frown. "You would do well to lower yourself below the presence of Lord Orosan while he is around."

"I see," the wolf nodded slowly, sipping his beer. "I'll keep that in mind." Even then, however, he did not pick himself off his seat.

The vulpine growled impatiently. "Well? Get up and kneel."

Arias smirked. "If I need to be lower than him, I'm not sure my kneeling will solve the problem."

With a snarl, the fox swept his arm across the table, knocking the lupine's tankard to the ground with a crash. "You better learn to watch your mouth, or I'll--"

"Enough, Toya!" the mouse cut in, placing his arm between the two canines. With a huff and a glare, the vulpine backed off to join his compatriot while the rodent took his place. Despite the incident, the mouse still wore a smile on his face and held out his small paw welcomingly.

"Judging by your halberd," the mouse stated. "I'd say you are Arias Nocturne. You have quite the reputation."

With a grin, the wolf returned the handshake before crossing his arms. "Thank you, my lord. I apologize for our little spat," he replied, flashing the fuming fox a sly glance. "I believe you wish to discuss a certain matter with me."

"Yes but not here amongst this mindless rabble," Lord Orosan replied, looking at the other peasants as they looked on. "We can use one of the private rooms in the back."

The mouse gave the bartender a quick gesture, prompting the badger to rush to a nearby door and unlock it, lowering his head respectfully before showing them on. Arias followed behind the rodent, mildly aware of the two foxes trailing him and closing the door behind him. The dimly lit room was sparsely furnished with a stack of crates, a wooden desk and two stools, above which hung a rusted steel lantern.

"Why don't you leave your weapons with my guards?" the mouse noted as he took a seat. "You will need them in pristine condition once you go after the bounty."

"If I go after the bounty," the lupine corrected defensively. "I decide which jobs I will pursue." Despite his remark, he readily slipped off his gear and handed them to the foxes, who placed it in a corner of the room before taking their positions next to the door.

"Well," the rodent answered, swaying his tail slightly. "Once you hear the details, you'll definitely want to take this bounty up."

The wolf grinned as he took his seat. "I'll be the judge of that. Now, if I remember correctly, the target is a human by the name of Theo Larkson?"

"Correct," the mouse replied folding his hands on the table. "He was a peasant tenant farmer on my manor. You'd never know he's a criminal from looking at him. Same goes for his family. Since he left, his wife has been dragging their little runt of a son around town begging."

Arias quickly recalled the young woman and child asking the bartender for food earlier, but he chose to make no mention of it and crossed his arms over his chest. "I see. What sort of crime did Mr. Larkson commit?"

"He hadn't paid his compensation money for well over a month," Lord Orosan explained. "As you surely understand, this sets a bad example for the rest of my tenants, since if none of them paid their dues where would poor little me be?"

He raised his hands up exaggeratedly as if to make his point before continuing.

"As such, I couldn't have such a man continue to live on my premises, so I sent some of my officers to his residencies to demand payment or else evict him from the land. And can you believe it? He resisted, threatened one of my men with a pitchfork before taking off into the forest east of here."

The mouse, contended with his story, leaned back and reached down into his coat. "Now, Mr. Larkson is still just another stupid peasant, so I don't feel it would very difficult for someone of your skill to hunt him down. Still, it would be rather unhealthy for my reputation if this incident is allowed to linger, and I'd be quite happy with you if you could settle it quickly."

"Perhaps I can," Arias muttered, picking at his claws indifferently before looking up again. "How well will I be compensated for it?"

Lord Orosan smiled. "Feast your eyes on this." Lifting his hand out of his cloak, he tossed a sizeable sack onto the table. With a rattle, a few shards of gold tumbled from the top and scattered across the table, glittering in the lamplight. "And I'll be happy to double it if Mr. Larkson is found by the end of the week."

For a few moments, the wolf didn't reply, staring blankly at the money with his equally golden gaze. However, it wasn't long before he began to laugh softly, running his fingers over the fur atop his head. The mouse, confused by the lupine's sudden rapture, sat up and frowned.

"What is so funny?" he asked guardedly.

"This is a very tempting deal," Arias chuckled, rapping his claws on the old wood. "But I have one last question for you."

He sat up, leaning on his elbows. "Do you know who Lawrence Kristo is?"

For the first time during the whole exchange, the mouse's eyes widened as he shifted his seating uneasily. "Lawrence Kristo? I've never heard that name before. What makes you think I know?"

"You should," Arias retorted. "He's the man you hired to sabotage Mr. Larkson's crops."

At once, the rodent drew back, sitting up as his two guards tensed. "Why, I never- Why would I want to ruin one of my tenants' own fields?"

"Because vegetables and grain aren't the only things in his land," Arias stated, crossing his arms again. "Last month, Mr. Larkson discovered a diamond while he was tending his wheat. Although he tried to keep it a secret, word got around the manor and eventually to you. Now, someone of your standing would surely want to profit from this find, and in hopes of being able to search his fields for more gemstones you asked him to give up his residency. When he refused, you decided to take matters into your own hands, and after hiring Mr. Kristo to poison his crops, it would only be a matter of time before he could no longer pay his rent and you'd be free to evict him at your leisure."

With that, Arias arched his eyebrow expectantly. The mouse was unable to speak for several seconds, causing an eerie silence to fall over the room. His mouth opened, but only a moment later was he able to find words to speak.

"Did... did Kristo tell you this?"

The wolf shook his head. "No. I read it from his files... after I devoured him."

With that statement, Lord Orosan quickly stood up and backed away slowly until he was pressed up against the wall. Arias soon followed suite, standing up to his full and very intimidating height. The genial grin on his face had abruptly faded, now replaced with a dark toothy grin.

"Not a lot of things really upset me," he growled. "But seeing this kind of betrayal, being played as a part of that betrayal... that makes my blood boil. And do you know what I do to people who upset me?"

Hyperventilating, the mouse pointed accusingly at the lupine. "Toyo! Lota! Kill him!"

The two foxes lunged claw-first at the wolf, but Arias was not one to be taken down so easily. Sliding out of the way, he grasped Toya's arm and pulled the vulpine's face into his elbow, sending him reeling as Lota slashed at his back. The wolf drove his foot into his assailant's gut before grabbing the fox's shirt collar and levering him over his head onto the table. The mouse, in the meantime, had retrieved a small crossbow from one of the crates and was in the process of arming it when Toya made a grab for Arias's throat. However, just as Lord Orosan made

his shot, the lupine turned his grapple around, and Toya managed a pained grunt from the bolt in his shoulder before he collapsed in pain. With a snarl, Arias leapt over the table and, with a solid backhanded strike, knocked the weapon from the rodent's hand, smashing it against the far wall.

Cowering in fear beneath the wolf's devilish gaze, Lord Orosan managed a weak smile. "Oh come on," he whimpered meekly. "You do jobs like mine all the time, don't you? You're a bounty hunter, for crying out loud!"

"I've already told you," the lupine answered. "I decide which jobs I will pursue." He licked over his lips and let a small globule of drool trickle down from his maw and onto the mouse's forehead. "Now, you interrupted my dinner. So, I'll tell you what. I'll make one out of you..."

"You... you can't do this!" Lord Orosan protested, eyes wide with terror. "My friends will kill you!"

Arias remained unfazed, chuckling maliciously before leaning down. "Yes, them and a million others." His arms lashed out to grab the mouse's, pinning them to his sides with a vice-like grip. "Now hush. Food doesn't put up such a fuss."

The rodent was treated to the sight of Arias's jaws as they opened him, the fence of pearly white fangs parting to reveal the slick saliva-coated tongue and maw-flesh within. It wasn't long before his head was slipped into that terrifying maw, into the inky black beyond where his gullet began to work down on his head. His squirming and thrashing did little to loosen him from the wolf's grip as he swallowed, the warm rippling flesh working over the small plumb body whose taste he craved.

With a satisfied growl, the lupine lifted his quarry into the air easily, tilting his head back to slide the mouse's shoulders and chest down his throat. His tongue licked over every bit of exposed fur it could, taking in the delectable flavor before sending more of his prey into his throat. Shivers crawled up and down his spine at the sensation of the mouse squirming in his body, traveling every closer to their final destination in his stomach.

Before long, the mouse's legs were the only thing that could feel the cold air outside, and to his dismay that feeling was disappearing at an alarming rate. He could feel the canine's sharp teeth graze over his thighs as his head poked into the waiting belly, where the smell of beer and bread hit his nose. Arias shut his eyes to slurp the rest of the mouse euphorically, their kicking finally ceasing as his feet slid over his tongue and disappeared behind his closing jaws. One final swallow sent the rest of the rodent into his now-bloated belly, where his fate would be sealed.

The wolf's gut twitched weakly as Lord Orosan struggled, trying to wriggle his way out to no avail. The air within was hot and stale, shaken by his captor's heartbeat as the walls churned and kneaded him. Gritting his teeth and breathing the heavy air, he pushed against the flesh around him and whimpered pitifully.

"Let me out!" he shouted in panic. "Please, I beg of you! I won't do anything like this ever again, just don't let me die."

Arias merely laughed, rubbing at his belly and murring at the sensations within. "You've lived in your manor house for far too long. It's time you learned something about reality. Justice is not forgiving, and neither am I."

With that, he tuned out the rodent completely, ignoring the thrashing and pleas coming from within. "No, this can't be happening! This can't be..." The strength in his stout body was fading, his mind registering the scent of digestive fluids before his consciousness began to blur. "I can't... be... eaten now..."

At last, the motions finally ended, allowing Arias to step over the unconscious vulpines to retrieve his gear from the corner. Although his stomach was more compact than one would expect, the grey-furred bulge still poked out conspicuously from under his chain shirt. Even so, the wolf didn't seem to care much as he snatched the pouch of gold from the table and headed back into the room. At the sight of the full wolf, silence instantly fell across the entire pub as they stared at the mouse's form within his gut.

Casting barely a glance at the stunned crowd, the lupine headed for the door and nudged it open before pausing. The Larkson's son was standing frozen by the door, unsure what to think of the canine that had just devoured their ruler. After pondering for a moment, Arias unhooked the money pouch from his belt and tossed it to the stunned boy.

"Give that to your mother," he stated solemnly. "I'm sure she'll like it."

With that, he pushed the door the rest of the way open, and after straightening his cloak and taking a deep breath he vanished into the frigid black of the night.