

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 10: Early Onset Eldritch-Induced Baldness

A few days had passed. After cashing the banknote and opening an account in the local bank, Argrave stayed at a fairly expensive inn in Mateth that valued order and cleanliness—virtues he found it difficult to live without, especially given the strenuous circumstances he had been through in the past few days. It was easy to overcome his mysophobia when faced with the very unappealing prospect of being held hostage in opposition to King Felipe III, but now that the danger had passed, he cleaned himself up.

Margrave Reinhardt would not waste the time to send men to find Argrave, he knew. Getting to his brother Bruno was far more important to the Margrave than securing a hostage. Argrave did not fear retribution overmuch. His relationship with the Parbons could never be repaired, though. An unfortunate happening, but it was unavoidable.

He had changed his well-to-do aristocratic clothes for firmer leather clothing—a shirt, boots, gloves, et cetera. Waiting for them to be custom fitted to his considerable height had been the only thing delaying his departure, in truth. It was vaguely armored, but Argrave did not trust his weak body to support full leather armor.

Once they were made, he left expediently from Mateth's western gate, following the road along the coastline for a time. He watched the ships coming and going from the docks in Mateth. Some things remained unchanged. The smell of the salt brought back memories of Earth. There was the unfamiliar, too—the smell of an otherworldly city, the sound of the people and carriages moving on the road, a caravel sailing the open sea, the pounding of a blacksmith's hammer from behind the city's stark white walls...

Argrave sighed in wistful homesickness, and then walked towards his destination. He strayed from the roads, walking across the plains leisurely. Despite his blustering to Robarr, there would be no bandits or foul beasts so close to the city, and his destination was not far.

He walked across the plains until he began to see stumps left by lumberjacks, and then he walked beyond those until he entered the forest untouched by civilization. The trees were tall here, ancient, and their leaves so dense not a speck of the dying sunlight made it through. It was not long before his only company was the animals and his thoughts.

Argrave was certain he was on the right track when he noticed the trees changing. Their bark became darker, as though winter emanated from deeper in the forest. The leaves went from bright green to a deep, rich color. The air itself seemed to change color.

“Rather ominous in person,” Argrave commented to no one in particular.

He stopped at a particularly tall and thick tree, likely the oldest in the forest. He stared at it for a time, brows furrowed, but eventually moved around to the back. He nodded when he found what he was looking for.

A set of stairs had been carved into the roots of the old tree. It led up to a hollow portion in the base of the trunk that seemed to have been chiseled away in an age long since passed. Mushrooms grew at points, like shelves in the alcove. The carved hollow housed a stone shrine. It was but a table, a tablet, a quill made of stone, and a statue. The years had covered the stone with moss, giving much of the gray stone a greenish hue.

The statue was a grotesque thing. It depicted a malformed lump of meat vaguely resembling a head with a mouth possessing far too many teeth. It had two eyes but they were not in alignment, as though its face was melting and drooping away. Argrave kneeled down before the shrine.

Argrave picked up the stone quill and the tablet. He wrote on the tablet, ‘I seek wisdom beyond my years.’ It left no marks, but he was not surprised by this fact. He set the two items down, moved back a few feet, and waited contentedly.

The mouth of the statue split open, its stone teeth retracting back into its mock-gums. It widened further and further, acting more as flesh than stone. Then, a reddish, mercury-like portal spread out in the mouth from its throat. An arm emerged, skinny and long, and kept emerging; it could not be any shorter than ten feet. Then a stubby arm pushed its way out, grasping onto the statue, and the thing began to pull itself from the statue.

The emissary started to reveal itself in earnest. It was anthropomorphic, yet all of its limbs were strangely proportioned and its skin resembled exposed flesh after being flayed. Its eyes bulged in and out of the socket in rhythm with its breathing.

The dread emissary looked about the forest, not displaying any hostility. It stood awkwardly on one foot and its long arm because one of its legs was far too short. The emissary opened its mouth, revealing a set of pearly whites so straight they looked fake.

“This shrine amongst the ancient trees still sees worshippers? We had no idea.” The voice was very ordinary, entirely unbecoming of the creature itself.

“I suspect I am the first to come in many years,” Argrave answered calmly.

"We know," the creature said passively. "And why have you come?"

"Why do people generally contact a god of knowledge?" Argrave stared the emissary of Erlebnis in its eyes without blinking.

Any single emissary of Erlebnis, the God of Knowledge, was capable of killing Argrave. Those elongated or stunted limbs were ineffectual, sure enough; however, the servants of Erlebnis knew magic far beyond what any order of mages might teach. Argrave recalled innumerable days playing 'Heroes of Berendar' where he had attempted to kill one of Erlebnis' emissaries for fun, only to be utterly pulped by ridiculous spells.

That said, Argrave was perfectly safe now. He could sleep in the strange creature's revolting arms and no harm would come to him. Such a situation was unlikely to happen, naturally, but the point stood. The emissaries only defended themselves from attack. They were neutral beings because they were fundamentally merchants. They only bartered, and their only good was knowledge. Harming customers was bad for business.

"You come seeking knowledge," the emissary nodded. "Like so many before you."

"Not true." Argrave held a gloved finger up and shook it. "I come offering knowledge, in return for a blessing from Erlebnis."

"Then you have wasted our time," the emissary said levelly. "No knowledge possessed by one as young as you would be worth a blessing from our lord Erlebnis."

"I know the location of Oril Valar, and the Viirtulfyr that he stole from your lord."

After Argrave's words finished, all sounds died. The wind, the swaying of the trees, the bugs and the birds, suddenly ceased to make any noise at all. Argrave could no longer hear even the subtle sounds made by his leather clothes as he moved. He felt his heart speed faster, but he could not hear it. Even if Argrave knew he was safe, it was difficult to stop the natural reaction to abrupt stimuli. The emissary spoke, and Argrave heard only its voice.

"Even mentioning Oril Valar, you have drawn the eye of our lord Erlebnis." The emissary did not display any of its emotion on its voice—it might as well have been talking about the weather. Perhaps it had no emotions to display.

"That was my intention," Argrave responded, fortunately able to hear his own voice in this strange silence.

The emissary's eyes withdrew back into its head, leaving behind the same reddish-mercury portal from which the creature had originally emerged from. Argrave waited patiently, expecting this might happen—the emissary had returned to receive Erlebnis' will.

In simpler terms, he was talking to his boss.

Argrave used the time to calm his beating heart. Communing with ancient gods often was not particularly good on the health. Fortunately, this information was the only thing that he could currently offer Erlebnis, a God of Knowledge. If he wanted further rewards, doubtless he would need to become inextricably bound to Erlebnis.

Conveying this knowledge to Erlebnis had been a secret quest in ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ If one found out about the Viirtulfyr, one could offer that knowledge to Erlebnis. More simply, one could return the book directly. Hoarding this knowledge was useless to Argrave, as the Viirtulfyr only contained top-level spells beyond his ken that he had no ability to retrieve, at present.

Argrave was confident in this trade. Further trades, though—forget it. Beyond the very high possibility of early-onset baldness from stress, he was tampering with a power that could very well lead to his insanity. A god was, fundamentally, impossible to understand. Ancient gods were further insidious and manipulative. He did not have the hubris the Greeks so loathed—Argrave knew his limits as a mortal and he was not certain he could continue to meddle without losing his mind.

Only one of the emissary’s eyes returned, refocusing on Argrave. “Our lord is watching this conversation through my eye, Argrave. He will be very displeased if you are toying with us.” Argrave could not help but shudder—he had not mentioned his name, yet the emissary knew. Perhaps he should not be surprised.

“The master is interested in this deal,” the emissary continued. “You would be willing to submit to a spell to determine the veracity of your words?”

Argrave considered the question, ensuring there were no loopholes in its phrasing. “As long as the spell only discerns truth from falsehood, that condition is amenable.”

“Cautious one. A valuable trait. And you asked for a blessing in return?”

Argrave nodded. “A specific blessing from your lord; the Blessing of Supersession, and it should be of the highest quality.”

The Blessing of Supersession would be an invaluable acquisition for Argrave on his path as a mage. It would allow him to connect his pool of magic to Erlebnis, an ancient god, for a period of five minutes. In effect, he would be granted unlimited magic during its duration—every emissary of Erlebnis had this ability, and it was precisely why they were such potent spellcasters. He would still be limited to whatever rank of magic he knew, naturally.

For Argrave, who intended to primarily use the very costly electric magic, it was invaluable. The blessing had its drawbacks—he was borrowing the magic, and he could not use the ability again until he had paid back his magic ‘debt.’ Ordinarily, one could not even use magic until they paid the debt back. The highest-quality Blessing of Supersession Argrave asked for removed that condition—one paid back the magic debt at their leisure and remained capable of using their own pool of magic without issue.

After Argrave had stated his request, the emissary turned its eye to look at the portal where its other eye once had been, communing with Erlebnis in total silence. Its gaze refocused on Argrave after some time had passed.

“You ask a very high price,” the emissary said slowly. “Even amongst our lord’s direct mortal servants, few possess a blessing of that sort.”

“I ask for a high price because I know the value of my knowledge.” Argrave shrugged. “The grudge your lord bears against Oril Valar is deep, and I know well the value of Viirtulfyr. If I could retrieve it myself, I might. Alas, Oril Valar is a very powerful person, and not someone a humble mortal like me can meddle with.”

“We see.” The emissary once more looked to the portal in its vacant eye socket, and Argrave waited longer. “The lord tells us that He can agree to provide a Blessing of Supersession of the highest quality, under the condition you answer three questions under a spell that differentiates truth from falsehood. In addition, the information contained in these questions must first be proven accurate by His emissaries. Simply put, we would retrieve the Viirtulfyr before you receive the blessing.”

Argrave hesitantly nodded at the conditions, but he was not entirely content. “Tell me the questions, first.”

The emissary raised its long arm, holding its hand close to its face as it counted down. “First, the location of Oril Valar in detail. Second, the location of Viirtulfyr in detail. Third, how you came to possess this knowledge.”

Hesitation crept in at the third question. If Argrave admitted where he originally came from even indirectly, Erlebnis might take an unwanted interest in him.

“Is the third question necessary?”

“If you wish for the highest quality blessing,” the emissary answered quickly, almost anticipating his words.

Argrave clasped his hands together, staring at the gloves as he rubbed his thumb against his palm. He wanted the highest-level blessing—an inability to use magic after its use would be very annoying.

"If you do not ask for details on the third question... I agree to those three questions only."

The emissary bowed its head lightly. "So it shall be. Then, we shall cast the spell."

Argrave gestured for the emissary to proceed. It held its hand out, and a red line of light shot towards his heart like the bite of a snake. Argrave did not resist, and he felt the oddity of another's magic for the first time in his life.

The emissary's one eye stayed fixed on Argrave's face. "What is the precise location of the spellcaster Oril Valar, who wronged our lord Erlebnis and stole the Viirtulfyr?" the emissary spoke, enunciating every word clearly.

"Oril Valar inhabits an island known to locals as 'Black Isle' off the coast of the northern point of the continent of Berendar, near the town of Kumdan. The island is host to a volcano which Oril Valar has tampered with, making it shroud the island in ash. Oril Valar has a castle on the northern side of the island, concealed by illusion magic. He rarely leaves the castle, and even less so the island."

Argrave held back no details, even giving more information than the spell would probably compel. The earlier they recovered the Viirtulfyr, the earlier he got his blessing.

The emissary carried on without missing a beat. "Where is Viirtulfyr, the book stolen by the spellcaster Oril Valar?"

"Oril Valar keeps the book close. It is in the same fortress in which he currently resides. It is likely still in the third floor down, in the library at the end of the hall on the right."

"How did you come to possess this knowledge regarding Oril Valar and the Viirtulfyr?"

"I confirmed it personally," Argrave said slowly. And it was true—he had gone there multiple times with each character from 'Heroes of Berendar.' He was the primary contributor to Oril Valar's wiki article.

The emissary said nothing for a time, staring at Argrave. The red light persisted—Argrave was worried the spell might react.

"Well? It is the truth, no?" Argrave remained stone-faced. If he had been lying, the red light would have broken.

The emissary snapped, and the red light retreated. "Indeed it is, mortal. Or at the very least, your mind and body believe it is the truth. We will confirm the value of your truth in the days to come."

The sounds of the forest returned as suddenly as they had left—it was a little like one's ears popping from a change in altitude. The other eye of the emissary emerged from the portal resembling red mercury.

“Our business is concluded, then.” Argrave nodded. “I presume you will give me a token that will notify me when you are ready to offer payment?”

“Most curious. You almost lead us to believe you have done business of this nature with our lord before. Perhaps an ancestor of yours provided you some knowledge... yet even still, that does not explain how you confirmed the presence of the Viirtulfyr *and* Oril Valar personally...” the emissary produced a red disk in its hands, seemingly from the air.

“Here. Keep this on your person and you will know when we are ready to receive you. If you have somehow tricked us... Oril Valar is the only being currently in this realm who has done such a thing. And if your information is correct, that will be rectified.”

Argrave took the red disk. It had no markings and looked to be made of simple stone painted red. “I look forward to receiving the blessing, then.”