

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 12: Strike Up the Band

Galamon drew the dagger across the whetstone one final time, and then rubbed it down with a cloth. He put it back in its sheath and set it on the table beside his helmet. He straightened his posture and stared at Argrave.

"The work is fairly long term," Argrave continued. "Six months. 3000 gold." Argrave saw some heads turn when he mentioned the amount.

"You know my rates," Galamon said. "Someone referred you?"

Galamon's voice was a low rasp, enough to give Argrave chills up his spine. He briefly felt envious. He had no issues with his own voice, per se, but to have a voice like *that*... well, it would be damned nice. Maybe if he inhaled hot embers for a couple of hours...

"Something like that," Argrave nodded, dismissing his vocal envy.

Galamon did not react. "Who am I guarding?"

"Me." Argrave pointed both of his thumbs at himself. "I have some enemies, you see. I plan to make more. I won't demand you do anything unreasonable, though the terms can be ironed out when we draft the contract."

Galamon nodded slightly, face still unmoving. "You'll provide room and board?"

"Yes. Though... we may be camping frequently. I would ask that you hunt, should that be the case."

"You have the coin?"

"Not on me," Argrave said quickly and loudly so as to deter any listeners. "We would have to go to the bank, draft a contract, and then I could give it to you. In coin, if necessary." Argrave tapped his fingers on the table. "Any other questions?"

Galamon stared Argrave down, and then retrieved his flask for another drink. He set it aside, then shook his head. "No."

He doesn't even ask for my name, my position in society... really, his confidence would seem like recklessness if I didn't know fully how good this guy was at his job.

“Good. But I have some things to say to you. So...” Argrave held his hands up and cast a D-rank illusion spell, [Isolate]. It prevented sounds from leaking out. A simple yet efficient spell. Of course, it was an illusion spell and not a warding spell, so a sufficiently high-level spellcaster could resist its effects—not that he’d find them in this seedy place. Argrave did not know any warding spells, though. He would have to change that in the future.

“Our words won’t reach beyond this table now,” Argrave said. “One,” Argrave held up a finger, “I know you were exiled from Veiden. Two,” Argrave held up a second finger. “I know why. Don’t worry—I wouldn’t have even talked to you had that been an issue.”

Galamon’s stoic face finally showed some expression. His brows furrowed, and his lips fell into a scowl. “Why was I exiled, then?”

“You...” Argrave hesitated. Even with the spell, he did not feel comfortable saying it out loud. Vampires were nearly universally reviled. If any high-level spellcaster were to overhear, it would make things very uncomfortable. Such people would not be common in such a place, but Argrave was not incautious.

“You have an iron-rich diet.” Argrave said, spreading his hands. Galamon stared, and Argrave considered that most people of the Middle Ages would have no idea that iron was in the blood. “You like a certain salty drink...,” he continued, waving his hands. “Erm... no, that sounds wrong... you’re a bloodthirsty warrior...”

“Enough,” interrupted Galamon. “Why mention this if you have no issue with it?”

Argrave shrugged. “In a long-term partnership, both sides should be honest with each other, I think. The people of Veiden are honorable. You are especially so. As long as you keep me from harm, I don’t care if you... drink on the job. Just don’t expect me to pay for the drinks,” Argrave warned vaguely. “On the bright side, your kind doesn’t need to sleep.”

If older vampires kept drinking blood, the sunlight would not damage them, and they would not require sleep. That was why Galamon always carried around a flask. Indeed, vampirism seemed a vaguely appealing idea to Argrave. If not for the fact that blood nauseated him, he might’ve even considered it further.

“I see.” Galamon stood. Argrave had to look a long way up. He decided to stand also. Galamon was huge—well-built, and even barely taller than Argrave. “I must quickly fetch some things.”

“I’ll wait. Then we’ll go to the bank.”

“Yes,” Galamon agreed. He walked away, and the crowd parted for him as he left.

Argrave sat back down in the table, dispelling the [Isolate] barrier. The two had very quickly become the most eye-catching people in the establishment, between their mention of Galamon's ostensibly exorbitant fee and their very distinct physical appearance.

"Oi," called a bald man sitting in a table across from his. Argrave ignored him. "Oi. Black-hair. Talking to ya." Argrave kept ignoring him. The man got out of his chair and reached for Argrave's shoulder. Not wishing to be touched, Argrave cast a simple shock spell, and the man jumped back.

"Watch it, wizard," the man hissed.

Argrave crossed his arms, paying attention as much to his surroundings as he was the man in front of him. He felt ill at ease.

"You shouldn't hire that snow elf," the bald man insisted, pointing at a careful distance.

"And why not?" asked Argrave coldly, not caring to hear the answer.

"You stick with your own," he said, putting his fist to his chest. "That white-haired bastard'll likely put a knife in ya chest as you sleep."

Argrave just shook his head.

"I'm tryna look out for you here. Nothing good comes out of that one."

"I presume you'd prefer I hire you." Argrave waved his hand. "Go back to your table, leave me in peace."

"Nay, I don't want your gold. You look a noble. Nothing good comes from getting mixed up with you," the bald man shook his head. "But people that talk ill of him... they end up missing, no body ever found. I'm just warning you."

Argrave frowned, somewhat surprised at that. The bald man seemed somewhat genuine. Argrave didn't let his guard down, though.

"The Veidimen never break a contract," Argrave shook his head. "Even if he did disappear some people, that's not my concern."

The bald man shook his head, calling Argrave a fool beneath his breath before he sat back down. Argrave turned his head to see Galamon returning. He had a strung bow on his back, an axe and dagger on his waist, and a bag hanging from his shoulder. He collected his hair and put it behind him, donning his helmet. Then he grabbed his greatsword and strung it to his waist, opposite his other weapons.

"I am ready," he said simply.

Argrave smiled at the familiar sight. "So you are." He stood, and the two left for the bank.

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Galamon thoroughly examined the contract that Argrave had written. Once he reached the end, he set it down on the bank's counter gently and looked at Argrave. The bank clerk sat there nervously—a giant snow elf in black armor was standing right in front of him, and Galamon did not seem overfriendly.

"To summarize... the job is mainly protection. And you don't wish to be touched unless the situation demands it."

"Yes. No bloody murder butchery, no secret assassinations, just a retained sword I can count on by my side."

Galamon took a drink from his flask, and then signed the paper. Argrave gestured for the clerk to hand over the banknote with the custom amount, deducting it from his account. The 3000-gold loss would sting, to be sure, but insurance was more important than wealth.

"Have a good day, sirs," the bank clerk said professionally.

"How should I call you?" Galamon said, tone professional and distant now that the contract was formally established.

"Just 'Argrave.'" He walked towards the exit and pushed out of the doorway into the streets of Mateth. "Walk closer so I can speak quietly."

Galamon obeyed quickly, and Argrave spoke.

"The next few weeks will be very busy. The Patriarchate of Veiden has been preparing an invasion on Mateth for some time. The time of their landing is going to come very shortly, and I need to minimize damages."

Galamon missed a step but recovered quickly and kept walking beside Argrave, hand on the pommel of his greatsword.

"There are some pigeons spaced out on the roofs... oddly equidistantly," Argrave pointed, looking up at them. "They don't scrounge for food like other pigeons. They don't travel in groups. Once night falls, they all coincidentally fly away." Argrave looked at

Galamon pointedly. "They're scouts being controlled by druids. Veidimen druids, specifically. And I need to get my hands on their reports."

After observing the pigeons for a time, Galamon looked back at Argrave. "You're sure they're Veidimen druids?"

"Well, if they aren't, it'd be a pleasant surprise." Argrave shrugged. "I have my own way of knowing these things. They're led by a druid called Tirros."

"Tirros?" Galamon repeated. "Tirros the Tempestuous? He's a prominent druid in Veiden working for the Patriarch... this is no ruse, then."

"Oh. You know him. Good. Do you think you could kill him?" Argrave asked. "With my help, naturally."

"I don't know your strength."

"Spellcaster, D-rank magic spells, mostly."

"...if he didn't have arms, perhaps," Galamon said hesitantly. He patted the axe on his waist. "This axe is made of Ebonice—it can dispel magic on contact. But Tirros would not be alone. Animal familiars, fellow druids..."

"Yes, indeed. If we fought him as we were, we'd be Valhalla-bound at the speed of sound." Argrave shook his head. "But I'm at the cusp of comprehending C-rank magic. I think." Argrave remembered he'd left his book about C-rank magic aboard Nikoletta's carriage. *That was a library book. I've got to get it back... ugh.*

"And besides, what's the quote... 'victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war and then seek to win.' That is to say, if we prepare, Tirros is nothing but a stiff breeze, not a tempest. Haha." Argrave laughed at his own joke. He resumed walking through the streets of Mateth.

"For now, Galamon, we head to the local branch of the Order of the Gray Owl. It's the small little temple in the northwest part of town... well, just follow along. We'll find out if I'm as clever as I thought I was."

Galamon stood rooted in place for a moment. The snow elf considered, for the first time in near a hundred years, that his self-confidence may have gotten him into trouble. This employer of his seemed positively determined to march to his death. He opened his flask, and the scent of blood filled his nostrils. He took a large drink, sating the beast within him. The sunlight felt a little gentler on his skin.

All have to die someday.

