

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 19: The Sad Clown

The druid's haven still echoed with noise for a time. With all of the druids dead, the animals would be ripped from their magical control. They were probably fleeing or fighting, having abruptly been given freedom. Argrave still stared blankly at the scene of carnage, as though committing it to memory. Galamon tended to a few of the bodies, slicing wounds in them to fill his flasks of blood.

*I'm pathetic*, Argrave thought. *Faltering here. Faltering at this. The first step of the stairway, and I'm out of steam? I have to do better than this.* He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bronze hand mirror, hands shaking fiercely.

Galamon finished his task and walked to Argrave's side. Argrave turned to look at him. At once, his entire demeanor seemed to shift, his blank look regaining life and vigor. He stowed away the mirror.

"That Winter Nymph blood was foul," Argrave scoffed and held his nose. "I should read labels before I go shoving things down my throat."

Galamon was taken aback for a moment by the abrupt change in expression. "It worked, no?"

"I suppose. Next time we go druid-hunting, I'll think of something else," Argrave said with exaggerated cheer. He turned on his heel. "I would say we could hunt more now, but the scouts on the other ends of this place are going to be long-gone. They'll flee and return to Veiden posthaste."

"Is that what you want?" Galamon inquired.

"Yes," Argrave said with a nod. "If all of the druids simply disappeared, it would take longer for the rest of Veiden to respond. If they receive news of what's happened, they'll act on it quicker."

"Quick action means less time to prepare," Galamon countered.

"Vasquer is about to go to war. A civil war, unfortunately. The invasion is inevitable; you know Veiden. Conquest is their divine duty. Quick action might be the only way to salvage this situation."

Argrave looked up the hill to Tirros' mostly unaffected shack. "We should go to Tirros' hut. He was teaching some of his fellows, and has druidic spell books—invaluable for me, considering their rarity in Berendar. I don't even think the Order of the Gray Owl has them." He marched his way towards Tirros' hut, boots sinking into the wet ash and making unpleasant squishing noises.

Argrave stopped at Tirros' shack, looking around inside. He grabbed the doorway to the shack. Galamon noticed that Argrave's hands were still shaking fiercely.

The snow elf mercenary followed behind Argrave. "Since Tirros 'the Tempestuous' was here, I can't doubt your claims that an invasion will occur. But... humans do not seem as fond of warfare as my kind. Do you hope to stay the civil war by inciting the invasion earlier?"

Argrave proceeded into the shack, looking about. "The civil war is inevitable. House Vasquer wants House Parbon to rebel. If that does happen, House Monticci will likely join them, leaving Mateth undefended; the invasion needs to be brought to light before then. That's why we need their reports.

"I think Reinhardt fundamentally misunderstands the king; King Felipe does not care about life. I tried to tell him this when he kidnapped—" Argrave paused, looking back at Galamon. "Oh, I never told you about that. It's not important. Anyway, Reinhardt will start a civil war—"

Two voices rang out simultaneously. One was female, the other male.

"Wait..!" the woman said.

"What are you talking about, a civil war, an invasion?" the man said.

Galamon drew his greatsword quickly and turned his back. Argrave, too, turned his head, and saw a familiar face that he did not expect to see. Elias of Parbon stood at the entrance of Tirros' shack.

"Why in the...?" Argrave trailed off, befuddled at seeing this man here.

Galamon stepped forward with his greatsword, and Elias stepped back, ready to fight. Argrave called out, "Wait a moment, Galamon."

Galamon held in place. "This is that same one that was following you a week ago."

Elias was undeterred, but he relaxed his posture. "I asked you a question, Argrave! What in the gods' name happened here? What are you talking about?"

Argrave shuffled on his feet, mind spinning as he tried to deduce how this situation came to pass.

“Don’t try to fool me with a witty answer!” Elias spat, stepping forward. “Who were these people? Why did you kill them?”

*Very wise to yell at someone who just committed a brutal slaughter,* Argrave wished to say, but he held his tongue. “How did you get here?”

“I followed you,” Elias said quickly. “I wanted to see what you were up to. Seems I was right to do so. So how do you explain... this?!” He gestured behind him fiercely.

Argrave bit his lip, then asked himself, *why am I keeping this secret? We came here to get the scout’s plans. I wanted to present them to Nikoletta, and eventually to Duke Enrico. Elias isn’t necessarily an enemy.*

“These men were advance scouts for an invasion,” Argrave explained gently and concisely, holding his hands in the air to appear non-threatening. “They’re spellcasters, as you probably saw. In their homeland, they’re called druids; they know magic that controls animals. They’ve been using that magic to spy on Mateth and the villages near it for some months now, gathering intelligence for an invasion.”

Elias stared, his ruby-eyes wide with some mixture of confusion, surprise, and hostility. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Then come inside, see for yourself the fruits of their labor.” Argrave stepped forward and tapped Galamon’s pauldron with his knuckle, motioning for him to put the weapon away.

Galamon put away his greatsword and stepped back towards Argrave. He kept his hand near the Ebonice axe strung to his waist. Elias walked forward tentatively, and Argrave beckoned him closer. Argrave grabbed one of the many parchments littered throughout the room.

Argrave scanned the document quickly. “Look at this. A request for a detailed drawing of the structure of the walls of Mateth. I wonder who would order such a thing? Quite insidious,” Argrave prattled off drolly. Elias snatched the paper from his hand and read it, then moved to other documents in the room, his frown growing deeper.

“Really, I’m surprised you were willing to get Mina to help you come here,” Argrave commented. He turned back towards the shack’s entrance. “Don’t deny it—I have a good memory for voices.”

Elias glanced at Argrave, but turned back to the papers, absorbed in their content. Nothing came of Argrave's call, and he sighed.

"Drat. She's scared. If I had some catnip on hand, I'm sure she'd come running, but alas..."

Argrave paused, waiting for an outburst. "Huh. Guess she really left." He turned and picked up a book. Then he spun around, raising the book in the air as though to throw it. He heard a brief yelp in the corner of the shack, and he pointed. "Aha! There! I win again!"

"Win?!" Mina shouted, dispelling her invisibility.

"Yes. I found out where you were hiding twice. I consider that no small victory, knowing you." Argrave put down the book. "Well, since you're both here, you're being enlisted."

Elias turned to Argrave. "This is a serious matter, Argrave. Regardless of my opinion of you, that you found this... it's of grave importance."

"Yes, yes, spare me the sappy monologue," Argrave waved his hands and walked to Tirros' shelf. He looked at the books, taking out those that he found important and setting them on the table. "I didn't 'find it,' by the way. Everything I've been doing the past week or so has been related to putting an early end to this invasion."

"But how did you—" Mina began to ask.

"Ah, ah," Argrave interrupted. "We can talk as we work. Help me gather this up. Elias, you'll have to carry all of the spell books."

"What?" Elias said, stunned.

"What, yourself," Argrave parroted back. "You've carried my books before. This time is even more important. I'm cut, burned, my throat was nearly frozen solid, and I expended all of my magic." *Untrue, actually. I used Erlebnis' magic. They don't need to know that.* Argrave held a book out to Elias. "Come on. We need to get these to Mateth posthaste."

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The Veidimen climbed down from the mound of rocks and into the forest, urgency flavoring their actions. One of them was unable to walk on his own and needed to be carried by one of their larger members. The party's white skin and light hair were very conspicuous in the moonlit forest.

They rushed as quickly as they could, supporting their wounded comrade with their shoulder as they walked. He was badly burnt, and a Lichtenberg figure marked his face. One of the druids cast healing magic, but the wounds were too severe to be fully dealt with.

“What happened in there?” one of them asked the burnt snow elf as they moved away. “How could we all...” the snow elf swallowed his words.

The burnt Veidimen raised his head, staring ahead in undisguised agony. He reached a hand and gripped the one who was speaking, pulling him close. The action brought the party to a stop, and they all huddled over their comrade.

“...the... exile,” the burned snow elf whispered vainly. “Gal... Galamon... ‘the Great.’” he forced out. “Tirros... dead.”

“Galamon?” one of the snow elves echoed, their hands shaking. “It was... Galamon? He must’ve...”

The burned snow elf nodded. One of his companions brought water to his lips, and he drank from the canteen, shaking. “The other... human. A dread mage. Hair as black as the abyss, breath billowing white from his mouth.”

The scouts shivered at the sight of their comrade’s state and the fear in his words.

“We must return to Veiden as quickly as possible,” a male snow elf said, standing tall and looking through the forest, where the coast was. “The humans know of our presence. With Tirros’ correspondence in their hands, they will know our plans. We must return to Veiden before they have the opportunity to prepare themselves.”

A few pigeons swooped down from the sky, landing on another snow elf’s shoulders.

“I kept my link with the birds. I’ll send them with a letter ahead to Veiden.”

The elf standing took a deep breath and exhaled. “Veid wishes for this war to begin earlier than our Patriarch intended. That we have survived is Her will, too. Now, we can only do our best for Patriarch Dras.”