

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 21: Sick in Heart and Mind

Nikoletta leaned over a map of Mateth, Mina and Elias standing across from her. The map was clearly different in style than the ones that the Dukedom owned, and it was not fully completed. Beside it, there were detailed reports about the knight's schedules, their composition and weaponry, and other such comprehensive military information about the Dukedom of Monticci.

The silence dragged out as Nikoletta read through the information. Mina paced nervously, but Elias stood firm with his arms crossed.

"Why are you wearing travel clothes, Nicky?" Mina asked, breaking the silence.

"My father was talking about marriage cand—" she paused. "No, that's not important now. I can't deny these are genuine," she finally concluded, standing up straight. "Argrave found these?"

"Yes. He said one of the snow elves tipped him off," Mina confirmed. "He..." she shuddered. "He found their scouting party and dispatched them. These were in their leader's shack, alongside a bunch of spell books that he made us haul."

"A scouting party?" Nikoletta asked.

Elias explained what Argrave had told them about how the druids were spying on Mateth.

Nikoletta's expression slowly morphed into one of worry and confusion as the story proceeded. Finally, once Elias had finished explaining, she looked at him and asked, "Why isn't Argrave telling me this?"

Elias shook his head. "He had burns, cuts, and some damage from a strange potion. He went to be healed by one of the wizards in Mateth and mentioned that he had some preparations to do. The fight was... intense." Elias lowered his head and frowned.

Nikoletta crossed her arms, catching on from their expressions that they were bothered. "What exactly happened in this fight?"

"He and his companion ruthlessly massacred them. There was a high-ranking wizard, B-rank at least... or high-ranking druid, whatever," Mina amended, waving her hand dismissively, "but Argrave killed them all."

"Nearly two dozen snow elves," Elias added grimly. "Thoroughly planned, flawlessly executed. Maybe it was his companion that planned it, I don't know, but it was undeniably Argrave at the center of things."

"When it was done, he vomited and cried, but after a minute or two, he went back to usual. Joking, laughing, like nothing happened," Mina added. Her words sounded more concerned than horrified.

Nikoletta's expression hardened, and she turned away from the two. She stared at the window of the Duke's estate, eyes distant and unfocused.

She had been hesitant to admit it, but Argrave reminded her of someone strongly: her brother, Elwind. Even now, as she tried to remember him, their faces seemed to overlap. It did not help that they shared the same obsidian color hair. Both were hopelessly facetious, excessively confident, and above all, self-sacrificial.

Just before he'd died, Elwind was cracking wise, ensuring that Nikoletta did not worry herself about his safety. Some tears came to Nikoletta's eyes, and she wiped them away and collected herself. She turned back around, clearing her throat.

"I'll bring this to my father. He and I are... arguing," she put simply, "but I don't think he can ignore this. I certainly can't."

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"I'm sick?" Argrave said incredulously, staring at the middle-aged man before him: Bragan. His head was shaved bald, and he looked more a bodybuilder than a healing wizard, but Argrave knew he was one of the best healers in the city of Mateth.

"That's what I said," Bragan confirmed. "You have a fragile constitution. You drank the blood of a Winter Nymph, for some ungodly reason. You were traipsing about in the forest in the middle of a cold night. And you had a fight with... brigands," Bragan said, the word dripping with doubt. "Catching a cold; this shouldn't surprise you."

Argrave turned away, putting his hands on his hips. He contemplated things for a second, then he turned around. "I don't think any healers in Mateth know the B-rank spell [Cure Disease], right?"

Bragan put one of his giant hands to his chin, thinking. "No. None I know, at least. And besides, it's quite expensive for such a minor affliction." Bragan reached to the counter and grabbed the bag of gold coins. "I recommend simply resting for a few days, especially after experiencing such an intense shock."

"There is no rest for the wicked," Argrave dismissed, contemplating. Bragan shook his head and walked away, gesturing his hands towards the door. Argrave complied. Galamon was waiting for him outside.

Galamon took a drink from his flask as Argrave approached. "You're sick?"

Argrave frowned. "Stupid vampire super senses. Whatever happened to doctor-patient confidentiality?"

"You mentioned having more to do. Sounds like you don't intend on canceling those plans." Galamon stashed his flask away.

"Indeed. It's only a cold; a minor affliction. Besides, ever since I saw Tirros cast that spell, I've been itching to dip my hands back into trying to get past C-rank magic... honestly, paying to have the disease cured is a waste of money. I'll just suffer in silence."

"You seem to like that." Galamon pulled his helmet tighter.

"What does that mean?" Argrave probed. "I thought you were like Gary Cooper; the strong, silent type. What's with that comment?"

"I don't know who Gary Cooper is." Galamon looked around as people walked past him.

"Let's walk," said Argrave, catching that Galamon felt this place was too public.

Argrave led the two of them through Mateth, until they eventually walked out on one of the empty segments of the dock. The seagulls flew about. Argrave was paranoid about being the target of an air-bombing from the filthy birds, and that reminded him he needed to learn warding magic.

"That was the first time you've killed someone," Galamon said plainly, stating instead of asking.

Argrave turned to look at him. "You're worried about me?"

"From what you've disclosed, we're going to be in combat often. You need to be stable." Galamon turned, taking off his helmet and placing it beneath the crook of his arm. His white hair flowed in the wind. "I've fought in wars; I was a general once. I've trained men to kill. It's an unpleasant trade, but it is mine."

"You said I did well," Argrave countered, not wishing to talk about the subject.

"You did. I think you have a certain talent for strategy, and you have the composure necessary to execute plans. Your uncanny knowledge makes both easier." Galamon raised his gauntleted hands up. "I won't pry for details. I've talked more today than I do most weeks, so I'll try and wrap it up now."

Argrave shifted on his feet, waiting for Galamon to continue.

"That scene was rough. It should bother you. It bothers me." Galamon touched his chest plate.

"Could have fooled me," Argrave rebuked suspiciously.

A bell rang out across the docks, marking the arrival of a new ship.

"You walk forward like you have a duty, a task, and you try to bury your fears, your worries. I am no better. I have done the same my entire life. The fact that it bothers you, that battle... let it not serve as a reminder of the carnage you're about to face, but the peace you seek to bring."

Argrave frowned. "Veid tells you it's your duty to conquer the other races, and you're talking to me about peace?"

Galamon raised a brow. "Veid wishes for us to conquer all to bring peace to the world. I fight at your side because of our contract, but I believe Veiden will win this war. Such is the way of our faith."

Argrave stepped away towards the ocean and looked out across the waves. "The war will end with a peace treaty if I have my way."

"The Veidimen do not compromise," Galamon said, stepping beside Argrave. "Diplomacy will not suffice. Veiden will win, or it will die. That is our way."

"Even in the face of Gerechtigkei?" Argrave asked with a grim smile. "Your people know him by a different name, of course. 'He Who Would Judge the Gods.' It's too damned long, though, so I prefer Gerechtigkei."

Galamon's head spun to Argrave's face, staring him down intently. Argrave watched the coming and going of the ocean as the bell of the docks continued to ring. In the far distance, a trading ship came ever closer to the docks. The seagulls moved towards it, inspecting it for fresh food. In the far distance, Argrave spotted a four-eyed shark peering at the ship as it passed.

"Then Erlebnis wishes for you to...?" Galamon began to question, but then he crouched to the docks and stared out across the ocean. Time passed as both of them seemed to idly appreciate the breeze. Eventually, Galamon stood. He looked at his helmet.

“No wonder you move so frantically. You’re fighting against the end of all.”

“Indeed. This kingdom is about to fall apart at the seams, the Veidimen are going to invade, a plague is coming, myriad monsters are going to appear, and all of this occurs just before an ancient calamity is about to be reborn... so much on my to-do list.”
Argrave shrugged.

“Haah...” Galamon sighed. He pulled his hair back and put his helmet back on, taking another long drink from his flask. “It seems Veid has planned a long atonement for me. You intend to stand in defense against He Who Would Judge the Gods.”

“I know. Some court case. Apparently, even without a juris doctor, I’m the best defense attorney in the world; pro se litigant of the century. If the judge won’t listen, well... such is life. Or death, as it were.”

Galamon took a deep breath and exhaled. “I’ve come to realize I should ignore half of what you say.”

Argrave chuckled, and then shuddered. His body felt drained and weak, reminding him that he truly was sick. “I wonder if the invasion will happen before that auction. I hope not. Well, for now, I suppose I should just read. That counts as resting, no?”

“No.”

“Well, whatever,” Argrave dismissed. He walked away from the docks. Each step he took forward felt a little easier than it had been before. Perhaps it had been Galamon’s advice. Or perhaps, more simply, sharing a small portion of his burden with another had made his journey onwards easier.

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Induen held the Margrave Reinhardt’s white knife in his hand, waving it about in the moonlight. It shimmered as though coated by something—a thin film of magic, undoubtedly. He was still lost in thought about the fight. Reinhardt had been much more decisive, proactive, and predictive. He had a better sense for what was going to occur. Induen questioned if that was experience, or simply skill.

Outside, Induen heard heavy footsteps. Believing he recognized them, he set down the knife and sat up straighter. The footfalls grew louder, and then the door burst open. King Felipe III strode in—Induen’s father, patriarch of House Vasquer, and sovereign of the Kingdom of Vasquer.

House Vasquer’s current members were all quite tall, and the genesis of that was their father. He had been a giant of a man in his youth—broad shouldered, barrel-chested.

Even old, he was still quite formidable. He had a great mane of unruly, barely graying obsidian-black hair, and a beard that stretched well to his stomach. His eyes were the same gray Argrave's were. He wore the colors of House Vasquer, black and gold, but it was highlighted by a rich imperial purple. A black kingly mantle hung from his shoulders with the symbol of House Vasquer sewn on its back in gold.

"Hello, father," Induen greeted calmly.

Felipe strode closer until he was standing face to face with Induen. "Have you learned nothing from what I taught you?"

The two spoke calmly, but there was no familial affection in their dialogue.

"We wanted a revolt from House Parbon. We got it."

Felipe raised his hand and grabbed Induen's throat. He picked him up with one hand as though he was a child, and then slammed him against the table head-first. "We?!" the king shouted. "Do you wish to die? Because that's the only reason I could even begin to consider how you could act so naively!"

The king released Induen and came to his feet. He spoke calmly again, as though he had not seconds ago been roaring in anger. "When people talk about this war and how it began, they won't speak of Parbon instigating it; instead, they'll talk about how the crown prince's guards began massacring the people when they tried to stop the evil royal knights from making a fool out of the Margrave."

Induen began to sit up, but the king kicked him in the teeth. The prince slid back through the wreck of wood.

"You don't think," Felipe continued. "You disrespect the throne. You are my son and heir, but you are only that. I am not dead, nor near death. I am the king, and you should not disobey me again." Felipe kneeled down, grabbing Induen's shirt and pulling him to his face. "Are we clear?"

"Yes," Induen enunciated clearly despite the blood trickling down his face.

Felipe released his grip, and Induen dropped back to the floor. The king directed someone to heal Induen, and then wiped off his blood-soaked hand on his mantle.

"Considering you used that illegitimate child to worsen the relationship between House Parbon and Monticci, I reduced the punishment to a mere beating," Felipe commented. "I've contacted Orion. He'll be returning. This should be suppressed quickly. I will teach you both how to war. Keep your ears open; you may learn something. Be thankful."

"Thank you, father," Induen said, his blue eyes veritably burning a hole in the back of his father's departing figure.

Chapter 22: Sick Tension

"...so, which cup has the coin?" Mina asked, running her hand over an array of three identical cups. Elias sat in a chair at a rickety yet clean table, while Mina sat atop it. Argrave was buried beneath blankets in a bed at the corner of the room, forming a shivering hump as he peered at a book dimly lit by sunlight through a boarded window. Some days had passed. Mateth had been a hive of activity as the troops were rallied.

Galamon sat at the foot of the bed, watching fumes rise into the air from a brewing potion. It was a potion that calmed the mind—Argrave considered it the reason he had been able to do what he had in the battle and had elected to make more before the invaders arrived. Its ingredients were the last of Argrave's funds, barring that set aside for necessary expenses like food.

"This one," said Elias, pointing at the center cup. Mina lifted it; it was blank. Elias lifted the other two with both of his free hands, but none of them had the coin. "What?"

"Check behind your ear," said Mina gleefully.

Elias retrieved the coin and widened his eyes. Argrave frowned, his annoyed face peeking out from the blankets. "You're supposed to be helping me with C-rank magic, Mina."

Mina hopped off the table, striding to his bedside. "I told you what I know, Grave. Fourth-dimension magic, for me, was like looking past a veil, or finding out the secret to a magic trick. Looks complicated, but it's simple deep down."

Elias stood, setting the coin back on the table politely. "It's useless to ask for help. It's different for everybody."

"Why are you two at my house, anyway?" said Argrave, burrowing deeper into his blankets.

"Your house, Grave? You said it was abandoned," Mina countered. "My father won't miss me; he barely knows I exist. Mom might make a fuss, eventually, but that's beside the point. And Elias here decided to stay and help." Mina gestured at Elias, who still refused to meet Argrave's eyes.

"Whatever. Do s-silent magic tricks," Argrave shivered. "And stay off the table. You may be like a cat, but you aren't a real one. People eat there. Namely, me."

Mina scoffed, yet still sat at the chair. "You don't look like you do much eating."

Someone knocked at the door. Galamon's head whipped cleanly, and he stood, drawing his dagger and holding it close at attention. He opened the door slowly, peeking through. Then, he opened it wide and walked away.

"Hey, Nicky." Mina greeted.

Nikoletta entered. She wore custom-fitted leather armor, the blue swordfish of Monticci painted on the breastplate. As testament to the wealth of the Dukedom, it was thoroughly inscribed, and enchantments shone along those inscriptions brilliantly. It was a familiar set of armor.

In the normal course of 'Heroes of Berendar,' after Nikoletta was expelled from the Order of the Gray Owl she would be involved in the civil war briefly before returning to Mateth after hearing it was invaded by the snow elves. The armor set she wore was an heirloom and was found in the Duke's estate, which had been overrun by Veidimen.

"Hey Mina." She looked around the room, giving a nod to Elias. Galamon sat back down in front of Argrave's bed, staring at the brewing potion like a dejected puppy. Nikoletta spotted Argrave and walked up slowly.

"Argrave. You look terrible...", she said in concern.

"Don't lie to me. My superior good looks are my one benefit in this beanpole body," Argrave put his hand to his face to accentuate his handsomeness. His hand was warm, but his face still felt too cold.

Nikoletta elected to ignore his comment. "Every time I see you, you look more and more unhealthy."

"Enough about me." Argrave closed his book. "The Baretta Troupe Auction. You said it hadn't happened yet. When is it?"

"Tonight," Nikoletta answered. "And, considering that you may have saved the entirety of the Dukedom of Monticci should this invasion truly occur, it is a matter of honor that I help you get entry."

"I don't want to participate. Are you kidding? A bunch of people in a tightly packed place, all yelling and spitting like starving dogs, fighting over scraps in some vainglorious perversion of both gambling and mercantilism." Argrave paused, taking a deep breath after his rant. "I merely have something to sell. If you really want to help, spread rumors about the exhibit so that it attracts more vultures."

"I'd need to know what you are selling."

Argrave paused, and then threw the blanket off. He strode across the room and pulled aside a decrepit plank, then pulled out a piece of paper. He walked back to Nikoletta and handed it to her, and then crawled back in the blankets.

"Eugh. These blankets are all sweaty. I need new ones." Argrave complained as Nikoletta read through the document. He stood, bunching them together while shivering intensely. Galamon stood, taking the sheets from Argrave by force. He pointed to the bed, clearly commanding Argrave to lay back down.

"This is the deed for Foamspire?" Nikoletta spoke incredulously. Galamon walked away, off to fetch clean blankets.

"H-how observant," Argrave said between shivers, veritably falling in bed. "Induen gave it to me after giving some... tough love, I suppose? Th-though, perhaps he'd hate me calling it 'love.' He seems to r-resent that word."

"Why would you sell this?" Nikoletta said, treating the paper carefully. "It's an extremely valuable piece of land. Many nobles rent out apartments during the summer and vacation there. Its income rivals a small city. And... well, Induen gave it to you. After what happened last time..."

"He's too busy dealing with his awful dad and the soon-to-be civil war. An estate is stable income, true, but I don't need a stable income. I need loads of lucre now," Argrave said quickly. Galamon walked back in with fresh blankets, and Argrave quickly snatched them from his hands and covered himself.

"Why?" Nikoletta inquired.

"For gambling, of course!" Argrave said cheerily, then started shifting to cover all of himself with the blankets. He became a woolen caterpillar in seconds. "Kidding, naturally. Blackjack doesn't exist yet. Gambling is fruitless."

"I'm sure my father would be willing to buy Foamspire for a fair price..."

Argrave opened his mouth, about to disclose that Foamspire would collapse into the ocean in a few months. Then, he remembered that Nikoletta was one of the 'good' player characters, and she probably wouldn't be overfond of blatantly scamming people.

"Then your father can go to the auction and bid," Argrave said instead.

"You still haven't said why you need this money," Nikoletta pushed further. She grabbed a chair from the table and pulled it beside the bed.

Argrave frowned. "Money is a precious thing in a country at war. The Veidimen invasion, the impending civil war..."

"Every time we talk, you sound so certain there will be a civil war," Nikoletta noted, leaning forward and placing her hands on her knees.

"It's probably already started. No matter what, it'll happen. The how, the when, the where, it's all just backdrop to the inevitability. Most of the commonfolk hate the royal family on account of increased taxes and rising serfdom. Beyond that, this was, from the very beginning, a scheme by Vasquer. I know because they sought to involve me in it. The royal family wants war. Felipe wants to purge disloyal subjects and replace them with sycophants. It's in anticipation for the succession." Argrave scratched his chin and then added as an afterthought, "also, he wants to give Orion some land."

Though 'Heroes of Berendar' was a very dynamic game, there were some things the player could not change. The civil war would always happen. Some of the nine playable characters could delay it slightly, but it still happened eventually. However, how the war resolved depended on the player's actions.

The abandoned house had grown very quiet, and everyone had turned to look at Argrave.

Argrave, caught in the moment, continued from beneath his pile of blankets. "Parbon was the main target, but they have many friends and I'm sure much of the south—Monticci included—will join in favor of those against Vasquer. The north will remain firmly under heel of Vasquer, though. Most of the northern nobles move pragmatically rather than righteously. Supporting the royal family gets them the biggest benefit."

Nikoletta lowered her head and black strands of hair covered her face. Elias stood and walked towards the window. Mina was looking at how everyone else reacted.

"So you'd made up your mind to turn your back on the royal family in the Tower," Nikoletta said as if in epiphany. "Back then, when my research had been stolen, Induen genuinely had done it. It was one part of the provocations."

"He was acting independently of King Felipe, but yes. It was dually to provoke Monticci and eliminate threats to his succession."

"If this is true, it only reinforces the validity of the rebellion. A king pledges protection in exchange for service; such callous disregard of life is not befitting of a true king." Nikoletta picked her head up and stared at Argrave.

Argrave kept his own thoughts about the validity of the rebellion hidden. House Vasquer was undoubtedly cruel and evil, but House Parbon lacked a plan beyond simply

overthrowing the king. If the player sided with the rebels, the kingdom would fall into crisis as people scrambled to present their own vague claim to the throne. Righteous causes were always undermined by selfishness.

Of course, if one sided with Vasquer, things did not sail smoothly either. King Felipe would die, and Induen and Orion would fight over the throne. Many nobles would simply declare independence, breaking off from the kingdom. The entire situation was a mess regardless of who was chosen.

“Well, as long as you sell that little piece of paper, I’ll be happy. I’m easy to please.”

Nikoletta nodded as if drawn out of a haze. “Then, I’ll be sure to do that.” She stood. “On one condition. You have to rest.”

Argrave squinted incredulously but smiled. “Such a monumental task? What shall I do? I suppose I have no choice.”

“And I do mean rest. No reading, no errands, nothing. Mina tells me you barely sleep, eat only plain food, and spend all hours of the day either trying to learn C-rank magic or memorizing those druidic spells you looted.”

“Yeah. And then I wander to a pipal tree, sit in a lotus position, and try to reach nirvana,” Argrave shook his head. “Please. I’m fine. I read until I fall asleep. I eat plain food because it’s all I can stomach with this damned sickness.”

Nikoletta fixed her hair and shook her head. She stared at Argrave with her deep pink eyes for a time, and Argrave stared back. She broke her gaze away and sighed.

“There was another thing. Considering it’s you that brought this whole thing to my attention, I wanted your thoughts on the invasion.”

Argrave paused. He scooted around awkwardly in his cocoon of blankets till he sat upright. “It’s bad timing. Luckily, I was able to reveal it.”

“No, I mean... strategy-wise. Mina told me you intended to stay and help out, but I wanted to know what you were going to do. Further, what you think the snow elves are going to do.” She stared at him intently.

“I’m going to... one of the coastal villages.”

“Why the villages?” Nikoletta sat back down.

Argrave looked down for a second, running through his thought process. “The Veidimen resemble Vikings, but they’re not berserkers. They’re strategic,” Argrave started to

explain, but Nikoletta stared at him with brows furrowed. “You don’t know what those words mean, I forget.”

Argrave pulled his hand free from the blanket and set it on his knee. “The Veidimen will come in longships. They’re long, thin boats, driven by oar. They’ll land at the coastal villages first, instead of striking at Mateth directly from sea. This will enable them to gain a foothold on land and secure a safe harbor. Then, once that’s done, they’ll probably mass troops for a day or two before marching on Mateth.”

Nikoletta considered this. “So, we should focus our ships near the coastal villages, catch them there?”

Argrave shook his head. “The Veidimen know druidic magics, you forget. They’ll scout ahead with birds before any rash attack. If you concentrate your ships anywhere, they’ll go elsewhere,” Argrave said, quietly refuting the point. “Anyway, once they march on Mateth, they’ll probably bring ships to attack the city’s docks concurrently. I suspect they’ll concentrate their mages on those ships. Like this, the city is surrounded, and your magic users are tied up dealing with those at sea. The infantry can advance unmolested. The walls will probably make it tough for them, though.”

Nikoletta stared at Argrave. Everyone was staring, he realized. He had gotten absorbed in talking.

“The Veidimen have more troops than you do. These men are battle-hardened warriors, too, not trained knights that’ve been wallowing in peace. They’re ignorant of some things like illusion magic and enchantment, but by and large their magic knowledge is no less formidable than what we have in Vasquer. They may have a few A-rank mages, but I can’t say that with any certainty. The only advantage we have is the position of defense.”

“Did you strategize for the attack on the scouts’ camp?” Nikoletta asked.

“Err... yes. Why?”

“Do you have ideas for the defense?”

“Sure, but—”

Nikoletta stood. “I think you should talk to my father. You can stay in a better place than some abandoned house you broke into.”

“Hey, I found a key. No breaking-in involved.” Argrave protested, then broke off into a coughing fit. “Why should I see your father, though?”

Nikoletta adjusted her armor and walked to the door. "To convey what you told me, and to help prepare a good defense. You know the situation well. I don't know how or why you know, but your knowledge has been accurate so far."

Argrave pondered this. He had intended to meet Duke Enrico at some point, but he assumed it would be after the battle had been won. *If* the battle had been won, rather.

Argrave threw off the blankets. "I have no reason to refuse." He pointed at Mina and Elias. "These two squatters can help carry my things. They've had practice at it."

Chapter 23: Insomnia

"Must you go personally, Master Castro?" A gray robed figure followed behind a short old man. Though the figure was mostly shrouded by the robe's cowl, locks of light blue hair barely peeked out.

The old man smiled and turned. His face was sagging, but he looked genial and charitable—the very picture of a sweet old man. The robe he wore was gray, but it glowed with enchantments, and a grand image of an owl shone like a diamond on the shoulders.

"Yes, I must. I have to handle a great deal of business elsewhere before heading to Mateth, but I must meet our young Acolyte personally to earn his favor. Genius is uncommon, but most often, it births two things: pride and eccentricity. That small little dissertation, if moved from theory to practice, could well shake the entire magical world." Castro voice sounded tired but gentle.

"...do you think..." the other paused. "I think I'd like a fellow... never mind."

"A fellow disciple?" Castro smiled. "Perhaps, Ingo. This trip serves two purposes; to show the boy that his talents are valued by the Order, and to suss out his character. If I must lower my face as Master of the Order of the Gray Owl to help a rising star lift the Order further up... so be it."

"But he's part of the royal..." Ingo trailed off.

Castro stepped forward and grabbed Ingo's shoulder. He had to reach up to do so. The boy stared at the old tower master with innocent brown eyes.

"I know you have much reason to fear the Vasquers. But rest assured, I will not allow anyone to hurt you ever again. Your life has been a cruel one, but I am resolved to

make sure that cruelty ends. Be at ease, Ingo.” Castro squeezed his shoulder tightly, and then released his grip.

Ingo rubbed his hands together, smiling. He looked fully grown, but some of his mannerisms still had a childlike innocence. “I am more worried for you, Master Castro.”

Castro laughed and turned away. “You are far too young to be worrying for me. I do not go looking for danger, and even still, few things on this continent can truly endanger me.”

The tower master walked to the edge of the large stone room they were in, opening the door to a balcony. The balcony extended off for a time, and it peculiarly lacked a railing. Ingo hung near the door, and his hood blew off from the intense wind. His light blue hair whipped about wildly.

Undaunted by the fierce winds, Castro walked to the edge of the balcony and fished into his pockets as casually as one would look for their car keys. He pulled free a black whistle studded with rubies and other such precious gemstones. He blew it, and a piercing shrill chirp echoed from the top of the tower.

Castro looked towards some distant mountains, waiting. Soon enough, a black dot appeared in the distance, gradually growing closer. As it grew closer, it slowly came into a view; a gray wyvern sped towards the tower ferociously.

The tower master walked off the balcony. Ingo clenched the doorframe tighter, but his eyes widened in surprise when the old man simply floated in the air. Castro started to walk downwards as though there was a set of stairs in the air. Ingo knew it was simply one of his master’s myriad spells.

The wyvern passed beneath Castro, and then the two ascended into the sky. Ingo watched him go in wonder. Then, he quietly turned and shut the door to the balcony, standing alone in the grand chambers of the Master of the Order of the Gray Owl.

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Argrave sat up quickly, drenched in sweat from a nightmare involving fire. He took a few seconds to gather his bearings. He was confused by his surroundings for a moment, but then he came to remember he was in the Duke’s residence, on a guest bedroom with a seaside balcony. He waited for his beating heart to calm down, and then he stood. He felt much better than he had earlier today. Perhaps he had sweated out the sickness.

Galamon was absent, refilling his flasks. Argrave had come to learn the snow elf vampire kept many flasks of blood on his person, usually enough for a whole week.

The Duke Enrico had said he would speak to Argrave in the morning. Even if Nikoletta had some faith in Argrave's ability, he himself assumed the Duke would not especially trust the strategy advice of some young royal bastard. The Duke had seen war before; Argrave was likely still a child in his eyes.

Argrave changed from his nightclothes to something more suited for formal occasions. It came from his luggage that he'd left with Nikoletta when Reinhardt had abducted him. He took a look in the mirror in the room. Tailored clothes hid his tall, skinny frame better, and Argrave personally enjoyed dressing well. Fine clothes, fine jewelry—they were fun to own and wear.

He spotted the bronze hand-mirror on his nightstand, and what little distraction he had found quickly drained away. As always, the thing served as a stark reminder of his duty; his role as the one to struggle against Gerechtigkei. He walked and picked it up, tossing it in the air and catching it by the handle. Within, he read his status once again.

It was somewhat validating to see the results of his constant study. Warding magic was already at D, and although Argrave had learned only a few spells, druidic magic was heading upwards. He thought the 'traits' section had remained the same, but he spotted a new entry...

"Hah." Argrave couldn't help but laugh. "Insomniac, huh... to think I used to be proud of always getting my eight hours."

Now that he thought of it, since he had become Argrave, he had never once fallen asleep easily and woke up undisturbed. Even before the battle at the scout's camp, he was troubled by sleeplessness and nightmares. He would dream that everything was normal—perhaps he was back in the lecture room at college, or driving, or enjoying a quiet family dinner. Then, it would all vanish. He would trip, or blink, and he was back in Berendar, with fell monsters and wars. A place familiar, yet wholly unfamiliar.

'Saving the world' was fun to read about, to hear about... *but to have that burden hoisted on you?*

"Forget it. I don't have the right to complain." Argrave tossed the hand mirror on the bed and stood, heading for the pile of stacked books in the corner of the guest room. He filtered through druidic spells, setting aside the ones that were useless. Generally, druidic spells were best for scouting. One could also aid life in growing, but Argrave had little need for that type of magic.

He paused, spotting the book on C-rank elemental magic out of the corner of his eye. He reached down and picked it up, walking towards the balcony. He pulled aside the curtains and walked out. The ocean crashed against the shore. One could see the grass plains and field of crops outside Mateth just barely. In the distance, ships travelled,

magic flames swirling about them to light the path. Above it all, the red full moon stood, just beginning to wane.

Argrave opened the C-rank elemental magic book, leaning out across the balcony. He willed some of his magic into the book. Past D-rank, spell books had to be enchanted with spells to project a matrix. Once his magic stirred within him and exited from his fingers, the C-rank spell matrix of [Wargfire] hovered in the air just above the book. Argrave could see it, but he could not comprehend it.

It reminded him of a time where he had been looking at a giant mountain from a helicopter. The mountain had been so large, it was difficult for his mind to comprehend its scale. Argrave shut the book with an audible *pop*, sighing in quiet defeat.

Argrave held his hand out above the ocean, staring at his palm. He most often wore gloves for fear of getting dirty, so he rarely saw his hands and fingers. He conjured only the matrix of his favorite D-rank spell, [Writhing Lightning]. Briefly, he recalled those snow elves that had been left spasming from electricity, writhing despite having been long dead. The image left him quickly, disturbing his calm heart.

The spell matrix hovered in the air. It was a bizarre amalgamation of many 3-D shapes, but each had a purpose and a function, and they came together to execute a spell. It was a little like a ridiculously complex programming language, Argrave reckoned. The thought made him laugh, but he maintained the matrix.

As long as he put no magic power into it, the spell would not activate. Besides, he had no magic power—he had been siphoning most of it to repay Erlebnis for the magic loan.

From F to E, the only change was adding another dimension to magic. It took it from one line to multiple lines, branching off in different directions, forming shapes. They took shape, forming simple ideas and executing simple actions.

From E to D, another dimension entered the scenario. The flat shapes were given depth. Simple shapes could form complex models. The third dimension was the basis of all humans could perceive—the extent of their perception of reality. But, if one were to boil it down, all that was added was another line and a new direction to move. Another ‘plane.’

He clenched his hand, and the spell matrix dissipated into nothing. If he were to imagine the fourth dimension—another line, another path, another direction, another layer of complexity to the mystical force that was ‘magic...’

Argrave held his hand forward, eyes closed. He pictured that matrix that he had just seen in the book—a fourth dimension. A step away from the mundane. A step further from the grounded reality of his former life, and one into the abyss that was Berendar.

He opened his eyes again and willed his magic to his hands. The matrix of [Wargfire] materialized, and a great maw of flame roared from Argrave's hand. It surged forward like a living beast, dancing into the night. Its fiery teeth came together and let out an echoing *clack*, like two solid fangs had genuinely met. Even from behind it, Argrave could feel the power. Then, it vanished into the night as though it never was.

Mute from shock, Argrave stared out across the ocean. His wide eyes slowly closed, and a smile spread across his face. He briefly worried that someone would come and see what exactly he was doing up here, but no one came. The night remained as silent as ever.

"I guess that wasn't so bad after all," Argrave smiled, kicking off the railing and standing straight. He stretched and walked back inside.

He walked over to the bronze hand mirror and picked it up, about to look at his new acquisition. Then, he came to a stop. He weighed the mirror in his hand, and then tossed it on the ground. He fell onto his bed in a disorderly heap.

"So many options just opened up for me...", Argrave muttered into the bed. "It's like I'm a kid who's just walked into an ice cream shop, and I see hundreds of flavors arrayed out before me."

With C-rank magic and the Blessing of Supersession, Argrave could become a force in his own right. Of course, he'd need to learn and memorize some certain spells. Naturally, as the ranks get higher, acquiring those rare spells becomes considerably more difficult. For the average spellcaster, at least—Argrave knew exactly where to go once the shackles of this invasion were broken.

For the first time in a long while, sleep came easily to Argrave. He did not even notice that his sheets were still sweaty.

Chapter 24: Changing Wind and Reign

Argrave awoke with a song inexplicably stuck in his head. Midday sunlight poked at his eyelids, forcing him to turn. The action woke him further and he sat up. He conjured simple water magic, cleaned his hands diligently, and then rubbed his eyes. The cold wetness brought him from the dreamworld. He blinked his eyes a few times, and then slid off the bed.

"Ooh there ain't nothing you can do; I got, I got my eye on you," Argrave sang the chorus quietly, humming the words he forgot to the rest of the song. He went to his

luggage and retrieved a pair of gloves, slipping them on. His sickness felt mostly gone. He still felt a bit weak, but then he always felt weak.

Argrave channeled half of his magic into Blessing of Supersession. The magic debt he'd accrued in the fight at the druid's camp would probably not be alleviated before the invasion occurred. It made him uneasy. That said, one's magic pool was like a muscle. In order to train it, it needed to be exhausted. The more he drained his magic, the more he would be able to hold. It was the closest thing to 'training' Argrave could perform. One push-up would probably break his wrists.

Argrave cleaned his teeth with a cloth and some water, and after washed his hair in the washbasin. He combed his hair back neatly. It was getting long—it fell a little past his ears. Argrave's chin was still smooth, though—he was too young to be growing even peach fuzz, it seemed. Argrave frowned. *Come to think of it, I'm not sure how old I really am. I certainly look fully grown, judging by height alone...*

The thought passed, and Argrave reprimanded himself for worrying so much about his appearance. *Should probably go meet Nikoletta, talk to her father as she wanted...* He straightened his clothes and made for the door, still singing.

"Some girl, old flame, jumps the stage cursin' her name... tells her just where she oughta go..." Argrave pulled the double doors back. A maid standing in front jumped back. She'd clearly had her ear to the door.

"F-forgive me, lord. I was just instructed..."

"You're forgiven. I know, I'm a saint. Anyway..." Argrave waited for her to speak.

"The Duke is looking for you, sir," the maid curtsied quickly. "I hadn't intended to... I was merely checking if the lord was awake."

Argrave put his hand to his chest. "And instead, you were enraptured by my soothing serenade. I understand completely." Argrave smiled genially, and the maid's tense shoulders dropped. "Well, where is the Duke, then? I have never actually spoken to him before. This will be a new experience."

"He is in his study with the young lady Monticci. I can guide you there, if you wish..." she began to ask.

Argrave held his hand out to stop her. "I know where his study is. I am sure you must be busy with other things. Do not let me keep you. Have a pleasant day." He bowed and then walked past her in long strides, humming the tune now that he was no longer in private.

The extent of what Argrave knew about Duke Enrico is what was written. Without fail, he died in the beginning of the game to the snow elves. The player could find his corpse,

and some of his stats existed in the game files, but his personality was mostly unknown to the player beyond what Nikoletta said about him while playing as her. The bulk of it could be summarized as 'pragmatic.' He was also a widower; his wife died giving birth to Nikoletta.

"Had no idea you were such a flirt."

Argrave jumped at the voice, turning around to where it came from. Mina materialized, starting with her short yellow hair. Another illusion spell.

"Hah! We're 1-2 now," Mina taunted, pointing at him. Argrave was confused for a second, but he remembered that he'd found Mina twice while she was hiding invisible.

After Argrave straightened his cuffs and regained his composure, a rhyme came to his head. "Who keeps score? You're such a bore."

Mina ignored him, her eyes veritably glinting. "Should have heard yourself. 'My soothing serenade,' all smiles and bows..."

"You think that's flirting?" Argrave asked incredulously.

"What else would it be?"

"General propriety," Argrave countered, walking down the hall again. "Gregariousness."

"Sure," Mina agreed sarcastically. "You're real polite. You never make fun of people to their face."

"I hear the dripping jealousy. 'Argrave, how dare you use honeyed words to a woman besides me?'" Argrave mocked.

"Y-you're ridiculous. I had no idea you were this shameless," Mina refuted, sputtering. "Well, if you're in these high spirits, I can assume you're feeling better?"

"Changing the subject, I see," Argrave answered without committing.

"I don't like..." Mina trailed off. "Never mind. Pointless to argue with someone like you."

"I know you don't like me. Not romantically, at least." Argrave said. Mina nodded in satisfaction now that he confirmed it. "Instead, you much prefer Nikoletta, don't you?" Argrave brought up a fact he knew from the game, seeking petty revenge for being frightened.

Mina went white as a sheet, and she anxiously said, "That's not... what are you... Nicky's..."

"No need to get flustered," Argrave assured, enjoying this very much. "Romance is a natural part of life. Though, one wonders why you've left your affections unvoiced."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Mina answered, regaining her composure quickly. She was good at acting, as ever.

"Sure, sure," Argrave nodded. "Keep quiet, subdued, when an invasion is coming at any time. Leave that burning question unanswered. Very prudent. Brave."

"Nicky's also a woman," Mina bit back, his jabs inciting a reaction precisely because they were the truth.

"That's no reason. The heart wants what the heart wants." Argrave stopped in the hall and turned to Mina now that their conversation interested him. "Believe me, I know."

"Then you...?" Mina looked at him with wide eyes.

"Me? No. But my best friend since childhood swings that way. He ended up fairly happy in life," Argrave smiled as he recalled things.

Mina seemed hesitant to speak further, but she eventually asked, "What happened to him?"

"Henry? He..." Argrave trailed off as his mind went back to the life he left behind. "He died. An accident," the lie came smoothly. In truth, it was Argrave who had died and come to this hellish place. "But..." Argrave tried to dispel his errant thoughts, shaking his head. "He and his partner were happy. They died together, at least."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Mina quickly said.

"As am I," Argrave agreed. "Anyway, I should be off. The young lady Monticci and the old gentleman Monticci await me. It's sure to be a blast." Argrave turned to leave, then stopped himself.

He pointed at Mina. "I want you to think of what I said. Remember this; the worst that can happen is that she says no. She probably won't, though. I know these things. Trust me. Have I ever been wrong before? Think long and hard."

"You keep...!" Mina started, but she deflated quickly. Argrave turned and waved as he walked away.

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The winds of the north roared fiercely as they travelled across the icy landscape. The fierce tempest carried snow enough to conceal distant mountains and vast forests. A great wall stood tall against it all. It was made of ice that had been carved out by hand. The wall was near a hundred feet tall, and no snow passed above it, instead blanketing the icy peak just above that shielded the city like an umbrella. The city beyond lay untouched.

The buildings were simple and long, made of stone and held by pillars of the same material. Carvings stretched across most of the city, making it appear more like a ruin than an inhabited place. The people walking about were tall and formidable. Their skin was as pale as the snow outside the city's walls and their ears came to sharp points. They wore dense fur clothes, and many walked about with a bow or an axe.

Opposite the ice wall was a sheer gray wall carved from stone. A great structure jutted out of the front of it, overlooking the city. It was a formidable keep, gray smoke rising from the black fires atop the towers. The tusked skull of a gigantic creature hung from the keep, its empty sockets forever staring menacingly at the wall of ice. At the foot of the stone wall, a large passageway led to a spiral staircase winding up into the keep.

The keep was filled with Veidimen. Barring the lightly armored spellcasters, the bulk of them were warriors. Their armor was plate, but it was all covered in dense fur to ward from the penetrating cold. In the heart of the keep, the throne room, a great assemblage of fierce-looking snow elves had gathered, each sitting at one long rectangular table that stretched to the end of the room. Each of the people sitting had a few behind them, stance polite as though waiting to serve. They seemed to be men and women in equal numbers.

At the throne, a short yet fiercely scarred man sat casually. His head was cleanly-shaven, but a crown of iron, fangs, and claws all arrayed with points upwards decorated his forehead. He kept his eyes fixed at the foot of the stairs. There, a badly burn-scarred Veidimen was supported by a few snow elves. Though the burns had been treated, most of his body was badly affected. His pale white skin served as a harsh contrast to the red and black scars.

"It was Galamon 'the Great?' the man on the throne asked. "You're certain?"

"Yes, Patriarch." the burned elf answered hoarsely.

Patriarch Dras shifted on his throne, obviously discomfited by the news. "How could you tell when the attack was so sudden and swift?"

The burned elf swallowed, and then took a deep, wheezing breath. "We had confirmed Galamon's presence...." The elf paused for another wheezing breath. "...in Mateth

many months ago, my Patriarch. I had seen him at times, while using the pigeons.... to scout. The appearance was identical."

The Patriarch leaned back in his throne. All of the snow elves arrayed kept quiet, waiting for their leader to inquire further. "If he opposes the invasion... Galamon would know more about our military than anyone save me. Since he's behind the attack, it's safe to assume that most of our military secrets will be leaked."

"That's assuming the humans will even accept his aid. They are wary of us Veidimen. Even possessing the scout's reports, he will not be able to reach anyone," one of the people at the table spoke.

"He was with a man," another commented. "If he's enlisted aid in this battle of his, he can likely use them."

"But Galamon, even after being exiled, still follows the teachings of Veid," Patriarch Dras said, voice low and frustrated. "He may as well be my brother. He firmly believes in Veiden, even if Veid has stricken him with the Curse of Bloodthirst. Something is off."

"Maybe he is not the leader in this scenario," a woman's voice said. She was quickly interrupted.

"Be quiet, Anneliese!"

Everyone's heads turned to two near the end of the table. An aged elven woman sat at the table, wearing mage's robes. Another woman stood behind her, tall and skinny, with silken white hair descending down to her knees. Her amber eyes stared ahead, unshaken.

"My apologies," the old mage sitting said. "I brought her here to learn. She forgot her place, Patriarch Dras."

The Patriarch scratched his chin. "We are all children of Veid. Let her speak," he dismissed, waving his hand.

Anneliese turned her head forward and opened her mouth, before pausing to gather her composure. "...if Galamon did not lead the attack, and was instead under contract of a human, his actions would make sense. Galamon would never break a contract, no matter the enemy."

"But the battle was said to be quick and decisive," someone quickly refuted. "Two took on twenty druids, including Tirros. From what was reported, the mage could not have been especially high rank, either. If Galamon was not leading, such a result would be... unlikely."

Anneliese turned her amber eyes to the one who had spoken. "Patriarch Dras led our tribe of Veiden, yet Galamon devised all of the strategies that led to victory in war."

Some people were taken aback by the comment which implied Dras owed his Patriarchate to Galamon. Many heads turned to wait for the Patriarch's response. He had his mouth hidden by a hand. Eventually, he lowered it. He was smiling.

"True. The strategist need not be the leader," Dras said calmly. "My own past has shielded my questioning, though. Getting lost in conjecture does Veiden no good. The simple fact is this; we are to head to Berendar. Any chance we had to wait for a good time to assault has been lost, and they will prepare for our coming."

The Patriarch stood and walked to the top of the stairs.

"For unending centuries, the Veidimen have endured the frigid winds of the north!" he shouted. "We were born in the fires of Veid's creation, and over the passage of time, the cold has tempered our rough iron will into a fierce warrior's steel." He paused, stepping about. "Now, we must come from our sheathes and unleash ourselves upon the world! It is time for us to embark from the shores and make ourselves known as the tool of Veid's will!"

The room erupted into cheering. Axes were raised into the air in fervor. The Patriarch continued his speech, and it echoed throughout the great keep. Though the words spoke of war and battle, none seemed tense. Instead, nearly all had expressions of anticipation, like the time had finally come to fulfill their life's dream.

Chapter 25: The Swordfish Sharpens

A knight pushed open a set of oak double doors that had the symbol of House Monticci in the center. The swordfish split open, and a small office lay beyond. A few faces turned towards the new entry. Argrave walked in, looking around the room. It was an office and a library in one, and a big round table occupied the center of the room. Many documents were splayed out across the table. Argrave recognized them—they were from the druid's camp.

Barring Nikoletta and Elias, there were two people present that Argrave did not recognize. This was something that had scarcely happened to him since arriving in Berendar. Most of the civilians in Mateth were untouched by the Veidimen invasion, but the military and leadership were mostly killed. If these two were here, it meant that they had probably died before the game began.

The man at the head of the table was of an average build. He bore a set of gilded armor bearing a blue swordfish at the front, so Argrave recognized him as Duke Enrico of Monticci. Argrave placed him at his early fifties. He had blue hair and the same dark pink eyes Nikoletta had. His hair was wavy and well-groomed, and his beard was trimmed to a sharp point. He was still quite handsome by Argrave's estimation. A veritable silver fox.

The other was a gruff-looking knight with a scar-lined face. His head was shaved bald. He stepped forward, placing himself between Duke Enrico and Argrave.

The Duke scanned Argrave, head tilted to peer at him from behind the knight. "This is your friend, Nikoletta?"

"Yes, it is." Nikoletta crossed her arms and nodded.

Argrave wanted to comment that her answer had changed since they first spoke, but he kept quiet.

The Duke continued. "He's a tall one. Taller than the king, even." He tapped the table. "Step aside, Knight-Commander Ryger."

"Duke," the knight obeyed quickly, taking his place at the table. The doors shut behind Argrave.

"My daughter has been relaying what you've told her the past few days," Duke Enrico started. His voice was calm and steady, with a certain business-like quality to it. "Your information was supported by what you brought with you, and my men retrieved some of the bodies in that camp of... what was the word..."

"Druids," Argrave supplied.

"Yes. Druids." The Duke stared at him. "Nikoletta may not question where your information comes from. I, however, am greatly concerned by how you know so much. You knew things occurring in my territory before I did. How did you come to know about this camp of druids?"

Elias turned his head to look at Argrave after the duke had spoken. Clearly he was interested in the answer too.

The knight-commander walked beside Argrave, coming uncomfortably close. He was a fair bit shorter than Argrave, but probably much heavier. Argrave smiled at him, keeping his feet firm.

"Information gathering is one of my strengths," Argrave answered. "I talk to a lot of people. I walk around a lot. I do things—favors—for people. You can learn a lot if you have time and an open-mind."

Argrave essentially described what 'quests' were in an RPG. Indeed, he had learned most of the game through quests, so it was not a lie. One of the key parts of being convincingly deceptive was learning to deceive oneself.

Ryger looked dissatisfied by Argrave's answer. The Duke pressed more. "That is not specific. Who, or what, gave you the information?"

Nikoletta grabbed his arm. "Father, please don't do this."

The Duke did not look at Nikoletta to respond. "You are too trusting. Thwarting schemes requires considerable caution, and plenty seek to undermine our Dukedom, Nikoletta."

"You are too paranoid," Nikoletta shot back. "Argrave could have made us go to war with Parbon, but he chose to risk himself."

"That is one matter. This is another."

"Hold on a moment," Argrave interrupted. "If I know you, Duke Enrico, you were already planning on rallying soldiers as soon as Margrave Reinhardt started moving towards Dirracha."

Duke Enrico stared for a moment. Somehow, he made dark pink eyes seem fierce. He had a stare that could make Charles Manson run for his money.

"Who or what or where or why—none of that matters," Argrave continued. "Those documents alone should set you on edge. They document your troops better than you do, I suspect. I know more than I should, and you don't need to know why that is."

"The source of information is *a/ways* important. It helps reveal the intention behind the conveyance of information." The Duke paused, running a hand across his beard. "But, in this case, you are right. Preparation has never undone anyone. On that note... several people have described that battle you had with the druids. Most called it a massacre, yet you were only two. You are a D-rank spellcaster, yes?"

Argrave shook his head. "Yesterday I was. Today, not anymore."

That statement elicited a reaction from Elias and Nikoletta. Elias' eyes widened, but Nikoletta burst out, "You said you were going to rest tonight!"

"I did sleep," Argrave rebutted. "Besides, I'm a lot better now. No more shivering. Either way, me being C-rank doesn't matter, as I haven't had the time to learn any C-rank spells beyond [Wargfire]. I don't think I will before the Veidimen land, either."

"I see." The Duke nodded. "You strategized for the attack on the scouts?"

“Yes,” Argrave confirmed.

“Do you have thoughts on what the snow elves will do?”

“You’re asking my opinion? Why not ask the egghead here?” Argrave pointed his thumb at the knight-commander Ryger. The man’s face deepened into a frown, but he did not say anything. He did not appear to talk much.

“I have asked his thoughts, and now I am asking yours. I prefer to strategize myself. A hobby of mine, mock-warfare.”

Argrave nodded. “Well, has Nikoletta told you what I said before?”

“You believe we are hopelessly outmatched.”

“I know you are,” Argrave corrected. “You’re vastly outnumbered, they have Ebonice in large amounts, they’re more experienced, they have detailed information about your capabilities, and their warriors are physically larger. It’s a losing battle.”

“Ebonice?” the Duke repeated.

“It’s an ice that dispels magic. All but the highest-ranking magic breaks on contact with it. Some spells can keep going for a time, but they lose purpose and generally shatter immediately—especially wards. It comes from their region, so they have a lot of it, naturally. My guard Galamon has some—an axe. I can demonstrate it later, but he’s away right now.”

“Our knights aren’t lacking in training,” the knight-commander said, speaking for the first time.

“But with battle experience? Many of these Veidimen are old—hundreds of years old, in fact, with as many battles under their belt. Their leader, Patriarch Dras, conquered all of the other tribes of the region. Their magic isn’t at all lacking compared to ours, either.”

The Duke leaned over the maps on the table. “Then tell me; what do you suggest be done?”

“Their primary disadvantage is that they are at sea,” Argrave stepped forward, walking past Ryger and Elias to stand over the map. “Their longships will try and land on unfortified locations so that their troops can disembark. Hiding traps in the water would be effective—pikes hidden underwater along the coast would force them to jump into the water and swim to shore. I needn’t explain why that’s disadvantageous, I think.”

"My daughter mentioned how you thought they might deploy their mages..." the Duke began.

Their conversation continued, Argrave discussing what he thought and the Duke refining the ideas. Like this, Argrave integrated seamlessly into the battle planning. The morning passed by swiftly.

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"...and if they use earth elemental magic as a siege weapon?" The duke pressed, pointing to a diagram of Mateth's walls.

"It's not so different from pushing a ladder off the side of the wall, only you need mages to deconstruct the platform. They would have to build it like stairs so as not to make it crumble, and that sort of magic is very costly. The walls are quite tall."

"What if they use it on the wall itself?"

"The walls of Mateth are enchanted. That can't happen."

"You do know too much," the duke said musingly.

Argrave laughed, stretching and looking out the windows. "Look at that. It's near midday. Galamon must be back by now, surely... well, if that's the case, I have to be going."

"Where?" the duke inquired harshly. It seems he didn't want Argrave to leave.

"Barden. I have things of my own to prepare."

"What things?"

The door shot open, and a tired-looking man stumbled into the room. Argrave looked at the man in concern.

"Duke Enrico, my lord," the man said, huffing. "This just arrived." He stepped forward, handing a note to the Duke. "Margrave Reinhardt's knights were attacked. House Parbon has sent missives to all the nobles in Vasquer, seeking support in overthrowing the royal family."

Elias stepped forward and took the note before the messenger could deliver it.

"I told you it was coming," Argrave said. "It's tough, always being right like this."

"Shut up," Elias said coldly, hands shaking as he read the note. Then, without another word, he dropped the paper and ran out of the room.

"Elias...!" Nikoletta shouted in vain. The heir to House Parbon left quickly.

"That's precisely why this invasion is so dangerous," Argrave commented, sitting in a chair and leaning back casually. "Everyone else will be choosing a side in the battle for Vasquer. No time to devote to the elven Vikings."

"How can you be so casual? This is... this is terrible!" Nikoletta shouted.

The Duke was silent at this point. He retrieved the letter and read it as Argrave spread his arms wide, asking incredulously, "What? I've been telling you this was coming."

"It's one thing to say it, it's another for it to..." Nikoletta sat down as well, clutching her head.

"Anyway, I really should be going now." Argrave put his hands on his knees and stood up. "Especially now that things are like this."

"Hold a moment," the Duke stopped Argrave, putting a hand in front of him.

"No, really, I'll leave you be. I left my cat in the oven, and my bread needs to be fed..." Argrave insisted, pushing past the Duke's hand.

"I won't restrain you, if that's what you fear," the Duke assured. "There's something you should have."

Argrave stopped. "Oh, the money from the auction? I can't use that yet, anyway. There's a place to the south at the city Jast... well, never mind. Not important yet. I can get it later."

"Auction?" the Duke questioned.

"Don't worry about that, dad," Nikoletta butted in. "Argrave, we can talk about that later."

The Duke gave a fierce glance to his daughter, and she hid her gaze. "We'll discuss this later. But for you--this. It's a simple token. If you show this to any of my knights, they will protect you. A simple precaution." The Duke held out a blue token with a swordfish on it.

"Oh, the Mark of Monticci. Nice." Argrave took it, reminiscing. It was a game item that had more or less the same effect.

The Duke frowned when Argrave recognized it, but he did not comment. "If indeed this invasion occurs, Monticci will have much to repay you for. The steps you've taken... it is worthy of nearly anything."

“Even that magic ring you’ve got stashed in the basement?” Argrave inquired, recalling an artifact that existed in the game.

The Duke frowned intensely.

“Ah—never mind. We’ll talk about that later. For now...”

Argrave held the token in the air, muttering a ‘thanks,’ and then left quickly. Nikoletta followed him out.

“But... Argrave, we still have to talk—”

Argrave interrupted, holding his hand behind him and waving. “We’ll talk once this is over. No use for money where I’m going.” He stashed the token in his pocket and walked for the exit.