

## Jackal 101

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 101: Sentinel's Capstone

Alasdair ducked beneath the iron gate of the Menagerie where a few of the Stonepetal Sentinels awaited him.

“Nothing, sir,” the closest to Alasdair said immediately.

“Nothing?” Alasdair repeated. He raised up both hands, kneading his gauntlets together anxiously. “Gods be damned... where would he have put the accursed thing?”

“We searched everywhere. All the rooms, every corner... not a thing,” the Sentinel confirmed, shaking his head.

“Damn it all,” Alasdair muttered, ducking back out of the Menagerie and into the balcony of the second floor. He leaned against the railing, staring out at the soaked floor. Even despite the blood having washed through the place, traces of the battle where Argrave had supposedly conjured enough magic to kill everything within sight lingered. According to Ossian, despite his display of power, Argrave seemed able to use magic—a veritable bottomless well of power well befitting a prince of Vasquer.

Yet even still, something did not feel right. A deceiver remained a deceiver. Even their efforts to prove the contrary were merely grander shows of deceit. Alasdair knew this well, because he was a deceiver himself. Though he played the part of the honorable Master Sentinel, well concerned for the welfare of those beneath him, he truly only cared for the position of Grandmaster. He had wasted his youth in this doomed knightly order—at the very least, he would be its master before his death.

Alasdair watched the blood, his old and scarred face tense beneath his stifling plate helmet. After a time of staring, his face relaxed, eyes locked on the blood. He knelt down, retrieving a rock with a frown on his face. He dropped it, and it impacted with the floor a story below. Ripples spread out—quick and shallow, but present.

“Mixed with water... It’s not just blood,” Alasdair said aloud in awe as he came to the answer.

At once, he moved to the stairs, rushing down them as quick as his heavy armor would allow. He walked out to the door, out into the city of Nodremaid, ignoring the confused cries of the Sentinels behind him. Moving alone in the Low Way was ill advised, but Alasdair was too overcome with excitement to allow his caution to control him.

He rushed to the side of the platform, leaning out and staring across the canals. As his eyes took in the sights, he started to realize something.

*The flow is different. The sluices have been moved.*

The realization brought a smile to his face, though it could not be seen beneath his helmet. The Sentinels beneath him, concerned for his well-being, caught up to him.

“Alasdair, sir,” one called out, not overloud because of their location.

“One of you, return back to the lower levels. Gather everyone serving beneath me,” he commanded, removing his sash of stone roses around his chest. “Use this to ensure their obedience. The rest of you... we search the city, checking the sluice control points for the severed head.” Alasdair turned his head back to the canals, where the water rose especially high. “Argrave is no prince. He used the floodgates to create an overflow.”

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“Someone approaches,” Galamon informed Argrave, stepping in front of him.

They were in the final hallway out of the lower levels, and towards freedom, ostensibly—once they were on the road towards the Crimson Wellspring, their days of dealing with the Sentinels would be over. A fight awaited them to claim the artifact, but despite his weakened state, Argrave felt extremely confident it would be easy.

“Someone?” Argrave pressed.

“A lone armored footman—a Sentinel,” Galamon told Argrave.

Argrave considered this. “Alright. Let’s keep going. Tell me of anything more.”

They proceeded forward, Argrave readjusting the backpack on his back. Their food rations were greatly reduced, and it felt much lighter than before. Still, he kept a slow pace, being careful not to overexert his lungs.

Galamon looked back. “He has a sash bearing stone roses.”

Argrave frowned. “You mean... another one, besides the one on his chest?”

“Aye. It has near twenty.”

Argrave didn’t know what to make of that. Fortunately, Anneliese supplied, “These sashes are a sign of command, as you told me,” she looked to Argrave. “If so, it would be given to a subordinate to deliver an order with their authority.”

“I see.” Argrave looked at the ground, then at Anneliese. “So... Alasdair has something important to get to the rest of the group. My cover story’s been exposed, maybe.”

Both said nothing, but that was answer enough for Argrave. Even still, he spent a long while deliberating on the matter before giving his answer. This person *might* be delivering an order that could compromise a lot of their future progress. He might not be, though.

“Stand aside, let him pass.”

“What?” asked Galamon incredulously.

“Let him pass a bit,” Argrave amended. “Then... deal with him. In whatever way you deem... most efficient,” Argrave finished bitterly.

Galamon nodded slowly, then patted Argrave on the shoulder as though to reassure him the choice was correct. Argrave didn’t feel any less terrible about it, though.

Soon enough, the Sentinel approached. Their party of three stood aside, Galamon even giving a polite nod to the Sentinel as he jogged past. As much as Argrave didn't want to watch, he didn't dare look away considering the potential danger. Perhaps he should have, though—Galamon grabbed the Sentinel's helmet with one hand and quickly dispatched him by jamming his enchanted knife into his neck. The Sentinel struggled only once before dying. It was hauntingly similar to the way Galamon had killed the one outside the Low Way.

"...I believe we would be best off hiding the body," Anneliese suggested. "Argrave cannot move especially quickly anyway, and it only benefits us. We can dump it into the canal."

Argrave nodded, and then moved forward. "Not wrong... I'll try and hurry. Alasdair is probably looking for Garm. He can take care of himself, but... we'd still better be quick. Quick as I can manage, at least." He touched his chest, then rolled his shoulder, pulling the heavy gray duster over his shoulders. Galamon hefted the body over his shoulder, then moved forward.

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Alasdair entered into one of the sluice control rooms. He had been examining the way that the sluices were set up, and by his estimation, this one would be pivotal had Argrave genuinely flooded the lower levels with the canals.

The sluice control room was narrow and simple, made of stone and filled with an unpleasant mildew. It was dark, no light prevailing. In the center, three rusted chains descended down below. Alasdair looked into the hole, and he could see rushing red water just beyond it. The sluices could be raised and lowered in this room.

Alasdair walked about, scanning the room as best he could in the lack of light. He felt along the wall, trying to feel things out. The only source of light came from the doorway. The light of Nodremaid was faint outside, but it was doubly so within buildings.

Eventually, he came to a turn wheel quite similar to the one just before the Menagerie. Alasdair tugged at it, and despite the fact that it was quite old, it moved easily—evidence it had been used recently.

He heard footsteps behind and lowered himself. Soon enough, both of his men entered into the room, and Alasdair stood quietly.

"No luck?" Alasdair inquired.

"No, sir," both replied asynchronously.

"We've searched all of the other nearby sluice gates," one followed up.

"Then search this one," Alasdair pointed down. "Carefully. Considering everything, this place is the most vital. If anywhere, I suspect the head will be here."

They entered deeper, combing along the walls and heading for the back. Once the two were deep enough in, a light flickered at the entrance. An arrow shot out, glowing in the light. Alasdair, reflexes trained for decades against vampires and Guardians, nimbly ducked behind the sluice controls, and a burst of fire scorched where the arrow struck the stone.

"Find cover," Alasdair directed calmly. "They're here. They have enchanted arrows."

Alasdair breathed out silently as his Sentinels moved to obey. The situation was desperate, he knew, but he had survived much worse. He drew his sword from his waist, holding it at attention.

"Argrave," Alasdair called out. "That abominable head of yours—I have it. It's in my hands," he bluffed.

"My head is still attached to me, last I checked," a familiar hoarse voice rang out at once.

"You want it back. You want to gain access to all of the places within the Low Way, take all its treasures for yourself," Alasdair continued. "I can take that away."

Another arrow shot out, and Alasdair shrunk away. A yelp of pain sounded out in the distance alongside the crackle of electricity, and Alasdair clenched his teeth tight. *That warrior the boy brought along isn't for show...*

"Rolf?" Alasdair questioned.

"I'm... fine, sir. My left arm is shot, though."

Alasdair grit his teeth, taking better cover. *Damn it all. Why are they out so quick? Thought it would take an hour, minimum, for them to find what they need... Nowhere to escape... think, damn it.*

"Fire another shot, I kill the head," Alasdair bluffed once more.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you will," Argrave said, sarcastic voice betraying his utter lack of belief.

"Fine, I'll do as you did. Flood the lower levels. Everyone will come here. Your ruse will be broken."

Alasdair pivoted forward, grabbing the turn wheel for the sluice. Remaining in cover, he started to raise it once more. The chains groaned in protest. The sound disguised the sound as another arrow fired out, but Alasdair managed to avoid being hit narrowly, a trail of magic whizzing by his hand.

Just as he started to hear a torrent of water rushing by below as the sluice rose, Alasdair felt hot pain on the back of his head. The blow did little damage on account of the helmet, but Alasdair staggered forth. As if expecting this, the gargantuan elf rushed forth, already swinging his blade. The blow seemed to fall short, so Alasdair stepped back. A blade of wind leapt out, and Alasdair, panicked, raised his own to block it.

The blade of wind struck Alasdair's sword, and the ferocity of the enchanted weapon's attack knocked the sword out of his hand. The elf still rushed forth, charge undeterred. Alasdair fell to his back and thrust his feet out, trying to stop the charge as a pikeman might stop cavalry. Alasdair barely saw the curved greatsword flying towards his face before it pierced his neck, sliding beneath his helmet.

The elf pulled out his blade mercilessly, stepping past Alasdair. Alasdair's head fell back as he clutched at his neck. In his last moments, he tried to search out what had struck him. Had one of his own betrayed him? The very idea filled him with an indignant wrath.

Then he saw it. A brown-haired head, impaled on a stake. Its cold black and gold eyes stared down at Alasdair as he writhed. He reached out for it in vain, and it watched passively. When Alasdair's hand finally grew near, he felt the last bit of strength drain from his body. He watched as magic swirled about the head, a blade of wind appearing right above his eyes.

“Die, mutt.”

The blade descended, and darkness took Alasdair, Master Sentinel of the Stonepetal Sentinels.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 102: Thicker than Water**

Argrave stared into the rushing red water, watching it rise and writhe against the red-stained stone. He leaned against a railing just before the canal. Anneliese stood just beside him, looking around Nodremaid with Garm in her hand. Evidently she had grown to tolerate the place much better, for she was less troubled than Argrave.

He was coming to terms with the fact that Berendar had changed him. Beyond the initial rush of fear, uncertainty, and panic that cropped up in the act itself, he wasn't bothered by what had happened today. Four people had died, their bodies cast into the canals. He had been the engine behind their deaths, even if he had not killed himself. Despite that, their deaths did not weigh at his thoughts as the druids had. Perhaps it was because he had come to loathe the Sentinels. Perhaps it was merely that he was different, now.

The smells, the sounds, and the horrors of Nodremaid and the Low Way had already made their effects known, Argrave supposed. Experiencing day after day of the horrible and the bizarre... he didn't dare think he was some sort of mentally untouchable iron man now, but the tasks ahead seemed less harrowing. Confronting the grim realities of the Low Way, morbid though they might be, might have served as the tempering he needed to continue.

*If I can survive this, I can handle anything, surely?*

“Maybe this was a good thing,” Argrave muttered, straightening his back a little. “A jolt to the system to wake me up.”

“What?” Anneliese asked, not hearing Argrave.

“Nothing,” he dismissed.

Galamon stepped out from one of the sluice control buildings, stepping up to Argrave. “You said that was the last one?”

“Should be,” nodded Argrave, not looking away from the canal.

The change in the water was not instantly perceptible. It continued to rush along its path, splattering the walls with wetness. Argrave noticed he saw more of the walls, first, and after, the constant flow of the water started to slow. Eventually, as more and more water came by, the flow ceased entirely, the water dispersing across the surface.

The bottom of the canal was filthy—all sorts of twisted aquatic growth grew from the bottom, unpleasant crimson barnacles blocking most of the smooth stone. Much of the canal had eroded over the years from the constant rush of water, and the terrain was uneven and jagged. That, coupled with years of debris, made a very unpleasant and wet walkway. There were weapons and bones in abundance, likely from the corpses of Guardians that had fallen into the canal.

Argrave stopped leaning against the railing. “There's our path. We should move quickly.”

“And if someone raises the sluice?” questioned Anneliese. “The remainder of the Sentinels will emerge eventually. If they notice something amiss...”

“The whole walkway isn’t on the route of the canal,” Argrave disclosed, walking up to a set of stairs leading down into the canal for maintenance. “It branches off into a cave. This cave leads up to the Crimson Wellspring.” Argrave looked at the sluice. “Even if we’re really unfortunate, and a tide of water comes rushing towards us... I suspect our B-rank wards in tandem should be enough to buy us time sufficient for an escape.”

“Two wards against a tide of water? Gods, you’re mental,” Garm said from Anneliese’s hands. “Throwing everyone into danger time and time again. Perhaps I would have been better with the Sentinels.”

“Maybe,” Argrave adjusted his pack, and then descended down into the canal below. “We’re at the final stretch. A fight awaits us. It’s the one I told you two about, way back when we still had grass beneath our feet instead of corpses and gore. We’re well-prepared for it, despite the setbacks we faced here.” Argrave stopped a little down the stairs, glancing between Galamon and Anneliese. “Let’s finish this with the same caution we entered.”

The two of them nodded. Garm raised a disbelieving brow at the mention of ‘caution’ but seemed somewhat relieved.

With a quiet nod and as deep a breath as his scarred lungs would allow, Argrave stepped down the stairs, heading for the drained canal.

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“Induen gave me an ultimatum?” Elenore questioned, her legs crossed in her seat at the fountain. One could barely see the stumps where her two feet once were, though they were mostly concealed by her unblemished white dress.

“He did,” Therese, Elenore’s new personal maid, replied. Evidently the orange-haired maid had been training her movements for some time, for she did not nod for her blind master as she had those weeks ago.

“He must be under great duress,” Elenore mused, placing her fingers on her chin. “Despite Severin’s reports, I am unsure of what he intends to achieve at Elbraille.”

“Will we do something about Argrave, as he demanded?” Therese questioned, and noticing that Elenore’s teacup was empty, moved to refill it from the dainty white floral pot nearby. “New tea, my princess. Be careful. It is still hot.”

“I don’t know where Argrave is,” Elenore shook her head, then felt around until she placed her hands around the teacup, enjoying the warmth. “He left Jast, and then... nothing. Elaine reported a shipment of books from some fringe town with an Order branch. He is, fundamentally, an unpredictable variable. He claims to know me. Even of that, I am unsure.”

“Then perhaps it would be best to allow Induen his way, punish Argrave when he resurfaces, and stabilize things?” Therese moved to suggest, having gained boldness being so close underneath Elenore.

Elenore smiled. "I told you that I wanted to create chaos. Shake the box." Elenore held her fingers against the lip of the cup to ensure no liquid overflowed as she raised it to her mouth, then took a drink of the tea. "We will do nothing to Argrave."

Therese looked surprised, but said, "Yes, my princess. But..."

"Why?" Elenore finished. "Induen is growing to be just as unpredictable as Argrave. In times of peace, where none would dare oppose his activities, he was relatively stable. Now..." the princess paused, placing her hands back on the teacup. "...now, he faces widespread disobedience. For someone like him, I imagine that causes great mental stress. His impulsivity manifests more frequently—an unideal trait for someone aiding in my navigation."

"I... cannot follow, my princess," Therese lowered her head.

"Provided Argrave is not simply another victim of the coil of war..." Elenore took another slow drink. "When he resurfaces, and should Induen grow incensed with him once again... I will merely quietly disclose his location. Nothing more, nothing less."

"To what end?"

"To decide which unpredictability is worth supporting," Elenore turned her head up at Therese. "If Induen should deem it necessary to reevaluate the worth my advice, I find it necessary to test if he is up for what comes ahead." Her thin hands clenched a little tighter on the teacup, turning her knuckles white. "It is something I would never have considered, had he not said what he did. But... trust is a commodity, it seems, even between kin."

Therese stared down at the princess, her face sad. "Then, Argrave... you believe he can...?"

"Prevail?" Elenore picked up the teacup, and then set it down once more. "If they confront each other directly, it seems ridiculous. A prince, accompanied by royal knights, versus a bastard with known health problems. I know little of his two companions, but Elaine said he trusts them without compunction. He is smart, sidestepping and solving problems in a multitude of ways. In the face of all that, Induen is uncompromisingly relentless and a talented spellcaster and warrior both."

"We can only wait," Therese concluded.

Elenore said nothing, and then nodded after a fair amount of time had passed. "Yes. Regardless of the result, it would be best not to latch too firmly to any one person." Elenore crossed her arms.

"Disappointment is my sole companion, these days."

"On that note, my princess... perhaps some good news is in order?" Therese began. "Two of the guards watching Bruno of Parbon have folded under threat of family. While I suspect they will not do anything major, such as murder... we can get much out of them. The Margrave's brother is largely in our hands, my princess."

Elenore smiled, then reached her hand out. "I knew I was wise to trust you, Therese. Give me your hand." Therese took it, as directed. "Trust is a fickle thing. It fades with the slightest infraction, and repairing it is much harder than building it. Remember this, always."

Therese's face grew serious, interpreting the words as both a lesson and a warning. "I will, my princess."

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Argrave, breathing a little heavy, stared at a mound of red crystals ahead. It was just barely illuminated by the spell light hovering over their heads. The canal had a low ceiling and the descent was quite steep. The overhang was just low enough that Argrave had to crouch a little to proceed, and if he was reckless, he could bang his head against the ceiling—the enchanted hood over his head had taken the brunt of his mistakes, but his head did ache a tad.

Deciding that now might be a good time to rest a moment, Argrave looked back behind, seeing the path of the drained canal making its way back up into Nodremaid. He gestured to the others and made a vague utterance signaling to stop. He searched for a safe place to rest, and then lowered himself onto a patch of stone unmarred by moss, barnacles, or other such generally detestable growth. Feeling a dull ache, he held his hand to his chest.

“Should have rested earlier,” Galamon said to Argrave, coming to stand over him. “Travelling downhill is taxing when the terrain is uneven.”

“This whole place is taxing,” Argrave said in exasperation. He looked around, locking eyes with Garm. He was sorely tempted to make a joke about wanting to be carried, but he didn’t want to lower the head’s opinion of him more yet.

“Those crystals are familiar,” said Garm from Anneliese’s hands. “The work of blood magic,” he continued.

“That’s the cave,” answered Argrave without looking back. “Not much further until the Wellspring.”

Garm stared ahead. “I’m glad, at least, I get to see it. Might be I can make sense of what happened here if I see it personally...”

Argrave felt his magic was full, so he repaid some of his debt to Erlebnis. He took his pack off his back and retrieved a vial full of the black liquid magic from within. His supply of the stuff was running quite low. Once he made it to the Burnt Desert, he intended to make one more batch of liquid magic.

After taking the time to rest fully, Argrave rose to his feet. They continued to trek downhill, moving ever closer towards the crystal mounds. They were ruby-like in quality, but quartz in structure. Despite the fact that they were the same eerie red predominant throughout all of the Low Way, their beauty was some welcome reprieve from the bleak harshness of the overgrown city of Nodremaid. Indeed, nothing grew overtop them, as though they warded off life.

“Here,” Argrave pointed, spotting an opening in the crystals. He stepped towards it, taking the first step. “An upward trek through this crystal cave. I hope you’ll understand if I take it slowly.”

“The scent of blood grows stronger ahead. The rotten blood in the canals, and... something else. Sweet. Rich. Like wine,” Galamon said, inhaling deeply. The elven vampire pulled free a flask of blood, drinking—he had refilled it from the Sentinels’ corpses.

“I can’t believe you fools travel with a *vampire*,” Garm muttered.



Argrave ignored him. “That’s good. We’re heading towards the source—the Crimson Wellspring. There, we’ll deal with Claude, Grandmaster of the Stonepetal Sentinels. Or at least, he was.” Argrave looked ahead, peering beyond into the cave.

“Now... he’s the current undead Knight of the Wellspring, keeping the thing pumping blood.” Argrave turned back to the two of them. “And he’ll be the last.”

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 103: Knight of the Wellspring**

Argrave steadily stepped up the jagged red crystals that bit at his boots. If there was one thing he had not expected to appreciate, it would be the enchanted boots. There was a limit to the level of comfort one could offer for footwear on Earth, even with advanced technology. Here, though, despite the sharp, ruby-colored crystals sticking up into his soles, he felt nothing. The only pain he felt was from the gradual wear and tear of walking.

The confines of the crystal cave were narrow and dark. There was a certain comfort to the narrowness—Argrave felt as though he was freed from the constant oppression that the openness of Nodremaid provided. Back there, the vast open space and looming buildings made him feel as though something could swoop down at any moment and end him. Here, he felt walled. This came with its own set of problems, naturally, but they paled in comparison.

“You’re sure this leads... anywhere?” questioned Garm, voice unlabored.

“Yes,” replied Argrave simply, finding himself annoyed by the head’s presence. Perhaps it was simply jealousy Garm did not need to endure this trek as Argrave did.

Ahead, the crystals cast eerie shadows like jagged teeth as the spell light dancing above Argrave’s head illuminated the cave. They came to a branching path. Galamon stopped, turning around and silently asking Argrave for direction. Argrave furrowed his brows, a bit uncertain—it was difficult to be certain the way he followed was right. It had been months since he’d been here in-game. He looked for obvious identifiers, and then he spotted a faint difference in the constant red. Movement.

Argrave knelt down and lowered his fingers. They came up red, and he felt an uncomfortable warmth seeping into his gloves. He followed the trickle of thick, viscous blood with his gaze, watching from where it flowed.

“We’re close, I think. Just follow the flow,” Argrave pointed, then wiped the blood off on his duster.

Galamon proceeded. The crystals started to grow from small, sharp things into large clumps, as though increasing in quality. At times, it made navigation a touch difficult, requiring uncomfortable stretching and twisting. Argrave had to stop the party to be sure his lungs were not overtaxed multiple times.

Yet their uncertain advance started to feel like genuine progress as the things around aligned themselves with Argrave’s memories of ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ The crystals grew larger yet, until the floor beneath them solidified into one giant crystal. The space continued to open, and Argrave greatly appreciated the opportunity to stand straight without fear of bumping his head against something. With it, though, came a whirling sense of nervousness and excitement both. With the Knight of the Wellspring lying ahead, it felt finally time to test his practice—his efforts over the months he had been here.

“Gods... the sheer level of power needed to create crystals this—”

“Shut up,” Argrave insisted in a whisper, turning back to Garm held in Anneliese’s hand. “Make no noise. I told you a fight lies ahead—don’t attract attention.”

Garm stared up at Argrave, saying nothing. He turned his gaze away, and Argrave took that as acquiescence.

Galamon proceeded deeper into the red crystal cave, his metal boots ringing pleasantly against the ruby-red crystals. Argrave could see the flow of blood beneath his feet grow thicker as they neared the Crimson Wellspring. Then, for the first time, there was a light ahead. Argrave stopped Anneliese, canceling his spell light and directing her to do the same.

They proceeded onwards until the narrow cave opened up into a vast cavern. Seeing a sight he remembered well, he took a deep breath as a strange sort of nostalgic awe rose in his chest.

This place had once been a council room of sorts. It was a circular room with a high ceiling, held up by four pillars. Stone chairs were arrayed in a circle around the center, while a chair in the center of this circle stood above the others. The chairs were occupied with humanoid figures—it was difficult to distinguish their features from the faint light emanating from the center of the room.

All of these things, though, had been supplanted by the crystalline growth identical to the caverns Argrave had come from. The crystals partially covered the pillars, as though reinforcing them. Many of the chairs were fully obscured by the crystals, the humanoid figures sat atop them encased in the ruby growth. In the center, the Crimson Wellspring floated, suspended in the air while emanating a bright red light that reflected off the surface of the crystals. The light made it difficult to make out its shape, yet a constant pour of blood emerged from it like water from a sink.

In the back of the room, seated on the main chair elevated above the rest, a distinctly disparate figure sat. It was a knight in armor. A sash of stone roses hung across his chest, marking him as a Stonepetal Sentinel. The stone roses had been turned into the same red crystals decorating the walls, though, and much of the armor was marred the same way, creating a rather ominous looking ruby-gray set of armor.

Claude, former Grandmaster Sentinel, sat in the chair with all the vigor of a corpse, a mace leaning up against his leg. To call him a corpse was an apt comparison—he was a husk controlled by the Wellspring, keeping it flowing until this day. His features could not be made out beneath the armor, but Argrave knew who it was.

Argrave knelt down, pulling everyone down with him. “There’s our foe. The Knight of the Wellspring.”

“...I have so many questions,” murmured Anneliese.

“You usually do,” Argrave acknowledged. “It’d be best if we stay focused, though.”

“Right,” she nodded after a long pause.

Argrave removed his backpack, laying it against a safe spot as he spoke. “If we step into the room, I’m sure he’ll come alive. But, we have the initiative. To begin: Galamon,” Argrave pointed. “You’ll hit him with arrows enchanted with fire—his armor will negate most of the damage, but fire is especially

effective against him. After this, you'll move up to meet him. I suggest bringing your Ebonice axe to dispel his blood magic and the dagger enchanted with flame for high damage."

"You told me never to contest his strength, that he was much stronger than me," Galamon said, looking at Argrave as he removed his own pack. "I'll use my greatsword in the other hand. The dagger... I need to get too close. Unideal if the opponent is stronger and faster than me, as you claim."

Argrave nodded. "You'd know best." He looked to Anneliese, who had also set aside her pack for the fight. "You and me—we'll stick close, near one of the pillars. Easier to take cover. We can watch each other's backs, conjure B-rank wards if needed. From there... you aid Galamon. [Skysunder] will be best here—fast, potent, perfect for Claude. You'll see why I insisted you learn lightning elemental magic first. Meanwhile... I'll do my thing."

Anneliese nodded. She raised Garm up. "Should I...?"

Argrave stared down at Garm. "Leave him someplace safe. He's another variable—unpredictable, and I hadn't really expected to... well, make use of him, even if he can help."

Garm pursed his lips, then closed his eyes. "Won't complain at this arrangement."

Anneliese moved to do as Argrave had suggested, perching Garm in an area that he was facing upright. Argrave took the time to stare at Claude. Watching the Knight of the Wellspring sitting there, immobile, made him wish to rush in and start things, if only for the sake of dispelling his unease.

But eventually, Anneliese returned, Garm placed a fair distance away. Argrave looked between the two of his companions.

"Listen. The only way I can see this going sour is if someone gets hasty. You two are damned smart, and I'd want no one else by my side, so I don't see that happening. Still, just to reiterate... we stick to what we discussed. Any questions, uncertainties? Now's the time." Argrave moved his head between the two of them, waiting. When nothing came, he took a deep breath, the dull ache of pain in his chest serving to ground him to reality.

"Anneliese, let's move to the pillars. Once we're there..."

"I'll begin," finished Galamon, already readying an arrow that shone with red light on its arrowhead.

Argrave gave a wordless nod in return, then touched Anneliese's shoulder to get her attention. They moved along the edge of the room, Anneliese watching the bodies encased within the crystal with an insatiable curiosity even amidst the tension. Argrave knelt up beside the crystal-encased stone pillar and spared a glance at Galamon before refocusing on the Knight of the Wellspring, Anneliese just beside him.

"Wait until I direct you to attack," Argrave whispered to Anneliese. Anneliese had a complex spell matrix in hand, ready to attack at a moment's notice. Argrave, though, had something else in mind. He held both of his hands out, and eels of blue lightning emerged from his hand, dancing up into the sky in a spiral. Though he lacked the Blessing of Erlebnis, their plan involved the usage of [Electric Eel]. His magic alone would be sufficient, he suspected—it merely lacked a safety net, now.

The few seconds of tense quietude set Argrave's heart beating faster every second. A *twang* sounded out in the soundless cavern, and a flaming arrow coursed out through the center of the room. It struck into the visor of the helmet, and Argrave could not help but be awed at the elf's marksmanship in spite of the situation.

Despite the arrow jutting out of its face, the Knight of the Wellspring immediately sprung to life. It fell forward, sending the mace leaning against its legs rolling out across the floor. Claude rolled, then came to his feet in a fluid motion. He pulled free the bloodied arrow, casting it aside, then held both of his hands out. The flowing stream of blood pouring from the Wellspring diverted its course, surging through the air as though alive. It split near Claude's hands, gradually coalescing into two twin blades—simple broadswords with flat heads.

Without a word, the Knight of the Wellspring rushed forth, metal boots ringing against the red crystals beneath its feet. Galamon had prepared another arrow and loosed it at its charge. The knight slowed, doing a pivot-spin on one foot to dodge the arrow with supernatural speed. Galamon set his bow aside, grabbing his Ebonice axe and his greatsword. He stepped forth to meet it.

When the two were perhaps ten feet from each other, Argrave said, "Anneliese!" loudly.

Two white bolts of lightning shot out from Anneliese's hand across the room, blinding with light and deafening with sound. Both hit home, striking the Knight of the Wellspring soundly in two points. The undead knight spasmed, and Galamon swung his greatsword with one hand. A blade of wind closed the gap, yet Claude still managed to block the attack with his blades. Blood from the blades scattered over his armor, loosed by the attack's intensity. When the knight recovered, it threw one of its blades at Anneliese, and Argrave ducked behind the pillar, pulling Anneliese with him.

The blade shattered against the pillar, creating a foot-deep gash in the stone and scattering blood against the wall. The blood dripped down, yet then began to bubble, surging back through the air towards the Knight of the Wellspring. Claude started to move towards their position, yet Galamon placed himself in its path, swinging his sword once more.

Argrave continued to use [Electric Eel], feeling his magic diminish as he prepared. He kept the spells just out of sight. A cloud of dancing blue electricity hovered behind the pillars—a lurking leviathan of lightning.

Galamon kept Claude locked in combat, using his enchanted blade to maintain a cautious distance. The knight blocked and dodged blow after blow with its one sword, but when the second blade of blood reformed in its hand, it rushed at Galamon, keeping a low profile.

When the two grew near, Argrave emerged from the pillar, seeking an opportunity. The knight swept its left hand, cutting horizontally, and Galamon barely dodged. The second blade descended in a dreadful overhead blow. Galamon swung the Ebonice axe, meeting the attack. Once the black ice met the blade of blood, it bubbled before dispersing, pouring over Galamon's armor ineffectually. The axe continued, striking the Knight of the Wellspring in the helmet. It staggered, rolling away with an animalistic haste.

With distance between the two, Anneliese shot out another volley of [Skysunder] from each hand. The knight had been anticipating her attack, and though it tried to dodge, the raw speed of the magic still managed to strike it. One bolt missed, impacting with the red crystal just behind it.

Seeing Anneliese as a threat, the Knight of the Wellspring broke off from Galamon, rushing towards them with a single-minded purpose. Argrave smiled, clenching his hands. Galamon rushed across the room as fast as he could, yet the Knight of the Wellspring was much, much faster.

Anneliese waited, hands at the ready, yet cast no spells. She waited, watching, with Argrave doing the same. Once the creature was near, it leapt, and Anneliese conjured a B-rank ward with her enchanted ring. The two blades of blood stabbed into the golden ward, breaking past them. Argrave conjured his own ward with his ring. The attack's momentum was diminished from the first ward, and the blades bounced back.

Just then, Argrave willed the spells he'd prepared down. The Knight of the Wellspring looked up and frantically tried to move away, but the close proximity removed that option. Near twenty [Electric Eels] surged down, their high-pitched sparking sounding like myriad war cries, and the Knight danced with light and electricity as the enchanted armor it wore shone to protect its wearer. Anneliese, too, bombarded the creature with [Skysunder].

As it struggled with their relentless barrage, Galamon caught up. He raised his greatsword, thrusting the kriegsmesser into the back of the knight's neck, pushing down into its torso. The blow was savage enough to force the Knight of the Wellspring to its knees, cracking the crystal beneath it. Galamon pulled his blade free, blades of wind scattering everywhere, and stabbed once more. He twisted the blade, and then freed it of the abominable undead.

The undead Claude knelt there, still sparking with electricity from their earlier assault. The swords of blood in its hands began to melt, falling to the floor. The Knight of the Wellspring slowly collapsed against the ground, scattering crystals into the air. Blood started to pour from every hole in its armor, as though a dam had just been broken.

"...it's over," Argrave said, leaning against the pillar. He started to laugh in triumph.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 104: End of the Long Night**

Ossian leaned over a railing, staring down at the drained bottom of one of the canals. Despite having traversed the Low Way since he was but twelve in secret expeditions away from the senior Sentinels' eyes, Ossian had not known the canals had a portion that could be dried entirely with the sluices. Why it was drained, or where the dried portion led, Ossian did not care to test. That would be a journey for another day, if indeed it came at all.

"...it's been a day, Ossian. Rations are running low, and we can only forage the plants in Nodremaid for so long without straying dangerously far from the main group," a spellcaster advised Ossian.

Ossian did not look behind as he questioned, "And no word, no sightings of Alasdair?"

"One of the Sentinels in Alasdair's group confessed that he left to search for that severed head in Argrave's possession," the spellcaster disclosed.

Ossian nodded, lowering his head and slouching against the railing. It was impossible to discern what had happened to Alasdair with no evidence. That said, the circumstances moved together to leave no

doubt in his mind. His own experience in the Low Way told him something, too: those lost in the Low Way rarely return if gone for more than a day.

As his thoughts crystallized, Ossian lifted his head and straightened his back. "It would be best to accept that he's lost to us now, just as those that went with him," Ossian said, voice neutral. He had never liked Alasdair, but the old man had seemed immutable. That he might be gone forevermore disquieted him more than he cared to admit.

"It's time to give the order to return," Ossian said, stepping away. "We'll gather everyone, do a count, and—" Ossian paused mid step, something having caught his eyes. He stepped away slowly, walking to the other side of the stone platform they stood on.

He stared at another, separate canal that still ran with water far below, his brows furrowed.

"It seems..." he began, not finishing his thought. He followed the route of the canal with his eyes. The blood-red water changed in tone as his gaze wandered—from a dark, rich and gloomy red, to a faint pink. His eyes followed it all the way up... and then, for the first time, he saw clean, white water emerge from one of the canals.

"Gods..." Ossian placed a gauntleted hand on his helmet, feeling like the whole world was spinning. "The rivers... the blood..."

The spellcaster stepped up beside Ossian, staring out into the distance. For the first time in their memory, both of the Sentinels witnessed the blood constantly dripping from the walls slow and cease altogether.

"Despite all that happened..." Ossian gripped the railing tightly. "He knew some vampires escaped. He ended their long night, cutting off their eternal sustenance. No more will they live forever, sustained by the bloody rivers of the Low Way." A fragment of stone chipped off the railing, drawing Ossian away from his thoughts.

Ossian stepped away, looking around the once-grand city of Nodremaid. "The true heir of Vasquer ended the Night of Withering once and for all. And after death... there is growth." He looked to the spellcaster. "We must return, bearing good news on two counts. As for Alasdair... he died valiantly to vampires. Nothing more."

#####

Argrave held the Crimson Wellspring in his hand. The light it projected had diminished greatly, but it still shone brightly enough.

The Crimson Wellspring was a ring of black metal with a diameter of about a foot. The ring itself was as thick as Argrave's thumb. Eight resplendent red gems rested along its circumference equidistantly, each connected by shimmering red runes that formed long-lost enchantments. Its constant downpour of blood had ceased.

"I can make no sense of the thing," said Garm, leaning up against one of the pillars with the back of his head supporting him up. "This Wellspring is... beyond my ken, I admit, even were I not severely out of practice."

Argrave nodded, having not expected much to begin with. His eyes wandered, witnessing Anneliese knelt down beside the corpse of the Knight of the Wellspring. Her thick braid of white hair was matted with blood, which may have worried Argrave had he not known she was uninjured.

“Your spell, [Electric Eel].” Anneliese turned her head to Argrave. “I see its uses, even when you do not use your blessing.”

Argrave nodded. “Yeah. Used all my magic, though, and didn’t even kill the knight. Galamon had to finish him off,” Argrave turned his gaze to the elven vampire, who cleaned his armor and axe while leaning against a pillar.

“Those people encased in the crystal,” Argrave began, looking around. “They’re High Wizards of the Order of the Rose. Right, Garm?”

Garm’s black eyes darted around. “Aye, they are, each and every one. All dead and gone. The bastard who made me like this... can’t find him, unfortunately. No such luck,” he veritably spat.

“Then you know all I do, Anneliese, about the Night of Withering, about the Knight of the Wellspring,” Argrave looked to her. “Any more questions?”

“Yes,” she stood. “This Crimson Wellspring—how did he feed it?”

“Anything living... or once living, I suppose. Corpses. Foliage. The Knight of the Wellspring would roam into the Low Way, hunting down things. Bodies sustained it the best.” Argrave held his hands out, staring at the Wellspring in his hands. “Even despite that... Claude never roamed Nodremaid, or the other northern sections. He never killed any Sentinel. Some distant vestige of his remaining consciousness, maybe, fighting the husk that the Wellspring made him.”

Anneliese placed one hand on her hip, staring down at the body of Claude. “And what is the Knight of the Wellspring?”

“The Knight of the Wellspring...” Argrave repeated. “There’s only so much I know about it. I know the Wellspring itself chooses them—it selects from the bodies fed to it. Other than that, this whole place is just a mound of mysteries, uncertainties. There are no records. Nothing left to tell the story.”

“The Wellspring sounds dangerous,” concluded Anneliese, stepping away from Claude’s corpse.

“It’s inactive, now,” Argrave assured, lifting his head up to look past her. “Something about this room empowers it, amplifies it, especially in the center.”

“The crystals may have that effect,” Garm contributed, his eyes closed. “They’re born of blood magic. It stands to reason there’s a resonance.”

“I don’t know,” Argrave shook his head. He held a hand out. “Help me up, please.”

Anneliese helped him to his feet, and Argrave muttered a thanks. He looked around the room.

“I think... we should sleep,” Argrave concluded, rubbing his eyes with his hands. “Feels like it’s been dozens of hours since I last did that.” Argrave looked to Galamon and Anneliese, who both nodded in agreement. “Tomorrow, we have a straight shot to reach the Burnt Desert. Claude spent all of this time hunting in that area—it should be safer than Nodremaid.”

The prospect of entering the Burnt Desert made Argrave feel like the path that stretched ahead of him was unending. He hadn't felt this way for some time. He moved to his backpack, fishing through it before he finally pulled free the bronze hand mirror.

He kept its surface facing towards the ground, instead staring at the carvings on its back. He ran his finger along them, feeling their surface.

The sight of the bronze hand mirror reminded Argrave he had promised to be honest with his companions once this was over.

"God damnit," he muttered to himself, lightly bashing his head against the back of the mirror.

*Don't think I'm sleeping easy tonight, he accepted. Too much to think about.*

#####

Argrave lowered himself down from a gaping hole, his gray leather duster scraping against the red crystals beneath him. He fell a fair distance—perhaps five feet—and then impacted with the stone, kneeling. He straightened, shaking his legs, then stepped forward to allow those behind him to follow.

Anneliese held out Garm, and Argrave took him to free up her hands. He offered his other hand to support her way down, which she used minimally. Once she had stepped out the way, Galamon jumped down quickly and gracefully. He moved more adeptly than they did, despite wearing plate armor. Argrave handed Garm back to Anneliese and looked around.

This place brought back memories. It was near identical in appearance to the tunnel that they had entered the Low Way from—tall ceilings, thorns decorating the walls, with roses of stone winding about the walls and ceiling, and wide stairs that made it awkward to ascend quickly.

"I can hear the wind," Galamon said.

"Best damned thing you could have said," Argrave said with a smile, stepping forth and gesturing those with him to do the same. His spell light followed him, and as he proceeded, he started to make out faint light in the distance. He had been expecting blinding sunlight, yet that was not what he got—instead, pearly white moonlight shone through.

Argrave contained himself, being sure not to throw his caution to the wind at the home stretch. The walk seemed unbearably long, and his hands were twitching the whole way, but soon enough the smell of the air grew fresher, almost sweeter, and he felt the wind at his cheeks.

Argrave stepped out of the Low Way, his heart beating faster than it had in the battle with the Knight of the Wellspring. A wave of cold wind met his cheeks, and he took in the vast expanse of the Burnt Desert before him.

It seemed as though he was at the end of the skies, two vast expanses of dark stretching out into eternity both up and down—the starry skies on the top, a vast carpet of black sand on the bottom. The sand was dark enough that it seemed nothing was ahead of them, just an abyss. There was a beauty to it, yet at the same time, there was a horror belying that beauty.

Argrave stepped forward, feeling as though his feet would hit nothing. When his gray leather boots sunk into sand, he fell to his knees, grasping it like a madman.



He started to laugh, and then looked back. “Smell that? It’s air,” he said, eyes wide. “Normal air, not goddamn Redlung-ridden air that smells like piss, blood, and whatever other foul tripe in that hell.” Argrave pointed up. “A sky above us, instead of redness and stone. Nothing lurking in the shadows, ready to jump at us.”

Everyone was a bit emotional, even Galamon, like some great burden had been lifted from them all. Garm had tears in his eyes, though he blinked quickly to dispel them.

Argrave threw sand into the air, uncaring when it fell on him. He lowered his head, giggling like a maniac, then rose to his feet. He took a deep breath of fresh air, ignoring his aching lungs. “Let’s enjoy this moment until the suns rise.”

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 105: Two Stars Consume the Darkness**

Argrave, Anneliese, and Galamon sat around a faintly flickering spell. Garm was there, too, though considering he was stabbed into the sand upright, he wasn’t exactly sitting. Despite being the middle of the night at the end of fall, the temperature was quite pleasant. In the Burnt Desert, the heat would linger in the sand for a long time after the suns set, both because of its color and its composition.

Galamon did nothing. He had done all of the maintenance he needed for his weapons and armor the night before. He simply stared at the spell light in silence, legs crossed and boots sinking into the somewhat cold black sand beneath them. Anneliese did just the same. Though she might’ve busied herself with reading in the past, it seemed even she had to surrender herself to the whim of relaxation at times. She braided her now-clean white hair idly.

Argrave, though, found it difficult to be consumed by the same spirit of relaxation. His brain was consumed with a veritable whirlwind of thoughts, foremost above them a simple fact: he had promised to be honest with the people here.

He couldn’t deny he didn’t want to. Refusing to let his guard down would be much easier—and probably much more manageable—than telling the truth as he understood it. And indeed, he could probably worm his way out of this one. He had many excuses: Garm’s presence, for one.

After much introspection, Argrave came to realize something. It wasn’t a lack of trust—he was confident Galamon and Anneliese would keep his secrets until the end of days, if need be. He didn’t suspect they would abandon him, cast him aside—they had proven time and time again that they were in this to the bitter end. The issue, then, did not rest with them. It rested within himself.

Argrave didn’t want to tell them where his knowledge came from. But he wished they knew. He valued them beyond simply tools best suited to ending *Gerechtigkeit*. Argrave couldn’t deny he enjoyed lying—perhaps that was why it came so naturally to him. But his life experience both here and on Earth had taught him constant deception boded poorly for any relationship, be it as friends or otherwise.

With this in mind, Argrave raised his head and looked up into the starry sky, where the bright red moon neared the horizon. He took a deep breath and sighed.

“Garm,” Argrave said, lowering his head. “Anneliese has told you what the purpose of our journey is, right?”

"In rough terms," the head replied, unable to nod in confirmation.

"With that in mind..." Argrave looked at him, as serious as he'd ever been. "...will you set aside any notion of benefits and demerits, any self-interest, and freely share with us what you know?"

Garm's black and gold eyes stayed locked onto Argrave. His face was as immovable as stone, and the only sound that could be heard was the howling of the desert wind against the towering mountain above them.

"No."

Argrave nodded, expression disappointed.

"I have always been a man of logic and reason, not of fairytales about the world's end," Garm continued, voice cold. "What superstitions tribal elves hold has no bearing on my reasoning. If you wish for my knowledge, I expect a return. The girl has promised my protection, and you have agreed to that condition. Until something else comes along, that is the extent of our cooperation."

"And if you see irrefutable evidence?" Argrave continued.

"...I don't know what I'd do," Garm admitted. "I won't say 'no.' Reasonably, I should say yes, if the evidence is irrefutable."

"Then as long as you refuse to trust in this group, I cannot include you in this next conversation," Argrave shook his head, adjusting his sitting position.

Garm took that in for a long while, finally closing his eyes. "So be it."

Argrave nodded, turning his head back towards Anneliese and Galamon. They both stared at him, expressions passive. Argrave thought there was a certain seriousness to their expressions, though—they understood that Argrave had finally made up his mind.

Argrave held a hand out, a C-rank matrix swirling in his hand. A large ward spread out slowly, enveloping the three of them. The sounds of the desert stopped, and they were left alone with each other. Garm kept his eyes closed just beyond the ward, as though refusing to even look at them as they spoke.

"Don't know where to begin," Argrave said. He rubbed his gloved hands together. "Let me just say what I'm thinking, cut past all the filters I put over my words. I don't really want to do this at all. Been dreading it. I feel idiotic." He brought his knees up, then bunched them together with his arms.

Anneliese and Galamon waited silently.

"But I can't imagine you two wanted to go through the Low Way, or the Cavern of the Lily's Death before that. Yet you did. You placed your trust in this wiseass sitting right here," Argrave pointed to himself. "I owe you an explanation, I think. But beyond just owing you... I guess I care about you, and what you think of me. I don't know," Argrave shook his head, somewhat embarrassed by his bumbling.

"Up until... some months ago," Argrave continued quickly, ignorant of the exact date, "This place... Berendar, Veiden, everything around me... it was fictional. It was as fake as a fairy-tale—made-up people, places, cities, happenings. Think of it like a book, or a... a live theatre," he grasped for concepts they'd understand.

Evidently the conversation had not gone the way either expected, for both donned perplexed expressions.

“Unlike a book, though, I could—well, anyone could—interact with, and change the direction of the story,” Argrave outlined. “I would...” he paused, thinking. “I would interact with this world via an avatar. A proxy. I would take control of something living in this fictional world, and with it, do what I wanted—hunt monsters, go on grand quests... and, well, fight Gerechtigkeits. It was a game.”

Argrave turned his head away, having trouble keeping eye contact with them. In the distance, he saw the first beam of light come up over the mountain, illuminating the vast dark landscape of the Burnt Desert.

“You could experience this world... through a proxy?” Galamon questioned.

Argrave nodded. “Yes. I existed in this world, through proxy, thousands of times. The timeframe of my control over this avatar was limited to a few years—three and a half years before Gerechtigkeits being the starting point, and Gerechtigkeits’ defeat being the ending.”

“But were you... well, were you...” Anneliese began, unable to vocalize her question.

Argrave tried to predict her question, saying, “About... three months ago, I guess, I woke up as ‘Argrave.’ Fiction became reality,” he finished, nodding and looked into the distance.

The light continued to rise further yet, dispelling the shadow over the dark sand. There was a long, long silence—the longest yet.

“How?” Anneliese finally broke the quiet.

Argrave didn’t answer, watching the sunlight slowly creep along the desert. Finally, he turned away from the scene.

“I don’t know.”

Nothing could be said in response to that, Argrave suspected, for both grew quiet.

Argrave elaborated, continuing, “I woke up, in a body that wasn’t my own, three months ago. I knew who ‘Argrave’ was, but he wasn’t me. This world, which I perceived as fiction, gained detail, gained depth, and became my reality.” Argrave paused to gather his thoughts.

“From there, I confronted two facts: Gerechtigkeits was coming... and I might be the only one capable of stopping it. That realization made me set aside all this existential nonsense. Even now... I don’t really want to talk about it. Don’t want to think about it.”

“This is difficult to wrap my head around,” Anneliese placed both hands on her temples.

“Why are you the only capable of stopping Gerechtigkeits?” Galamon questioned.

“When I played the game with my... avatar, some details remained consistent,” Argrave stared at Galamon. “In this world, my avatar was the one who stopped Gerechtigkeits. And in this world, my proxy always possessed one item.”

Argrave pulled over his backpack, rustling through it. He pulled out the bronze hand mirror.

“I would always possess this mirror.”

Argrave briefly caught a glimpse of it.

Traits: [Tall], [Sickly], [Weak], [Intelligent], [Magic Affinity (High)], [Insomniac], [Blessing of Supersession (MAX)]

Skills: [Elemental Magic (C)], [Blood Magic (C)], [Healing Magic (C)], [Illusion Magic (D)], [Warding Magic(C)], [Druidic Magic (C)], [Inscription (E)], [Imbuing (E)]

Anneliese stared at Argrave, simultaneously enlightened by his mention of the mirror and confused by the entire situation.

“Alright. That’s the best I’ve got for explanations. Now, ask me questions. Help me make you understand. That’s the only way we can salvage this mess, I think.”

In the distance, the twin suns finally began to rise over the blackness of the Burnt Desert, shrouding the desolate landscape of blackness in the bright and warm light of a new dawn.

#####

Argrave found the entire conversation very unpleasant.

But then, Argrave reasoned there were many things in life that were unpleasant yet ultimately beneficial. Cleaning out a wound with alcohol, for instance, was excruciating—letting an infection fester was far worse.

Of course, his analogy to assuage his discomfort quickly fell flat when he acknowledged the existence of healing magic.

Nevertheless, Argrave answered all of Galamon and Anneliese’s questions for hours as the suns rose ever higher into the air, dispelling what chill had taken the desert at night. The more questions he answered, the more they had—it seemed a never-ending cycle, and yet things did eventually come to a close, in large part due to Argrave’s voice giving out.

Argrave stared out into the vastness of the Burnt Desert, Galamon standing just beside him.

“A lot of things about you make sense, now,” Galamon commented.

“Yeah?” Argrave pressed.

“Yet even more has stopped making sense.”

“Yeah,” Argrave repeated.

A strong wind blew across the desert, sending black particles drifting through the air.

“I’ve realized something,” Argrave said.

“What?” Galamon looked to Argrave.

“We don’t have much food,” Argrave gazed out into the empty sandscape, eyes unfocused.

Galamon exhaled from his nose loudly—as close to a laugh as the elf got.

“The nearest place... it’s pretty far,” Argrave said neutrally.

“Don’t worry,” said Galamon.

Argrave looked at him, hopeful the elf had an idea.

“If you collapse, I can carry you both,” he patted Argrave’s shoulder.

“Yeah. That’s because we’re your emergency food.” Argrave sighed.

They stood in silence, letting the wind wash over them. Anneliese stepped up beside Argrave, standing opposite Galamon.

“What you told us... I hope you know that your secret will remain with us,” Anneliese began.

“Was never worried about that,” Argrave shook his head. “I know you two well—Galamon more so, but you...I know enough. I told you from the beginning. You are a person of good character,” he looked at her. “Just... didn’t want to think about it. And I didn’t want to ruin things. Too much at stake to do so.”

She nodded passively, evidently lost in thought. After a time, she lifted her head. “Do you dislike being here?” Anneliese questioned.

“I don’t dislike the desert,” Argrave shook his head. “Magic removes all of its inconveniences. During winter, it might be the best time to be here. Of course... if you thought Vasquer was despotic, you haven’t been to the Burnt Desert. The powers that be control every facet of life here, and they’re slowly whittling away any resistance.”

“That is not what I meant,” Anneliese looked at Argrave. “Do you dislike being Argrave?”

Argrave raised a brow, a bit taken aback by her question. He looked around, being sure Garm was not near. Seeing that he wasn’t, Argrave let himself be lost in thought.

“I like... this place,” Argrave reluctantly said. “I love its cultures, its people, and its history. I spent years playing the game for those reasons,” Argrave admitted. “I like the idea of being here. Magic fascinates me. Discovering things, secrets, about Berendar... even now, it does excite me. But thus far? I think you can know my feelings just looking at me.”

Anneliese nodded. “Argrave,” she said.

Argrave looked over, his gray eyes locking with hers.

“You will win again. When all is said and done, and when the world is settled... you will have freedom.”

“Bold claim, missy. We haven’t even crossed this desert without dying,” Argrave pointed to the sandscape with his thumb, keeping his gaze locked on her amber eyes.

She merely smiled at him. Her eyes were strangely sad, Argrave thought. Eventually, he looked out across the desert, unable to maintain the eye contact.

“Let’s worry about winning later. After we cross the desert, we have to dance around in a despotic regime directly responsible for climate change. After that Low Way, it’ll be nice to have some fun in the sun.”

Argrave held a hand out, blocking out the two suns. He felt like a mess—his chest still ached, he had a terrible headache, and he couldn't stop simply *thinking*.

Yet for the first time since he had come here, he didn't feel entirely alone.