

Jackal 121

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 121: Metal CLashing

With Garm's existence made known, the Lord of Copper had gained leverage over Argrave. That was an incontrovertible fact. With a word or two, Argrave could become an outlaw in most of the lands in the Burnt Desert. Fortunately, the significant delays in their travels had enabled Argrave to recover fully from his magic debt to Erlebnis—he could use the Blessing of Supersession again.

"What do think we should do?" questioned Anneliese. The three of them watched the Vessels speak to Brium. "This is... an unenviable position."

"He has his hands wrapped around something vital," Argrave nodded, then he looked to Anneliese. "But look at things this way—we skipped a step."

"What?" asked Galamon.

"His trust," Argrave lowered his head, staring at the road before Cyprus. "He thinks that he has power over us... and so he's more willing to implement us in his plans."

"He thinks?" repeated Anneliese. "He *does* have power over us. Perhaps we should make sure that Garm is safe."

"I don't think that Garm is in danger," Argrave shook his head. "But if you judge differently, we can go back and make sure right now."

Anneliese sighed and crossed her arms. "If only we still had our druidic bonds, we might confirm that without needing to move..."

"We'll get new ones soon enough," Argrave assured. "Perhaps quicker than I thought. Ones better than that dragon our... he's our friend, I suppose... better than what Rowe has."

"...what?" she looked at him incredulously.

"In terms of utility, certainly. But for now... I say we go along with what Brium asks of us." Argrave turned to her.

She looked very torn. But after a while, she gave a slow nod. "Alright."

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Brium and his escort of four Vessels stopped just before a plain gray building that was no more than a simple dome of cold stone. Argrave's party was off to the side, not fully integrated with the rest of the Lord of Copper's retinue.

"Before we enter... allow me to relay my expectations," Brium spoke to Argrave, though did not turn his head. "This place is called simply 'the Stone.' It is a neutral meeting ground for the Vessels in this city."

"The place from which all of the Lords of Sethia were born—mined from the Stone, forged by Fellhorn into metal," Argrave finished. "I know."

“That’s correct,” Brium smiled and nodded. “My distant ancestors were pagan lords, but Fellhorn’s coming changed that.”

“What’s expected of us?” Argrave pressed.

“I don’t suspect you will have cause to speak much,” Brium confessed. “Here is your role—you are mercenaries, hired by me. Your presence is meant to provoke them into action.”

Argrave nodded seriously, then questioned, “Against the tribals? Or...?”

“Against me,” Brium’s smile faded. “The other Lords—they are constant, calm, just like the waters of Fellhorn. The southern tribals have been belligerent for years, and yet not once have the Lords retaliated. We Vessels only enforce rules on our subjects.”

“And you are not fond of that refusal to retaliate,” Anneliese noted. “Why are you different from them?”

“They are all literalists. Traditionalists,” Brium said contemptuously. “They plan to be but a Vessel all of their lives—a stagnant pool, a still lake, growing only as rivers deposit their rainwater into them. Their power grows, certainly. But... Fellhorn is the god of rain *and* floods.”

The Vessels alongside Brium nodded eagerly, his zealous followers drinking in his words.

Anneliese pointed to him. “And you wish to become the flood?”

“The southern tribals of the mountains have learned, grown, and adapted. Our current way nets us nothing. The literalist way—remaining as a stagnant pool, offering drink to those who submit—is insufficient to spread Fellhorn’s eternal rain further,” Brium shook his head and clenched his fist, genuinely aggrieved. “I cannot see the faith stagnate like this. Even if I must be the one to stir the waters, they must begin to move.”

“What is the benefit of provoking action against you?” Galamon questioned.

“When is wood weakest?” Brium questioned, stepping up to Galamon and staring up at him. “When it is rotten inside.”

Galamon stared unflinchingly. “Your point?”

“When will an enemy attack?” Brium held his hands out. “When their foe is at their weakest. And the southern tribals have been looking for an avenue to attack for many years now.”

“Provocation after provocation,” Argrave shook his head. “You certainly have your work cut out for you. All of this just to lure the southern tribals down from the mountains? Seems far-fetched. Too many things left to chance,” he baited, trying to get some information out of the talkative Lord of Copper.

“My people need to wake up to the realities. I am certain Fellhorn will see fit to bestow upon me the luck I need. I am certain that the tribals will be ready,” Brium smiled and shook his head.

Now it’s all but confirmed. Brium is working with some tribals. Even if it isn’t Durran who’s talking with them, if I can get contact with these tribals... I can make this flood hit a dam. Of course, he’s not going to let me meet them easily. He’ll hide their existence until the day of the attack.

"I see you're pleased," Brium noted, staring at Argrave.

Argrave hadn't realized it, but he was smiling. He ran his hand across his face to suppress his expression, then said, "Just feels like things are finally going my way for once. Long road ahead, but I'm eager to trod it. I have some ideas to swing things in our favor ever more. But those can come at another time, certainly."

"Indeed," Brium nodded. "What I've told you, I will soon tell those inside this building. I feared I might have to use the leash around your neck, but you convince me I was mistaken. It matters not."

"I am glad of that," Argrave said simply.

"Now, the lords Argent and Aurum have been kept waiting for twenty minutes. I am positive they will be incensed." Brium stepped ahead into the Stone.

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The three Lords of Sethia were each and all as remarkable as the copper skinned Brium and matched their titles absolutely, embodying them in their appearance and dress. These appearances were not something coincidental. Each of the three had been tailored over generations to better fit their role, and to cement their status as the Lord of their tower.

Argrave knew how they maintained these appearances—breeding systems within their towers. People with desirable traits were 'hired' to bear a Vessel for the tower. They were technically free, but realistically forced to remain in the tower, living luxuriously for the purpose of producing heirs with the desired physical traits.

Now, these three Lords sat at a table in the center of the Stone, flanked by their own personal retinue of lesser Vessels. Argrave felt out of place. He usually did, though.

The three lords sat in a triangle on the circular table, neither facing the other fully. The Lord of Silver, Quarrus, was a tall albino man—his skin, hair, and eyes lacked all pigment, making all of his features resplendently white. He had a sharp look about him and seemed to be angry constantly. He kept his hair long as though to show it off, and wore only silver jewelry and clothing. His status as a Vessel seemed to preclude the usual vision defects associated with albinism.

The Lord of Gold, Crislia, was a woman with very strong elven features. Her skin was vaguely gold-like but lacked the intensity of the real metal and was further muted by the wet skin natural to the Vessels. Her hair, though, was a perfect match for the word gold. On top of all that, she wore enough accessories of the precious metal to afford a king's ransom.

Quarrus leaned forward into the table, clenching his fists as he stared at Brium. "We agreed to meet here with you out of respect for the long-standing title of the Lord of Copper, and of respect for the greatness that has come out of Cyprus in the distant past..." Quarrus slammed his fist and stood. "But you insult Argent by bringing a mockery of our features?" He pointed to Anneliese.

Argrave pulled her back and stepped forward almost instinctively, immediately on edge. Brium raised his hands up to pacify Quarrus.

"You've misread me entirely, Quarrus," he said pacifyingly.

“Silver hair, pale skin—what else am I to make of this?!” Quarrus shouted angrily. “You would make one with the features of the Lord of Silver subordinate?”

“They aren’t subordinate,” Brium said calmly, still holding his hands out. “They’re mercenaries. Above all, they’re a fitting response to what happened to your tower.”

Quarrus breathed heavily for a few moments, staring at Anneliese. After a long time of tension, the Lord of Silver turned, picking up his chair that had been tossed to the ground in his outburst. He corrected it and sat, still a ball of wrath.

Crislia, Lord of Gold, had been waiting for her time to interject, and did so now. “Let us not forget the purpose of this meeting. Yesterday, you called a meeting between you and Quarrus, for the purpose of—”

“I understand why he brought us here, now,” Anneliese whispered into Argrave’s ear, drowning out Crislia’s voice.

Ear tingling, he turned his head slightly at her voice while waiting for her to continue.

“To mark us as his—to bind us closer, eliminating our political mobility in the city. It would be all but impossible to cooperate with Argent or Aurum now. Argent views us as a public insult. Aurum would not risk offending Argent.”

Enlightened, Argrave directed his focus back to the conversation ahead. The Lord of Gold had finished summarizing the purpose of this meeting, remaining the calm mediator.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Brium?” Quarrus insisted, leaning in.

“The meeting...” Brium began. “It was a coincidence that it matched with the time of the raid.”

His words were met with a complete, almost incredulous silence throughout the Stone. Quarrus leaned back in his chair, face taut as he stared at Brium.

“Is it so surprising these things should happen?” Brium raised his hand into the air. “Every time the southern tribals raid, they receive very little retaliation. At the best of times, we send a party to demand back what was stolen.”

“Retaliation is not the way of Fellhorn. He rains only water, never blood,” Crislia shook her head. “All those living may still become a part of His eternal rain.”

Brium leaned in. “Things cannot remain as they are. We *must* retaliate—we must flood those mountains they hide upon, wiping them all clean. If we do this... We dirty our hands but once, and Fellhorn’s influence spreads to those damnable mountains once and for all.”

“You verge on blasphemy,” Quarrus noted, his anger turning to alarm.

“This city was the first to be claimed by us Vessels of Fellhorn,” Brium tapped the table. “And now... we do not expand. Fellhorn’s rain remains constant, nothing more. We lose as much as we gain by the day. All of this... because we allow a cyst to persist!”

He's genuinely trying to persuade them, Argrave thought. A last-ditch effort to wake them up to follow his deluded fantasies of grandeur.

Yet the two other lords were unmoved by the Lord of Copper's pleas, both staring at him coldly. Brium stood, becoming animate in his passion.

"We must march into the mountains, induct them into the faith. We have the capability. We have Fellhorn at our backs. If He deems us unworthy, He will make his will known!" Brium pleaded. "But until we take that plunge, we remain as we are—constant, stagnant."

"Core tenets of Fellhorn's will, both," Crislia noted coldly. "We came here with the impression this was merely the actions of a misguided young Vessel... but the issue seems to be much deeper than that."

"Issue? There is nothing wrong with me," Brium said defeatedly as he lowered himself back into the chair. "But you two refuse to listen."

"And you did *this* as some attempt to wake us up?" Quarrus questioned. "A ridiculous notion. I am done here." Quarrus rose to his feet and made to leave.

"As am I," Crislia agreed. "Things must change, Brium, you are right. But not for the faith. For you." she shook her head, then moved away.

Brium was left as the last sitting at the circular table of the Stone. Things had gone nearly exactly as he outlined, but Argrave thought he didn't look the least bit happy.

"It's time to get to work, before they decide to handle things," he said, rising to his feet.

Argrave took a deep breath. The days to come would be turbulent, without a doubt.

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Chapter 122: Burdened We Toil

Argrave returned with Brium to Cyprus alongside his escort of Vessels. Once they were inside the first room, with its decrepit tapestry winding about the walls, the Lord of Copper spoke with a natural authority.

"The hunt is on. All know what to do," he said, and these words alone were enough to send the Vessels beneath him scattering despite the vagary of the command.

Argrave stood with his companions, waiting as the other Vessels left the room. Brium walked to the couch they'd been received on and sat, lounging. Argrave stalked up to him cautiously, waiting until there were none around to speak.

"Do you have something planned for me?" Argrave questioned.

Brium did not turn his head back to look at the three of them, and responded, "Let me hear about these things that you have in mind." He set his feet on a stool. "If all you offer is your status as a C-rank mage, and the prowess of your companions..."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Argrave stepped around the couch, coming to stand before the Lord of Copper. "I have deeper ties to this place than I let on," Argrave began.

"I had surmised as much," Brium nodded.

"Against Aurum and Argent both... even if the southern tribals do indeed come... it's a pitched battle, to put it lightly."

Brium ran his hand across his knee. "How would you know this?"

"You're saying I'm wrong?" Argrave asked bluntly.

Brium stared up at Argrave, then fixed a piece of his wrinkled clothing. "Let us continue as though you're correct," he conceded, refusing to admit his disadvantage.

"There are other regional powers," Argrave pointed to himself. "I can make sure they support the right side."

My side, naturally, Argrave thought.

Brium furrowed his brows. "What are you referring to?"

"Well, barring the simple fact that the southern tribals are not as near unified as they let on... there are more than simply tribals in those mountains." He looked in the direction of the mountains, though nothing could be seen beyond the walls of Cyprus.

"Elaborate," the Lord of Copper demanded.

"The southron elves, for one," Argrave raised a finger. "The dwellers of the caves," he raised another finger. "And... certain others. Foreigners, like me, with whom I have a connection."

"You have ties with all of these?" Brium questioned. "I question if everyone in Sethia would be ignorant of you as they are, were that the case."

"If one has rope, they can tie a knot," Argrave waxed poetic.

Brium smiled. "You mean you can make these ties. And you would expect only the rope from me, I presume?"

Argrave shook his head. "I have my own rope."

Brium looked taken aback by this. "I will warn you—I reward only results," he cautioned.

"Overpromising earns you naught but severed trust."

"If you reward results... I'll be one rich man, I think," Argrave smirked.

Brium took a deep breath, obviously affected by Argrave's claims. He placed his hands on the couch and rose to his feet. "My careless action at the Stone has caused you some trouble—your companion is perceived to be an insult to Argent. I may have put her in danger..."

Careless my ass, Argrave thought. *He knew exactly what he was doing.*

"Anneliese is safe now, and that's what's important," Argrave dismissed. The woman in question crossed her arms and nodded, agreeing.

“And she should stay safe,” Brium looked at her. “To that end, you will henceforth be accompanied by one of my own—a Vessel by the name of Yarra. You have met her. She retrieved you at your inn,” Brium explained. “She is extremely loyal to me, and her Vessel is one of the larger in Cyprus—indeed, in all of Sethia. She has absorbed the lifeblood of many transgressors. Most threats... she can handle.”

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, trying his best to hold back a frown. *He said, ‘you will.’ Not an offer, but a mandate. I suppose I should have expected something to link us to him yet further—he divulged a lot to us. Between Garm, threat of retaliation from Argent, and now this Yarra... he won’t trust us easily.*

“That’s fine by me,” Argrave nodded, realizing displaying his reluctance earned him no favors. “But some of these peoples I’ll be contacting—they won’t look at the presence of a Vessel kindly. Getting them to agree to attack Sethia alongside southern tribals is a far cry from getting them to cooperate with followers of Fellhorn.”

Brium walked to the tapestry on the walls, hands on his hips as he lost himself in thought. He turned his head back to them once he’d formed his answer. “She will give you space at her discretion. If you are as valuable as you claim to be, though, it is paramount that she protects you at all times. We Vessels need not sleep, eat, drink, and are unfatiguing... in summary, able protectors. Argent may strike at any time.”

Already got a sleepless protector, thanks, Argrave wished to say.

“Then we welcome the extra hand,” Argrave instead said jovially, spreading his arms wide. “I hope she is amenable to working *with* us, instead of merely protecting us.”

Brium huffed out a laugh. “You must’ve gained an impression of her. She is quite brusque to all but me.” He nodded, then walked back up to them. “Yes, I’ll tell her to be cooperative. I’ll tell her of your pet project, too, so worry not about exposing your *head* to her. She’s away, doing some things for me. I will have her come to your inn. Expect her shortly.”

Argrave felt bitter with that reminder thrown into his face, but he suppressed those thoughts and nodded. “Then I’ll... what was it you said? Start the hunt,” Argrave concluded.

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Argrave looked back at the patina covered tower of Cyprus.

“Before we make it back to the inn and meet with Yarra, we should talk. Thoroughly,” Argrave said, turning around on the road and speaking to his companions.

“What is there to speak of? Despite unexpected occurrences, things have gone mostly as we predicted,” Anneliese pointed out.

“I’m unsure how the two of you perceive this whole plan of mine,” Argrave admitted. “You two... value honor, loyalty, contracts...” he sighed. “And here I am, entering into employment under someone with the intent to betray.”

“I am contracted only to you,” Galamon said at once. “Any stain is on your soul, not mine. I believe Veid granted you this purpose you have. She would not choose one such as you in ignorance. Your personality is part of her expectations. As such... I have no qualms. She has ordained this to happen.”

Argrave nodded gratefully, never disappointed by Galamon's steadfastness.

"I am of a similar mind," Anneliese confirmed in turn. "Besides, there is no true agreement towards either of you, and I would not expect that man to be honorable in any dealings," she looked back towards Cyprus. "Speaking personally... I trust you," she nodded with a smile.

Feeling affirmed and bolstered now that one of his doubts was squashed, he took a deep breath and exhaled.

"This faith you're showing... enough to make a man weep," he said, only half-joking. "I'm glad we're all in agreement to ride down this river to the end. But now we have the biggest hindrance to any creative pursuit." Argrave looked between the two, but neither provided an answer. He spoke the next words grimly, saying, "A supervisor."

"...yet with the concession of freedom in our negotiations with regional powers," Galamon pointed out. "She is ineffectual. The Lord of Copper mostly assigned her to prevent our escape, I presume."

"And to spy," Argrave noted. "That much should be obvious. But I've got a hunch about something." Argrave put his hands to his lips, thinking. "I don't think Brium knows fully what Garm is... only that he exists. We should try and find out what, exactly, they know."

"The woman seemed tight-lipped," Anneliese pointed out. "It will be difficult to get information from her naturally."

"Maybe so," Argrave conceded. "Putting all that talk aside, I'm going to be streamlining some of our plans. Brium might have ulterior motives behind Yarra's 'protection,' but... We've got free labor. Galamon should know best. Anyone working for me... I work them to the bone. And since Yarra's got no bones... I'll work her 'til she drops," Argrave looked towards Sethia, a grin on his face.

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Argrave was fitting some of his spell books back into his backpack when a sharp knock echoed out into the room. It inspired *déjà vu*, being near the same pitch and volume as the last time Yarra had come to their room. As ever, Galamon readied his axe and opened the door cautiously.

The sharp-eyed and thin Vessel stood waiting there. Galamon did not need a prompt from Argrave to open the door wider this time, allowing Yarra to walk in as she pleased.

"Perfect timing!" Argrave said enthusiastically. He put the last three books inside of his backpack and cinched it shut. He lifted it up. "Here. Wear this," he directed.

Her gaze jumped between Argrave and the backpack he held. She made no move to take it from his hand.

"It's a backpack. You wear it on your back," he explained sarcastically. When she gave no response, he continued exasperatedly, "Come now. Brium said you are unfatiguing—certainly better than bone-shouldered me at carrying a pack on your back. I'm a mage, not a warrior."

"...I cannot promise it will be undamaged should we fight anyone," she said, voice dead. Argrave suspected making her laugh would be the hardest mortal feat.

"I am rather adept at avoiding fights. The ones I find myself in... end quickly, I find. Soon, I'm sure Brium and the rest of Cyprus will agree with this assessment. But for now, here," he dangled the backpack, arms growing tired.

"He is Lord Brium," she corrected, then took the backpack from Argrave's hands, throwing it over her shoulder. It had been made to accommodate Argrave, and so the straps were quite loose—she tightened them quietly.

"Excellent. I'm very proud of you," he nodded. "Now, are those shoes made for walking?" he looked down at her shoes. They were no more than red silken slippers. "It seems not."

"I will manage," she disagreed.

"Right." Argrave looked around. Anneliese and Galamon had already readied everything. Garm was disguised as he usually was—the stake hidden by Galamon's pack, and his head concealed by the elven vampire's giant helmet. "Well, let's be off," he made for the door.

"Wait," she interrupted, and Argrave paused mid step.

"What?" he asked patiently.

She stepped closer. "I need to know where you intend to go."

"An underground graveyard," Argrave said plainly. "For the southron elves, in their glory days. I make a habit of exploring elven tombs, it would seem. Though... Galamon did the last one, actually..."

"So you *are* a necromancer," she half-noted, half-questioned.

"On the contrary," Argrave shook his head. "I am a druid. Among other things," he conceded.

Her gaze wandered to the helm on Galamon's back, and then she looked back to Argrave. "Why do you head to this graveyard?"

"Druid things," Argrave shook his head. "It's a pretty dangerous place. Haunted, ostensibly, but in actuality, it has an animal infestation."

"Dangerous how?"

"Don't worry, you'll be fine, I'm sure. Brium—er, Lord Brium talked about his confidence in you. I'm sure you'll be able to handle them fine," Argrave repeated with a smile.

"Please don't avoid answering," she demanded, a fire of irritation finally bubbling in that dead voice of hers.

"We'll talk on the way," Argrave said, undaunted, and stepped out of their room, his gait light and unburdened.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 123: Singers of the Brume

Backpacking was a laborious thing. Argrave was coming to terms with its necessity, but he could not say that he was fond of carrying a pack on his back with the bare essentials while travelling across

landscapes of varying types. Without healing magic to ease him of blisters and other things brought about by the journey, he would never have made it across the Burnt Desert. Between its dunes of sand and its rocky hills, it was not an easy place to traverse, even in winter.

Now, though, Argrave found great pleasure in the hike they took. They travelled from Sethia to the distant mountains where the southern tribals made their home. The weather was pleasant, the desert was quite beautiful, and the wildlife, terrifying though it might be at times, invoked a dual sense of nostalgia and wonder.

It helped that he had conned someone into carrying his pack for him.

“It’s going to be dangerous to travel farther,” Yarra warned, who kept pace with Argrave. She seemed to have no trouble with the pack, despite being as skinny as he was while half his size. It was the power of a magical body, he supposed.

“Because of the tribals?” Argrave looked up to the dark mountains towering above. “Meh. We’ll be fine,” he waved dismissively. “Not much farther anyway.”

She adjusted the pack with her ire hardly concealed, casting glances at Garm atop Galamon’s pack. Despite her constant curiosity towards the head, she asked as many questions as a mute. Argrave had intended to find out what she knew, but her stubborn silence made that difficult.

They travelled along a dry riverbed. Though the valley around them evidenced water had once flown through this area, all water had dried, and the clay-like soil beneath their feet was hard and cracked into tiles of varying sizes. Argrave kept his eyes on the mountain as he walked slower, looking for landmarks he recalled from the game to guide him.

After a long delay, Argrave spotted a strangely split rock that was quite familiar to him and smiled. “Folks... let’s set our packs aside. Someplace safe.”

“What for?” Yarra questioned, while Galamon and Anneliese moved to obey immediately. Galamon freed Garm from his position, holding him in his free hand like a torch.

Argrave rubbed his hands together. “Time to get to work, obviously.”

Yarra followed Argrave’s gaze to a large boulder down into a gulch.

Seeing she still wasn’t removing the pack, Argrave chided, “You were so hesitant to put it on, now you can’t bear to take it off? Just listen. Is that hard?”

She begrudgingly took the pack off and sat it alongside Anneliese and Galamon’s. After ensuring that their packs were well-concealed, Argrave proceeded into the gulch, minding his step as it descended slightly. The gulch turned right, driving further into the mountains, but Argrave ignored the turn and walked to the boulder.

Argrave held his hand out and knocked four times, then said loudly, “Gebicca, blood of Burgund, has come to pay respects.”

He waited a few seconds... and then the giant boulder, which had been as solid as any other rock, turned to sand. It fell on him, and Argrave reeled away, coughing. He cleared sand out of his nose, his hair, his ears, and his mouth, then lamented, “Forgot about that bit.”

Argrave continued to spit out grains of sand ungracefully as the others near him stared beyond into the cave. Once he was done, he straightened and examined his own handiwork, a smile lining his face. Though the cave ahead was disorderly and uninviting, glowing blue runes shone on the surface of the cave wall.

Oftentimes games, 'Heroes of Berendar' included, would have restrictions on quests. Even if the player *knew* the solution to a puzzle, they'd still need to talk to the right person to be able to proceed. That Argrave had been able to overcome this hurdle without doing so was a deeply satisfying thing—and it doubly confirmed that no one had come here before him.

"Care to lead, Yarra?" Argrave gestured ahead.

By the look of her, Yarra's answer was a resounding 'no.' That said, she showed no hesitation in moving forward into the ominous cave. Galamon followed just after, while Argrave and Anneliese proceeded side by side.

The narrow cave abounding with glowing blue runes was a wonderfully unnerving sight in person. The faint babbling of rushing water echoed out as they walked deeper. The runes provided light enough to walk forward without issue, though, and soon enough, the narrow entrance widened into something much grander.

The narrow passage widened into a vast cavern. A set of stairs descended deeper down into the cave, meeting the smooth, upward-sloped cave floor. At the very top of this slope, there was a small spring, a single trickle travelling down in a straight line. This small trickle divided the cave into two sections, though the erosion was not especially significant.

Coffins of black clay rose up along the sloped cave floor. They were packed closely together as they ascended, like stairs built for giants. The coffins had blue runes along their rims, lighting the place like torchlight. There was an eerie mist about the whole area—dense, almost cloudlike.

"These runes... are incomprehensible," Anneliese muttered, gazing out in awe. "And this place, so—"

"Don't get lost in your head, Anneliese. I can tell you what I know about this place after we're done. In fact..." Argrave turned his gaze to the Vessel, Yarra. "You may wish to prepare to fight."

Galamon nodded, freeing his helmet from atop Garm's head and donning it himself. He drew his greatsword, too. Argrave held out his hand, a spell matrix forming. Soon enough, four [Electric Eels] bounded from his palm, illuminating the area better yet as they drifted above his head. He took slow, steady steps down the wide stairs, waiting and watching the entire room.

Their advance into the tomb seemed to evidence that no danger awaited them, yet the atmosphere of the place was decidedly not easing. The dense mist, the coffins, the constancy of the babbling stream above... Argrave's gaze flitted to a coffin.

Deep within the complex system of caves, a noise rang out—windchimes, almost. It was pleasant to the ear. This chiming grew in volume, slowly melding together into something more complete. It formed a soothing melody, almost playful in tone.

"Be ready," he cautioned.

And his words of caution proved to be of perfect timing. The mist within the cave began to condense, solidify—in but a second, Argrave found himself facing a black-skinned warrior with large ears and indiscernible features. A curved sword whistled towards his face. Argrave willed the [Electric Eels] to move, and they struck their target far faster than his newly formed foe's sword could move.

The warrior staggered back, flesh cracking and leaking mist. A guttural and phlegmy howl battered against Argrave's ears at once, echoing in his head and against the cave walls until it was all he heard. The sound was terrifying enough that he felt all his skin crawl against his leather gear, despite that he had been fully expecting it to come. The pleasant song became discordant ringing.

Yarra was the first to regain her composure... or perhaps she never lost it, for her hand liquified and thrust forth like a spear towards the warrior's head as soon as it ceased staggering. Its head scattered like the mist from which it was made, yet the attack seemed ineffectual. It did not walk forward—it merely *reformed* forward, slicing at Yarra's stomach.

Galamon slashed at it with his greatsword. His blow struck home, both the metal blade and the wind blade following it causing another visible impact. With another near identical howl, the mist exploded backwards, blown by an invisible wind. The sight did not distract Argrave from the sound of something scraping—claws on stone, Argrave thought, like a fleeing animal.

"Well," Argrave began, stepping forth. "The first of them knows that we're here. It's like I told you—you can only hit them when they're trying to hit you. They have to be solid to attack, and as such, that's the only time they can be hurt."

"These must be wraiths. Ghosts," Yarra said with conviction. "This mist is not true mist. I cannot absorb it."

"Don't you listen? I told you they weren't," Argrave shook his head. "Back in the day, the southron elves used to reign supreme here. They had pets they used for war... and intrigue." Argrave looked about the cave. "The Singers of the Brume, they're called. Brumesingers for short. They subsist on the souls of the dead. The little devils are no ordinary animals, and can be held responsible for the warrior we just dealt with. This fog..." Argrave held his hand out. "It's a magic mist. A brume, I guess. They can travel through it, conjure distractions, conjure fighters..."

Yarra seemed to be trying to find a hole in what Argrave said, but it seemed after some reflection, she simply nodded.

"Don't kill them, please," Argrave requested dryly. "They're very valuable, culturally and otherwise. Though, maybe you don't care about the cultural part."

"But how will we stop—"

"Tire them out," Argrave explained. "They expend their energy every time they try and stop us. It's a game of cat and mouse, chasing these creatures about 'til they drop."

"So we have to continue to fight these mist apparitions until they simply cease?" Yarra questioned.

"Precisely," Argrave nodded. "There are plenty of other rooms in this place. So... let's get walking, and let's stay alert."

Argrave took a step forward, and the mist solidified once again. A hand thrust out towards Argrave's neck, a dagger in hand. He raised his arm to block, trusting his armor's enchantments, but Anneliese was ready. A single white bolt of [Skysunder] struck the hand, casting the arm aside. It dispersed and vanished.

"Should heed my own advice, sometimes," Argrave lowered his arm, then readied four more [Electric Eels]. "Thanks, Anneliese. Someone else should lead, I think."

#####

It was not especially difficult to find the Brumesingers throughout the vast tomb. Though the rooms were many, each carved of a vast cave system, they needed only follow the mist, seeking out its intensity. The Brumesingers conjured the remnants of the spirits they had consumed—namely, southron elf warriors. Vigilance alone proved enough to combat the majority of their conjured warriors, fortunately. Argrave worked Yarra tirelessly, making her take the lead at all times.

The creatures weren't stupid, though, and they were pack animals. They quickly gathered together, combining their efforts against the party. Cornering them was impossible. The Brumesingers could travel through the brume they conjured—that was much of the reason Argrave sought them out. In time, they'd make great scouts.

Soon enough, their party of four—five, including Garm—found themselves facing something quite unideal. Ahead, the mist was so thick that trying to see the room beyond was like trying to see through milk. The room had no other exits, so far as Argrave knew, but the fact remained that they had bunched up.

"Little bastards have been running for quite a while..." Argrave kneeled down, clicking his tongue. "Hard to get a notion of how many there are, too."

"Place ahead is like a deathtrap," Galamon noted. "The creatures don't attack immediately. When we're in that mist, it's hard to see... and four, five of the attacks coming at once isn't manageable."

"Why not make use of that head on a stake of yours?" Yarra suggested. "I question why you brought it."

Argrave looked towards her. "What, do you think it can warn us if it sees something?" he pressed, finally seizing the opportunity to learn what she knew.

"I know it can," she shot back.

"And how?" Argrave questioned.

"Because Brium told me," she said. "He would not disclose that without conviction."

So, Brium knows Garm can speak. Argrave tried to ponder what that meant of the situation, but he couldn't really narrow things down as to how Garm was ousted.

"I don't think that's necessary," Argrave said, pushing past that and focusing on the task on hand. "We'll just need a good, steady formation..." Argrave scratched his chin. "...and some patience."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 124: Death in Toto

Argrave was the farthest thing from a hunter.

But the people with him both hailed from a northern island where hunts made up a large portion of the food supply. Galamon had been a part of many hunts, and Anneliese knew much of the process by virtue of her sheer curiosity. As such, Argrave had learned that their people took two approaches to hunting animals in Veiden: trapping, or cornering.

They could not afford to make any traps, and so they had worked at cornering the Brumesingers. Galamon had steered them towards that end. Now, the creatures lay beyond a veil of mist, entrenched deeply. As the saying went, a cornered rat will bite the cat. Patience was their largest virtue. Their venture to capture the Brumesingers became a siege.

The four of them would press into the mist—never enough to leave them vulnerable from all sides, but far enough to evoke a reaction from the animals hiding within. And indeed, time and time again, the warriors of mist would appear, and their party's patient caution proved more than enough to receive all comers.

Brium's Vessel, Yarra, proved to be well worth the trust bestowed in her by the Lord of Copper. Once she learned how these warriors summoned by the Brumesingers functioned, she was quite adept at dealing with them. Her control over the water springing from within was masterful, to the point where she left not a drop behind no matter how she attacked. She seemed to have a penchant for manipulating the water within herself to weapons. She would reform her hands into swords, spears, and all manner of war instruments.

This process took an uncomfortably long time. Argrave felt tempted to leave and ensure their backpacks left outside were *truly* hidden, but he kept those thoughts inside. Over the course of many fatiguing hours, during which Argrave ran out of magic, the fog that had been near as thick as milk began to dwindle. The place started to look like a graveyard sauna.

At a point, the warriors conjured lacked form and distinguishing features—it had been obvious they were southron elves, at first, and their skin had looked truly real. Now, they truly fought warriors borne of mist.

With a retreating slash of Galamon's greatsword, the last two remaining warriors finally dispelled not into mist, but into nothingness. Argrave had grown well used to their unnatural and grim howls, yet this last's death knell did not echo out across the ancient tomb. The silence that followed was all-consuming.

"Hoo," Argrave breathed out, some of his tension dissolved in the wake of excitement. The process of getting to the Brumesingers in the game was much the same, though admittedly infinitely more reckless and far less time-consuming. "Alright. Yarra, Galamon, stay near the entrance. Make sure the little ones don't scamper out."

Yarra nodded, far more amenable to direction after the nonstop conditioning of the misty siege.

With the two of them standing near the entrance, waiting, Argrave and Anneliese advanced ahead. The room had coffins lined up on each of its two walls, but in the back of the room, stairs rose up to an elevated portion that housed one single, grander coffin.

Argrave stepped around, watching the floors for any movement. Neither he nor Anneliese spotted anything for a long time, but then he heard a faint, rapid sound—it sounded like a dog's squeaky chew toy, almost. It took him a bit to place it, but then he knelt down, lowering his face to the ground and peering beneath one of the coffins. At once, he smiled in triumph.

He saw the Brumesingers he'd been seeking crouched low beneath the coffins. The white-furred creatures were canids. Their appearance bore the most resemblance to that of a fox, with especially large ears. Considering they were desert creatures, the fennec fox seemed a close relative. Their fur was like snow. Their eyes, too, were especially striking—they were like moving pools of gold, a glimpse into another dimension.

The Brumesingers were wheezing in exhaustion, all of their energy spent. Argrave lifted his head up and beckoned Anneliese over. She came to the other side, and her presence made the creatures sidle away in panic, moving closer to the center of the coffin.

"Aren't they neat?" he spoke to Anneliese. "Had we found them earlier, they would've been as black as night. Their fur changes color as they consume the souls of the dead—white, gray, to black."

"They are fascinating," she agreed, white hair scattered everywhere on the stone as she pressed her face to peer under. "What should we do now?"

"I count... four," Argrave concluded. "A lot of hell raised by four of these little guys. You see why I want them." Argrave tapped the ground, thinking. "You should take one for now," he looked to Anneliese. "Eventually, I want you to have a bird familiar for hyper-effective scouting. For now, though... these guys can travel through the mists they produce. Nothing short of fantastic for scouting, espionage... all-purpose monsters, these little ones."

Anneliese nodded. She held her hand out and a green light shone from her palm—Argrave couldn't distinguish the spell, but he recognized it as druidic magic. One of the Brumesingers lifted its head, then slowly and cautiously crawled out towards her.

Content, Argrave focused back on the last three. Lacking the magic to cast the spell needed, he triggered the Blessing of Supersession, feeling the overwhelming power surge into him. Surprisingly, the Brumesingers reacted to Argrave's change—one bolted from beneath the coffin, surging towards the exit like a maniac. Galamon kneeled and received it easily, restraining it with his forefinger and thumb.

When he found it wouldn't escape, Argrave turned his focus back to the other two. He held out his hand, casting the C-rank druidic spell, [Pack Leader]. At once, he felt a strange sensation in his chest. The feeling was vastly different from when he had linked with the pigeons at Mateth. Then, like a cork, it exploded into him.

Argrave came to understand death in that moment.

With this newfound and entirely unexpected epiphany, Argrave's entire body seized up. His arms lost strength, and he collapsed to the ground. His heart started to beat at the pace of a hummingbird's wings, his skin felt like it was crawling, and he started sweating uncontrollably. He sight failed, fading into whiteness, and all sound vanished behind a loud ringing.

He did not know when this had come to pass, but Anneliese knelt over him. His vision slowly regained clarity, and he felt something warm on his cheek. Two ‘somethings,’ in fact—on one side, something soft, and on the other, something leather.

As he got his wits about him, he realized Anneliese held his face while the two Brumesingers sat by his cheek.

“There. Your eyes are focusing,” Anneliese said, her voice growing louder as the ringing in his ears faded. “I had no idea something like this might happen. I should have warned you. The spell I used was not like [Pack Leader]. Animals closely linked to things, like...” she trailed off, worried.

“That was...” Argrave began, voice powerless. “...some damn experience.”

“What did you feel?” she insisted.

“Shouldn’t you know?” he croaked out a laugh. “Death,” he relayed.

She said nothing, eyes wide.

“I don’t want to die,” he could only say. “I thought I knew that. But now I *know* that.”

“You hit your head when you fell,” she said. “I will turn you over, take care of that.”

Argrave accepted this quietly. Anneliese turned him over, and his gaze fell upon the snow-white little creatures that had occupied his entire day. He looked into their whirling golden eyes and felt an indomitable bond between the three of them. There was something *more* between them. These creatures ceased to be mere Brumesingers—they felt like an extension of Argrave, every bit as important as his arms or legs. He hadn’t felt this intensity when he’d linked with the pigeons in Mateth.

He only realized the back of his head hurt when the pain faded, likely due to Anneliese’s healing magic. She moved him, leaning him up against the coffin. The little white creatures bounded on top of his lap, all of their timidity vanished—rather, it felt like they were now protecting Argrave. Just the same, he felt protective of them.

“Why the hell was that the roughest part of this?” Argrave questioned, only half-joking.

“It seems... these animals are linked intrinsically to death,” Anneliese stared down at them. The one she’d claimed stood near her leg. “Furthermore, it seems there is definitely a strong compatibility between you and them.”

Argrave looked down and raised his hand to rest atop them, some of his energy returned. “You feel anything like this?”

Anneliese shook her head. “[Pack Leader] links your souls. The spell I used merely changes their soul’s disposition towards me. Were I to connect to them with a direct link, as I often did with the bird... I expect I would experience much the same thing, provided I have the same affinity with death as you do.”

Galamon stepped around the coffin, coming to stand before Argrave. He held the last Brumesinger in his hand, and the creature dangled uncooperatively from his hand. It let out small little yelps, though dared not bite at the gauntleted fingers holding it.

“What to do with this one?” Galamon questioned.

Argrave looked up at it, watching it dangle. He started to think, but then stopped himself, picturing the matter like jumping into cold water. He held out his hand and cast [Pack Leader] once more. That dread came again. The sense of death was lessened in intensity, but present nonetheless. Once it was done, he took the Brumesinger from Galamon’s hand, and it crawled down Argrave’s arm to join the other two.

Yarra came to stand beside Galamon, her arms crossed. “Are they of the same family? How many are male or female?” she questioned.

“Why?” returned Argrave suspiciously.

“These creatures could be important for Cyprus’ future. Breeding them could be a very lucrative thing.”

The notion of forced breeding from the Vessels set Argrave into a vision-blurring rage at once. With the Blessing of Supersession still active, he felt the bottomless well of magic within him spin and stir, ready to move, and then...

Argrave stopped himself. That sort of primal anger was so ridiculously foreign the sheer shock of realizing he’d been the one to experience it dispelled all the rage he’d felt. He calmed his breathing. *Going to have to consult Anneliese, read more about druidic magic... almost made a big damn mistake.*

“...they’re all from the same mother,” Argrave lied. “Not exactly viable for breeding.”

“Unfortunate,” said Yarra with a shake of her head. “I have helped you with your task. Now, I must do my own duty.”

Argrave tensed. “And what is that?”

“That spring in the main hall,” she said, looking back towards the door. “I must ensure it ceases to be. Who knows where its waters lead? It cannot be permitted to continue.”

Some of Argrave’s tension dispelled, but then he considered her words more.

Who knows where its waters lead, she questions. And she’s right. Those waters might sustain a whole village. And she wants me to stand by, watch that happen.

The roiling power of the Blessing of Supersession at the tip of his fingers was a constant temptation. But Argrave’s logical mind battled against his vying heart, and he eventually rose to his feet. The Brumesingers clung to his clothes before dropping off on the ground.

“Fine. Do as you must,” Argrave conceded, doing his best to hide his unease. “While you’re doing that, we’ll grab one more thing from this place—something to help win the southron elves over.”

Yarra nodded. Some of her disdain towards Argrave was gone, evidently, after seeing him act. The feeling was not mutual. She walked away, and Argrave ground his fingers against his palm.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 125: Beast's Instinct

The Vessel, Yarra, placed her bare hand in the spring inside the cave. Argrave stood just behind her, watching this act with some degree of curiosity. They had retrieved their backpacks from outside. His Brumesingers were off in the cave, eating some of the still-lingering souls in this place. The fox-like little creatures actually ate with their eyes—not nearly as disgusting as it sounded, actually. Their gaze alone could devour souls that lacked attachment.

The water in the spring branched off at several portions, flowing into separate streams that slid in and out of the rocks, carving into the stone. Once Yarra's hand met the water's surface, though, the constant flow started to cease. The streams which had been flowing downhill started to reverse, crawling back up the stone to swell the spring.

As the spring swelled with returning water, the direction of its flow started to change. The water began to course towards the Vessel's hand as though it was a hole beneath rather than a hand above. Despite the intense movement, once it met Yarra's hand, it simply... ceased.

In a time no longer than a minute, the great spring quickly became a place of dry rock. Even when drained by a hose, the rock would never look this dry. Every bit of water became part of Yarra, the Vessel of Fellhorn.

"...it was a deep spring," she finally said, rising to her feet. "Further portions will flow until they meet their end, but no more water will emerge. This visit proved to be of great value to Fellhorn and Cyprus both."

"I'm glad," Argrave said, lying. His triumph at gaining the Brumesingers was tempered by guilt. Perhaps he had been naïve to expect that Yarra would do nothing about the spring in this cave. But the guilt didn't bog him down—it was a reminder to work harder until the time came to turn Sethia to chaos.

Argrave cast a supplementary spell of [Pack Leader], and the Brumesingers quickly scampered across the room, crawling up his leg and taking refuge in his duster. The creatures were light and small—something adapted for the desert, no doubt—and Argrave did not feel especially burdened by their presence.

Argrave pet one of them, then lifted his head and muttered to Anneliese, "Never pictured me as the 'pocket dog' type of guy."

"Pocket dog?" she repeated.

"Explain it another time," Argrave dismissed. "Yarra. A question for you."

She waited expectantly, staring up at Argrave.

"How much time do you suppose we have before the Lords of Silver and Gold decide to make their move?"

"Lord Brium estimated, at shortest, a week. Other estimates are wildly varied, but the average of these predictions is about half a month," she explained, arms crossed.

Argrave frowned. "Bit generous, no?"

Yarra shook her head. "If Aurum and Argent were so quick to plan an assault against Cyprus, one of three of the lords of Sethia existing for hundreds of years, then this city would never have survived as long as it has. Order and deliberateness are the prime things to expect from the other Lords."

“Alright,” Argrave raised his hands, conceding. “But the day is nearly done, and I don’t fancy walking around a mountain at night. We’ll camp here tonight. Tomorrow... I have to earn the favor of the southron elves.”

The Vessel no longer held contempt towards Argrave, it seemed, for Yarra expressed neither disdain nor anticipation regarding his grandiose comments. Instead, she asked, “How do your ties to this land run so deep?”

Argrave smiled. “Been here more times than you know.”

“That answer only spawns yet more questions,” she noted, eyes narrowed.

“I’ve got a lot of depth,” Argrave spread his arms out, briefly revealing one of the Brumesingers before it sought cover once more. “I’m going to set up my place to sleep—been an exhausting day.”

Argrave walked away, but then paused, turning and pointing to Yarra. “Do you think you could watch the cave entrance, keep guard? If any tribals see it, they’ll notice the new cave and be upon us during the night. The three of us, we need to sleep... but you...” Argrave trailed off.

She stared up at him for a long while, and then slowly nodded. “I’ll keep watch.”

“That’s good. You’re quite reliable. I see why Brium chose you,” he flattered.

She said nothing, then turned, leaving the correction, “*Lord Brium.*”

Argrave bit his lip as she walked away, questioning if his repeated mistaken address might bring his loyalty to question. He shook his head and turned. He waited a suitably long time and then muttered, “Finally, some time to breathe.”

Anneliese held her Brumesinger in her hands, gently petting its giant ears. “It was a tiring day,” she confessed.

“And another one tomorrow,” Argrave continued. “Hell, tomorrow might be the most important day of all.”

“True,” said Galamon.

Argrave looked back to the entrance that Yarra had left from. Though Galamon shook his head, confirming she was no longer there, Argrave’s paranoia was not sated. He conjured a ward around them to be sure that she truly could not listen.

“You can talk now, Garm,” Argrave said.

“Gods. What have I to say?” Garm complained at once. “It baffles me how you people manage to reveal me so easily. And who ends up suffering?”

“Didn’t exactly hear any genius ideas about how to hide your presence,” Argrave rebutted at once, then sighed. “No, that’s not fair. But hell, I’m just as confused as you. The only times we were lax at all were on the roads.”

“It’s no matter. I have little to say, regardless,” Garm closed his eyes.

“Get your talking in now, I’d advise,” Argrave said. Despite that, Garm said nothing more.

“If you’ve nothing... As it stands, the southron elves are going to be our lynchpin for this entire thing,” Argrave outlined. “They’re going to be our contact between us and Durran, and they’re going to be the primary coordinator for this entire little betrayal of ours. As such... it’s very important that Yarra stays far, far away from any inkling of association with them.”

“You’ve said this enough,” Galamon said.

“But now we’ve had a day with the Vessel,” Argrave explained with his hands. “And we know better what we can do to stop any... unfortunate occurrences. After how easily Garm was discovered, we have to be extra, extra cautious.”

“I can agree with that,” Anneliese nodded. Her Brumesinger let out a whimper and shook, so she knelt and let it to the ground.

“As such, any conversation about plans that I have with the southron elves... I want it to be underneath a ward.” Argrave looked around. “I’m telling you so that the both of you can know how to direct the conversation.”

Galamon shook his head. “I’ll just stay quiet. You two work well enough as a pair.”

“You might not have that luxury,” Argrave turned his head. “The southron elves respect warriors, not mages.”

Galamon sighed. “I’m no orator, but I’ll do what I can.”

With a nod, Argrave concluded, “That’s all I can ask.”

#####

“He’s dead?” Elias asked, not fully able to believe it.

“There can be no doubt,” Helmuth confirmed, purple-eyed gaze staring at Elias with some measure of remorse.

Elias leaned back into his carriage’s seat, bringing his hand to his face. His uncle, Bruno of Parbon, had been slain. He felt a deep pit of emptiness within, like something had been torn out within him.

Bruno of Parbon, Elias’ uncle. The first real loss in this war. He had been the impetus of their rebellion, ostensibly, though his capture was merely the straw that broke the camel’s back. His father had been so certain that the king would not dare harm him—yet now, without trial, without any attempt at ransom, his uncle had been slaughtered.

“Sorry about your uncle,” Stain spoke quietly, sitting across from Elias on the carriage.

Elias didn’t know what to say to that. No, he didn’t want to say anything at all. He felt like the carriage he was in was far too compact and reached for the carriage door. It opened, the carriage still moving, and Elias alighted.

“Young lord...!” Helmuth called out, moving after Elias. Stain, too, jumped out.

"I just want to walk for a bit," he said, stepping ahead quickly. Stain and Helmuth shared a glance, and then pursued the young lord of House Parbon, a fair distance behind so as not to disturb his thoughts.

Elias kept pace with the horses pulling the carriage, walking very quickly. Their escort of knights was much grander than even the one they had taken to Jast, and many of the knights looked to Elias, pityingly. Evidently, the young lord was the last to receive the news.

Elias could only watch the ground for the longest time, his mind whirling. It gave him an unflinching sense of dread. But then he grew angry at himself—this was the reality of war. People died. He should not be so shaken simply because his uncle had died.

With that bitter thought, Elias lifted his head, staring far ahead down the road. In the far distance, where the ground sunk into the earth, he saw the walls of Elbraille. Walls were meant to evoke a sense of safety, protection, Elias always thought—the Lion's Gate just beside the Lionsun Castle had always brought a sense of wonder and safety to his chest.

Now, though, with death on his mind, he felt a sense of danger. Of entrapment. He was tempted to write it off as the idiotic thoughts brought about by recent grief, but he paused in the road.

"Young lord..." Helmuth spoke, saying nothing more beyond that. Any bitterness or hostility that had come between them at Jast had dissipated in this moment.

"The only danger in war isn't sword and shield," Elias said, staring at Elbraille.

"It's true," Helmuth agreed. "Most snakes kill with poison, not fang and claw."

"And we're about to enter Elbraille, to help him suppress this matter regarding unrest," Elias turned his head. "I knew that I could expect to encounter some enemies here... now my gut's screaming at me to turn around and go home. To safety. Never had a stronger feeling than this."

"No shame in that," commented Stain. "Instinct can save you."

"Bravery is proceeding in spite of fear," Elias shook his head. "But... I have to remember my uncle. I must be cautious to the point of paranoia. Not for my life... but for those beneath me." He turned his head to Helmuth. "Tell the men that we won't go to Elbraille today. We'll camp out here today."

Elias moved back to his carriage, climbing inside. Stain looked to Helmuth, a question in his gaze, but the old wizard merely nodded and moved to obey.