

Jackal 126

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 126: Sleeping Oasis

Come morning, Argrave had fully repaid the small debt he'd accrued to Erlebnis, enabling his use of the Blessing of Supersession once again. Their route to navigating the obstacles ahead was much clearer after a lengthy discussion. And, lastly, the Brumesingers spent the night gorging, turning their fur from a snow-white to an off-white.

The Brumesingers were magic creatures and had been living here for years, feasting on the high-quality souls of the dead southron elves in this tomb. It would be some time before they'd be able to conjure warriors of mist or traverse through the fog to reach any place imaginable. In time, the five-pound furballs would eventually become true forces of nature, especially if Argrave gave them good souls to eat.

"...so these runes are illusion magic?" Anneliese questioned, sitting cross-legged beside one of the coffins with runes across its lid.

"Yep. Between the sand door outside and the runes throughout this place, it's clear the southron elves were masters of illusion magic. Southron elf illusions, no matter if you're E-rank or S-rank, can't be seen through. But... they're a lot more limited," Argrave explained, rubbing his finger across the glowing blue rune.

She nodded, staring. "...you didn't sleep at all last night," she said quietly, changing the subject.

"Couple hours, maybe. Not an unusual occurrence," Argrave dismissed, standing. "What can I do? Cry?"

She also came to her feet. "You can talk about it," she offered.

"What are you, my therapist?" Argrave shook his head with a grin. "We've got stuff to do. Let's go meet with Yarra, rendezvous with the southron elves."

"I just worry," she shook her head. "Your habits were improving after we left the Low Way. Now..." she sighed defeatedly. "Now I question if you sleep worse. If you were sick again, I might heal you. This, though... I can do nothing but talk."

Argrave bit his lip. He knew she was right, but that was only because he wasn't blind to his own condition.

He stepped forward. "You know, they say if you improve your physical health, your mental health will improve in turn. All the more reason to hurry towards becoming Black Blooded."

She smiled bitterly and nodded. "As you say. Let us go."

#####

"Are you sure that you're headed the right way?" asked Yarra, some of her confidence in Argrave diminished overnight.

"Yes," confirmed Argrave brusquely, holding his compass in hand.

“Certain enough to stake your life?” she questioned. “The three of you ran out of food, and there is only wasteland ahead.”

The four ambulatory people in Argrave’s party trod across the dunes of the Burnt Desert. The town of Sethia had long faded behind the hills of distant black sand, and the only landmark still in sight was the tall, tall mountains.

“I’m certain,” Argrave confirmed, coming to a stop and glancing around before turning back to his compass. One of the Brumesingers poked its head out just by his neck, glancing around the vast expanse of black desert excitedly before retreating back into cover.

“How?” she questioned, stopping beside Argrave, her backpack—technically Argrave’s backpack—swaying briefly before settling.

“Eidetic memory,” he said, unfocused.

“What is that?” She shook her head confusedly.

“Photogr—well, no, that wouldn’t make sense to you either. Doesn’t matter. Was a joke, anyhow.” Argrave shut the compass. “Should be around... somewhere.” His gaze scanned the distant mountains. After a time, he stopped scanning and his face lit up. “Ahah. I’ve still got it.”

Argrave walked forward again, unburdened and certain. They passed over the top of another dune, and just beyond, there was a relatively flat bit of sand. Almost perfect in the center of this flat plane, there was a sword overturned and partially buried. The blade of the sword had curved barbs and was quite badly rusted.

With quick steps, Argrave headed downhill towards the center of the flat bit of sand. He walked to the sword, and then picked it up, stabbing it into the ground. On the first try, it fell back into the sand. The second time, Argrave used more force, and it stood upright in the sand as he walked away.

“Alright...” Argrave took a breath. He held his hand out, and then used water magic. A steady pour of water flowed from his hand.

“What are you doing?” Yarra asked at once, angrily.

“Keep your hat on,” Argrave said dismissively. “I’m taking us to the southron elves.” He turned his head to look at her. “Well, *us*, actually. As agreed, you’ll stay outside.”

Argrave was, ostensibly, revealing the location of the southron elves. They were a nomadic people by this point, though, moving from abandoned settlement to abandoned settlement. Argrave would be sure that, even if things did go sour, the elves would never be discovered. All he needed now was to keep Yarra far from them.

She stared at the water, not meeting his gaze. “Fellhorn permits violence against those that would conjure water with magic.”

Argrave kept his gaze steady. “Permitting isn’t encouraging, you know,” he noted as the pool of water grew larger and larger, sinking into the sand and spreading out.

“You encroach on His domain,” she pressed angrily.

With a clench of his fist, the downpour stopped. “Are you going to stop me from doing what I need to do to help Cyprus?”

“I am a Vessel of Fellhorn before a servant of the Lord of Copper.”

Argrave took a deep breath. Part of him would be happy to be rid of this woman. They were alone, miles from Sethia, miles from any witnesses... and the woman was far too inhuman to warrant any remorse. All of the Vessels were.

But it couldn’t happen. Argrave had to stay close with Brium until the time came to separate cleanly and completely. No nonsensical excuse would repair the trust severed by his best Vessel’s death. It would be a stupid thing to do, and for the sake of ego instead of logic.

“And what do you think Brium would do, were he standing here?” Argrave questioned, eyes narrowed.

At that, Yarra looked away at once, almost visibly recoiling. Argrave held his hand out and resumed his task, growing the pool larger and larger. Once that was done, he removed his glove.

“What are you doing?” questioned Galamon.

“We need blood, don’t w—oh.” Argrave paused. “I forgot.”

Argrave put his glove back on. Galamon stepped forward, retrieving one of his flasks. He removed the lid, then dropped the remainder of the blood inside it. Nothing odd seemed to happen to the pool of water. Its mundanity was enough that Argrave questioned if he was forgetting something.

“Don’t forget, Yarra. Stay here. Out of sight, preferably. We’ll be back... and when we are, the southron elves will fight at our side when the time comes.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

Argrave took a step forward, towards the pool. Though his body had expected his feet to meet solid, if mushy, ground, it felt like there was nothing but air beneath them. Argrave fell into the water with nary a splash. Galamon counted to three, and then stepped just after him. Anneliese came last.

Yarra peered into the water, shocked. She looked as though she wanted to kneel down and touch it, yet she did not.

Had she been more attentive, Yarra might have noticed a set of golden eyes watching her. A single, off-white Brumesinger crouched low atop a sand dune, watching the Vessel with sublime patience. Its actions were far different from that of an animal.

#####

Having fallen to the ground, Argrave rose to darkness. His gloved hand brushed against something hard—a sandy stone, by his estimation. It took him a second to think to conjure a bit of spell light, and at once, the subterranean cave became lit up with light. The cave was made of black sandstone—a rather eerie sight, like some cavern of hell, but this place was precisely where Argrave intended to be.

Galamon joined Argrave, very nearly landing atop him. His quick reflexes spared them both that. The elven vampire growled, "Move," and Argrave hastened to obey. Soon enough, Anneliese joined them, and Argrave supported her so that she wouldn't fall as he had.

After she gave a thanks, Argrave questioned, "Is it working?"

"...it is," she confirmed. "I can see Yarra."

Argrave sighed in relief. "That's good. We can keep an eye on her, make sure she doesn't try anything." He turned his head around, examining the cave. Recalling his experience yesterday, he questioned, Anneliese, "And... you're not overwhelmed by feelings of death?"

"Not *overwhelmed*," she said, emphasis implying that she was merely 'whelmed.' "And the feeling is fading fast."

"Okay. Do you think we can move?"

"...I cannot, not while maintaining the druidic link," she admitted. "Not without guidance."

"Okay." Argrave stepped up, then said, "Gonna grab your shoulders, guide you along."

After she nodded in confirmation, Argrave wrapped his arm around her and moved her along as he walked in the cavern. Fortunately, the place was spacious enough that they did not need to duck or maneuver significantly. The sandstone was flat and lacked treacherous obstacles, so the task was not excessively difficult.

"Gods..." muttered Garm from atop Galamon's backpack, just ahead.

"Something more to complain about?" Argrave questioned.

"Oh, nothing," Garm said sarcastically. "Just wishing I was blind."

"What does that mean?"

"Please, don't distract me, both of you," Anneliese interrupted before Garm could give his answer.

The both of them heeded Anneliese's word, and they trekked through the sandstone cave in silence. They trekked a long, long way, Argrave's spell illuminating the path ahead. Occasionally, holes of light poked through the cavern—the surface was not too far above. Piles of sand evidenced that they were still in the dunes.

Eventually, though, the flat ground started to go upwards.

"Wait," Anneliese stopped them.

"What is it?"

"The link... is stretched quite thin," Anneliese said. "If I go further, I fear it will sever. I think you two should go on ahead. If Yarra does anything, I will come and find you."

"Sure about that?" Argrave double-checked. "The exit's pretty close."

"Indeed," she nodded. "And if the exit is close, all the better."

With a nod of surrender, Argrave released Anneliese and pressed on with Galamon, casting glances behind him to be sure nothing would go wrong. Eventually, sunlight started to rear its head more and more, and the cave opened up into a very different sight.

Grassland.

The grass stretched for a great distance ahead. It all led up to a great body of crystal blue water, utterly still and clear and pure. This oasis was flanked by many of the palm trees that they had seen back in Delphasium, with black trunks and purple leaves and strange fruits. The land was vibrant, full of life-- a far cry from the desolate wasteland outside.

And just beyond the oasis, one could make out houses carved into the stone, with glowing blue runes carved into the paved walkways. Though suppressed by sunlight, those were sure to light up the place at night sufficiently.

"Place is big," noted Galamon, kneeling. "Not many people, though. Sixty. Seventy."

"Some are out, maybe," Argrave thought aloud. "But this is it. The last bastion of the southron elves. Seems it's just us three."

"Might as well say 'us two.' I know you expect me to keep my mouth shut," Garm said bitterly.

"You can talk if you want," Argrave shook his head. "Southron elves don't mind necromancy all too much. Their warpets ate souls, after all. Nonetheless..."

"You like to keep your cards close," Garm finished. "I'll stay quiet."

Argrave sighed. "Thanks, Garm... let's hope we don't have another Stonepetal Sentinels situation on hand."

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Chapter 127: Jet-Black Relics

"Wanted to say..." Galamon looked at Argrave as they watched the oasis town, far out of sight. "You've gotten tougher."

"The hell does that mean?" Argrave asked, worried at Galamon's praise.

Galamon shook his head as though telling Argrave to calm down. "You used to never stop complaining. Couldn't bear the sight of blood. Hated physical work. Different, now."

"Not my choice, believe me," Argrave turned his head away. "I like soft hands."

"Regardless... you're blind to yourself, at times," Galamon finished.

"You're still making potions and poisons next time we need them," Argrave pointed at Galamon without looking.

"...as ever," Galamon said with a sigh. "Enough talk."

Argrave and Galamon proceeded openly and honestly into the oasis town of the southron elves. It would be difficult to approach any other way with both of them being over seven feet tall, and they also didn't come for deceit and trickery. Of late, that was a rare thing.

"Just a reminder..." Galamon began seriously, and Argrave turned his head to look at the elf. "...don't use the Blackgard name," he advised.

Argrave laughed once. "Hadn't planned on it."

"I've been with you too long," the big elf noted, looking around the town. People were starting to take notice of them, and anxiously moved to act.

"Tired of me?" Argrave kept his gaze facing forward, keeping an eye on developments.

He shook his head. "Used to you."

Argrave spotted familiar people and kept his eye on them. "So what's the problem?"

"Didn't blink an eye at jumping into a pool of water and blood to enter a cave with a dying race within. It's... concerning, that's all." Galamon tapped Argrave's elbow. "Keep your hands up. Demonstrate we're harmless."

Argrave obeyed Galamon's command, keeping his hands in the air. "I just broke one of their illusion spells. Though... that's not the least crazy thing I've done, I'll admit. Maybe you can help convince Garm that I'm as all-knowing as I claim to be."

"He's seen enough. If he isn't convinced, my words won't change him," Galamon answered. Argrave saw Garm's eyes move around in the helmet on Galamon's back, and then squeeze shut.

A great many of the southron elves moved around the oasis, weapons in hand as they moved to confront the two intruders upon their territory. As they came closer, Argrave saw their features clearer.

The southron elves were far distinct from the pale-skinned Veidimen—they deviated far from their ancestors, enough so it was near impossible to think Galamon or Anneliese might be distant relatives to those present. Most notable was their jet-black skin, far darker than that of the southern tribals or other denizens of the desert. Their hair, their nails, and even their eyes were black. Their ears were much larger, and their bone structure was altogether sharper.

The southron elves were a lean and skinny people, and a little taller than the humans Argrave had seen in the Burnt Desert—a couple inches, perhaps, but not to the extremes of the Veidimen. They wore elegant silk clothing matching in color with their skin.

These elves gathered in front of Argrave and Galamon, most pointing a large glaive towards them. They shouted and cried and made demands, but their voices were too many to follow any sort of direction.

Argrave took an uneasy step back, and then called out, "We aren't here to cause any trouble."

But his words were drowned out by a multitude of questions, and the glaives in the elves' hands did not lower. At the very least, the conflict was not escalating. Argrave was content to wait until things settled enough for him to speak, but then he spotted someone he knew quite well walking out towards them.

"All of you, let me pass!" a loud voice rose above the rest.

A grizzled veteran pushed past the crowd, face marred by scars and burns. Half of his nose had been torn off by something, and one of his eyes was blinded by a burn. Even still, he looked no less of a warrior as he pushed through the crowd, using his own glaive as a walking staff that he did not seem to need.

He came to stand a cautious distance away from the two of them. With silence reigning, Argrave pressed the advantage, using his classic trick—knowing everybody's name.

"You're the warrior Corentin?" Argrave pointed.

Corentin shifted on his feet, planting his glaive in the ground.

"I mean... can't picture anyone else matching your description," Argrave pressed, lowering his hand.

Corentin pointed with his glaive. "Who told you this? How did you get here?"

"Gebicca, of the line of Burgund," Argrave disclosed.

Though the hostility from the southron elves did not evaporate, it did diminish into a steady caution in the silence following. The Brumesingers hiding in his clothes came out at this moment, and the sight of their long-dead warpets evoked gasps of silence and mutterings from the crowd.

"Gebicca? Is that right?" Corentin said. "And what did she say about me?"

"She said..." Argrave paused, rubbing his chin. "Well, she said that you're a real asshole, honestly."

Corentin laughed. "And Gebicca... why is she not here?"

"Because she's dead," Argrave said simply. He picked up one of the Brumesingers off his shoulder, holding it in his hand and petting it.

Corentin stared at Argrave. "Then it seems you have a reason to be here."

#####

Corentin entered into a large room, seemingly emerging from nothing but the wall. He looked about, and then went to retrieve something. After rummaging through a bag in the corner of the room, he pulled free a black cube, etched with glowing runes like those found everywhere throughout the village. These runes did not glow blue, though—theirs was a fell purple.

"Dad?" came a voice.

Corentin turned around. "Don't leave the room, Iltuda."

"I won't," the woman responded. a rather muscular southron elf with a long, braided ponytail. She wore heavy coverings, likely for dealing with the heat of a forge. "But what's the matter? That..." she looked at the cube in his hand. "Has danger come to the village?"

"I don't know," Corentin answered. "Not overt danger. Not an attack. But the Vessels taught us those might be the biggest threats."

"Then...?" she pressed.

"Someone claiming to know Gebicca has come."

"Someone else?" she raised her brows.

"Yes," Corentin nodded.

Iltuda removed the thick forging gloves she wore and stepped forward. "What do they want?" she said insistently.

"To talk alone," Corentin said grimly, then hefted the black cube glowing with purple runes. "I'll find out what he wants, who he is," he said, then moved towards the wall he had entered from once again.

"This could be dangerous, dad!" she tried to grab his arm.

Corentin dodged her grasp easily. "And I am a warrior of our great empire. I am here to protect. Protect you, protect the villagers, protect the empire."

"Our dead empire," she refuted.

"Stay inside," he repeated, pointing, and then walked to the wall. "Step outside, I'll tan you on that leather rack, young lady."

"You're mud," she shook her head.

"Yeah, love you too," he said with angry sarcasm, then vanished into the wall.

#####

"Gods, I'm turning paranoid..." Argrave tapped his temple rapidly as they waited for Corentin's return.

"Keep thinking about ways this might go wrong. Can't muck this up."

"Gods?" repeated Galamon, standing just behind Argrave. "You always said 'god' before."

Argrave looked up perplexedly, then dismissed with a shake of his head, "Whatever. Been here months. When in Rome..."

Southron elven architecture was much more refined than most of the buildings they had seen in Sethia. Though Delphasium had been a place of marble, and was quite beautiful, this place had a distinct flavor and culture to it separating it from anything else. The walls were made of smooth, black sandstone, polished to the point where it shone. The glowing blue runes decorating the walls and ceiling gave an accent to the place that made it seem almost mystical.

The chairs were made of silk and wood—the wood formed the frame, and silk cloth stretched tight made the seat itself. It was a little like sitting in a hammock. The center sunk the lowest, while the edges held firm. Argrave's Brumesingers roamed at Argrave's feet, moving about the place frenetically. They were energetic little devils.

"He's coming," Galamon notified Argrave, bringing him to attention. Soon after, Argrave heard the sound of steady footsteps coming up the stairs.

When he saw the cube with glowing purple runes in the southron elf's hand, Argrave straightened his back in the chair and placed his feet against the ground, ready to bolt.

Don't freak. Don't freak. It's just Corentin. He's just being cautious. Caution—why else would he bring a grenade?

Argrave tried to calm himself, feeling the ring beneath his gloves with the B-rank ward, and thinking of the enchanted leather armor around his skin.

"I'm glad you're willing to hear me out," Argrave said, trying to use conversation to ease his nervousness.

"Mmm," grunted Corentin simply, grabbing a chair from another side of the room and pulling it until he sat across from Argrave and Galamon. "And what brings two Veidimen to the last bastion of the southron elves?"

Argrave tensed at once, worried that Anneliese had been discovered. He calmed and thought on the words further. Argrave touched at his ears—his hair had grown long enough to cover his ears, he realized.

"I'm human, actually," Argrave corrected, relieved. "Just a freak of nature."

"I see," Corentin nodded. He was being a little polite—a telltale sign he didn't trust them at all.

"I'm going to conjure a ward," Argrave said, holding his hands out. "Block out listeners."

Corentin adjusted on his seat, placing the black cube on his armrest, clenched tight in hand. "Go ahead," he gestured towards Argrave.

Argrave went ahead, conjuring a C-rank ward to envelop the three of them. As soon as it was up, Corentin questioned, "How did Gebicca die?"

Argrave scratched his brow, then said, "...badly."

Corentin stared with his one remaining good eye.

Argrave swallowed and continued, "She was crushed. Trapped. Removing the rubble would have killed her, and she'd been starving for some days when I found her," he described, going over the situation the player met her in-game. "Tried to help. Maybe an S-rank spellcaster could have saved her. But I'm not one, and not affluent enough to bring one."

Corentin ground his teeth together as he stared at Argrave, then he nodded. "Alright. And why are you here?"

"Two reasons. Because Gebicca came to trust me enough to divulge her tribe's secret... and because I need your help."

"Help?" Corentin frowned. "And you sought it here? In a ghost town?"

"Don't need your forces, not especially. What I want... is to uproot the Vessels from Sethia, completely and utterly. My situation demands a third party."

“Your situation?”

Argrave licked his lips, choosing his words carefully. “The Lord of Silver, Quarrus, has something that I want in his tower. The Lord of Copper is trying to use the southern tribals to wipe out Aurum and Argent before betraying the tribals, absorbing all factions,” Argrave disclosed without qualms. “I need what’s inside Argent. But I don’t care to have the Vessels being the only faction retaining power in the Burnt Desert.”

“So, inform the tribals of the betrayal,” Corentin suggested simply.

“I could,” Argrave shook his head. “But I want to be sure that the Vessels in Sethia are purged. To do that, I’ve been working with the Lord of Copper. The southern tribals can’t win against the Vessels—the Vessels *have to* fight amongst themselves.”

Corentin took a deep breath and exhaled. “So, you’ll ensure they fight amongst themselves, while you wish us to be a proxy to inform the tribals?”

“Precisely,” Argrave nodded. “You know as well as I do that without internal dissent, Sethia will never be free from Vessel rule.”

Corentin rotated the cube in his hand. “...we will have to speak to the other warriors. They will be returning soon.”

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Chapter 128: The Old Guardians

Corentin sat in a group of near eight others, in the same house that he had just had his discussion with Argrave. The other southron elves were grizzled, scarred warriors just as he was—obvious war veterans. They were in a loose circle, some standing, some sitting.

“So, just as Durran did, this new arrival claims to have met my daughter?” one asked, a man with a missing nose.

“Yeah,” Corentin nodded, looking out towards the door. “Same tale as Durran, too. Gebicca was crushed beneath rocks. Same accounts. Only difference...” Corentin turned his head back. “Argrave brought Brumesingers with him. Seems to have tamed them, too.”

The warriors all looked greatly intrigued by this. One, who leaned against Corentin’s wall, asked, “How?”

“I don’t know,” Corentin shook his head.

“You didn’t ask?” the man pressed.

“What am I, a damned interrogator? You ask him,” Corentin crossed his arms and shook his head.

“What good are you, old bastard?” the man with the missing nose asked.

“Least I can still smell things, Morvan,” Corentin returned with a laugh. “You go outside, that cavity you call a nose fills up with sand. What kind of desert warrior loses to sand?”

Some of the others joined the man in laughter.

“You one-eyed prick,” Morvan leaned forward, a smile on his face.

“Let’s stay serious,” another man interjected—though he seemed the oldest, he was the least scarred. All of the others heeded his words at once. “Save the banter for when we don’t have an unexpected visitor. This man, Argrave, claims to be working with the Lord of Copper. This deserves serious treatment.”

Corentin raised his hands. “Of course, Florimond.”

Florimond looked about. “What is he doing right now?”

Someone stalked to the door of Corentin’s house. “Looks like... he’s letting the Brumesingers play with the children.”

That brief little description immediately made everyone stir.

“Either he’s not a bad guy, or he’s damned good at tugging the heartstrings,” Morvan shook his head.

“This is someone working for the Vessels,” another warrior posited. “With the intent to betray them, too. Maybe he’s a paragon. Maybe he’s a good actor.”

That sobered some of the warriors up, and their smiles faded somewhat.

“But what he’s saying—that the southern tribals are going to attack with the help of the Lord of Copper—it does match with what Durran told us. Everything matches,” Corentin ceded.

“Did you tell him anything about Durran? About the proposition the man’s made to us?” Florimond questioned.

“You think I’m stupid?” Corentin put a hand to his chest. “I kept my mouth shut, tried to let him say his piece.” Corentin lowered his hand.

“And that warrior with him?”

“Quiet fellow,” Corentin nodded. “Looked... I don’t know. Probably the type of guy I’d avoid on the battlefield. Strong, tough, hard. If a man like that would follow him...”

“You’d run from anything, craven moron,” Morvan crossed his arms.

“You stand before that damned giant and tell me how brave you are,” Corentin gestured towards the no-nosed elf. “His hand’s bigger than your head. Maybe that’s not saying much, considering how small the brain inside is.”

The whole room laughed, and even Morvan sunk back into his chair, shaking his head with a grin on his face.

“So, what in the world are we going to say to this guy?” Florimond looked around. “Do we tell him about Durran?”

“Why would we?” Corentin crossed his arms.

“True, true,” Florimond nodded. “Nothing to gain from that. I do think we need to hear more from him—ask questions, work out his personality.”

“And we need to hear this ‘grand plan’ of his,” Morvan raised his hand. “Doesn’t matter if he can manipulate the Lord of Copper if he’s a drooling imbecile. If he’s stupid, we should probably migrate. Been too long, anyhow. Don’t like staying in this place for too long.”

“We should regardless. But...” Corentin began. “Didn’t want to say this, because it’s just conjecture on my end. I brought this,” he pulled out the black cube with glowing purple runes on it. “He kept his eye on it, like he knew what it does.”

“Gebicca might have told him,” Florimond posited.

“My daughter had never seen one of those,” Morvan disagreed. “Smart girl, but... too young,” he shook his head, then lowered his gaze to the ground. “Too young,” he repeated hollowly.

The room grew quiet, as though to comfort the man’s loss. Someone patted him on the shoulder, but no words were exchanged—they didn’t seem needed.

“Yeah, embarrass me by staying quiet,” Morvan finally broke the silence, shaking his head. “Keep talking, you damned idiots.”

People in the room chuckled. Florimond heeded Morvan’s advice, continuing, “So—we ask him questions, try to get a clearer picture of things—everyone in agreement?”

“Aye,” said the entire room asynchronously.

#####

“Sounds travel strangely in this place. I can hear nothing,” Galamon shook his head.

“Their runes,” Argrave explained. “They help with privacy. Don’t worry about it.”

Galamon stood beside Argrave, who sat on a rock in the oasis town. The Brumesingers dashed about the open area like little balls of lightning, the southron elven children watching them and playing with them, tossing things to be retrieved or leading them about with feathers.

“Do you like children?” Galamon questioned.

“No,” said Argrave immediately.

Galamon looked down. “You surprise me.”

“Well... if they’re related to me, it’s fine,” Argrave shrugged. “I don’t want to deal with other people’s children. Nephews, nieces, et cetera—that’s tolerable. Otherwise, forget about it.”

“Sons, daughters?” he pressed.

Argrave scoffed and shook his head. “Wrong time to even consider considering that.”

“You cannot control where the mind wanders,” Galamon stated.

“I’m not ready,” Argrave crossed his legs. “End of discussion.”

“I wasn’t ready, either,” he chuckled.

Argrave looked up at him. He bit his lip, considering a question. Before he could ask it, he spotted a decent crowd moving towards them. The old warriors of the southron elves moved from Corentin's home, striding towards them. Argrave stood, turning around.

"Despite their age, injuries... these men are full of vitality," Galamon stated.

"Are they skilled?" Argrave questioned, though he knew the answer.

"I cannot tell a man's skill by sight alone. None can," Galamon shook his head. "But they're alive. That is testament to something."

"They're skilled," Argrave told Galamon. "Frighteningly so."

"Hmm," grunted Galamon, keeping an eye on them as they moved closer.

The crowd of old veterans was quite a gruesome sight, but strangely, Argrave could not bring himself to pity any of them. They seemed too proud to be pitied. Some were missing hands or had gruesome scars across their bodies—Morvan 'No-Nose' was here, just as One-Eye Corentin. The de facto leader, Florimund, was similarly present.

Argrave felt a little nervous, facing them all. The Brumesingers, either sensing his nervousness or simply tired of playing with the southron elf children, rushed across the field and took refuge in his clothes.

"You must be Argrave," Florimund greeted. "And those creatures..." he eyed one of the Brumesingers, who kept their golden eyes on the southron elf suspiciously. "...they are the last Brumesingers."

"That's right," Argrave nodded, looking around the group. "And..." his gaze stopped on Morvan. "You must be Gebicca's father," he stepped forward, swallowing. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but..."

"I know," Morvan held up his hand. He was missing a pinky. "Corentin told me."

Argrave paused, taken aback by this reaction. At first, he dismissed the thought, presuming that the man had time to process his grief since Corentin had informed him... but Morvan definitely wouldn't process it to this point, and especially not this fast. His breathing quickened as he came to a rapid conclusion.

He's known. He's known for a while now.

Argrave tried to think of alternatives, another explanation for this scenario... but nothing came, and the only thing Argrave could conjure was that Morvan had been informed a long time ago. The southron elf locked himself away for a week in 'Heroes of Berendar.' Considering everyone else's personality had remained the same, there was no good reason Morvan's reaction to his daughter's death would change.

"...my condolences," Argrave managed to squeeze out, realizing he'd been silent for far too long. "Your daughter was a woman of honor, thinking only of her people to the very last."

Morvan nodded with a bitter smile, and then turned his head away.

With more time, Argrave tried to think of how he could approach this. There had to be something he could say, some way he could spin this to get into contact with Durran—hell, if he said the right things, his task might come a hell of a lot easier.

Then his mind drifted back to the Low Way, where he had stacked up so many lies that it was difficult to keep track of them all. The Unbloodied Blade, the Unsullied Knife, Blackgard... all of that had come back to bite him.

"By chance..." Argrave began. "Am I not the first outsider to come here?"

If he was open and honest, he could expect the same in return. Or at least, that was the gambit.

The veterans acted like experienced poker players, none of them betraying their thoughts with their expressions.

Argrave pressed the point, asking, "Have you met a man with a boar mask? Wears full plate armor, kind of like my friend here?"

The crowd stayed still. *They're not reacting—a swing and a miss*, Argrave concluded.

"...or a golden-eyed southern tribal by the name of Durran?"

That got something out of them. The way some moved, their eyes shifted... Argrave didn't need to have Anneliese's empathic capabilities to tell that he had hit the head on the nail—though he'd feel a bit more confident if she was by his side, granted.

"Real erratic guy, kind of crazy, really cynical?" Argrave followed, drawing more reactions from them to be sure that he was right in this assumption.

"Why are you asking?" asked Florimund. He had the best poker face of them all—he asked the question with enough confusion that even Argrave doubted if he was on the right track.

"Because he's the one that I need to inform Brium plans on betraying the tribals," Argrave said, nervous as all hell he was wrong about the whole thing.

Silence settled in the clearing. The old warriors looked between themselves, silently communicating. After a long while, they nodded between themselves, before at last conveying that to Florimund.

Florimund turned, facing Argrave, and finally confirmed, "We've met Durran."

Argrave felt like some pressure was released from his chest, and he couldn't help but sigh. "That's good. That's great, in fact."

"You're friends of his?" Florimund gestured.

"We've never met," Argrave shook his head. "But I know of him. And if he keeps on as he is, trying to work with Brium to take out the Vessels in Sethia... he's going to get his whole damned tribe killed. Drained by the Vessels," Argrave continued quickly, hoping they wouldn't ask the details of the relationship."

"Durran is a friend of the tribe," Morvan vouched for him. "We can get your message to him."

"Then that's all that I need," Argrave clasped his hands together.

"...but you're going to need to tell us a lot more about yourself," Florimund continued. "Namely, your relationship with the Vessels, your plans..."

“Fine by me,” Argrave nodded, sweating inwardly. This was going to be difficult to explain, to say the least, and Anneliese’s magic couldn’t last forever. “I will say this. I advise you migrate your people. The Lord of Copper might’ve had eyes on me—I can’t say for sure.”

He felt that exposing Yarra’s existence would only do more harm than good for further negotiations.

Florimund nodded slowly. “We’d planned on it, anyways. Been too long since we moved last. But come inside—let’s talk.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 129: Blades That Lie

Florimund held a pure white—likely genuine ivory—chisel in his right hand, a hammer in the left. He turned them about in his hand, inspecting them for any flaws or deficiencies. The other warriors looked over his shoulder, leaning atop him to see the thing better.

They sat cross-legged on the floor in a rather strange place—a silk-crafting room. Above, there were innumerable cocoons, each made of black silk. It made Argrave quite uncomfortable, but he hoped Galamon, standing just behind him, would stop him from being hit by any dislodged bugs. There was a loom, too, and a female southron elf attendant, who paid loose attention to the many warriors and two outsiders in her building.

The conversation had gone passably, and Argrave had explained most of what he needed to the southron elves. They had agreed to communicate with Durrant, though nothing more and nothing less. That was what Argrave needed.

The chisel and hammer were the items that Argrave had acquired in the southron elf tomb—though the Brumesingers had been the purpose of their visit then, in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ the reason the player went was to obtain those items. It was a fetch quest to earn the southron elves’ trust. It wasn’t entirely dissimilar to how Argrave was using them now, yet different enough Argrave had some doubt.

“Been near a century since I’ve seen a complete set of these,” Florimund noted, and the other warriors in the room nodded, clearly impressed. “Do you know what these are?” he raised them up.

“They’re the tools for your illusion magic,” Argrave nodded.

Morvan No-Nose crossed his arms. “Don’t call it magic, you damned palm tree. It’s artisanship. The Way of Worldbending.”

“It’s magic,” Corentin shook his head. “Stop being a pretentious twat.”

Argrave might’ve been uneasy by the banter bandied about, but he felt it was actually a good sign coming from these people. If the southron elves hated you, they acted polite. If they welcomed you, they always said what was on their mind, even if it was incredibly rude.

Florimund handed the tools off to the other warriors, who eagerly took them from his hands and examined them. “Why are you showing us these?”

“I’m giving them to you,” Argrave held his gaze.

They all cast a glance at Argrave in that moment—surprise and suspicion bundled together.

Argrave held his hand up. "They're Gebicca's, by right. She told me of the tomb. And I'm pretty certain she'd want to give it to you."

"Don't pull that noble nonsense," Corentin waved his hand. "You can't use it, so you're giving it to us."

Argrave laughed. "Even if I could use it, I'd give it to you. Not because I'm some saint, but because I don't have a use for it." The people bristled at him when he said that, like he was contesting some point of pride of theirs. Argrave quickly added, "They're largely stationary things—entryways, traps. I very rarely sleep in the same place twice."

"Hmph. Stationary," Florimund chuckled. "You must never have seen our glaives at work."

Think I've hooked them, Argrave thought, but feigned ignorance, shaking his head.

"Warriors have a hard time of things," one of the veteran southron elves spoke—a one-handed man named Yann. "Compared to spellcasters like you... vastly different trajectory. Mages start off piss-weak—a militiaman with a spear could slaughter most mages up to D-rank. The spells are slow, then, lacking power, lacking control."

Argrave nodded, agreeing with this assessment.

"But mages... they don't have the same ceiling," Yann continued. "There's only so much a warrior can do with his body alone. The spellcasters keep getting stronger and stronger, and before long, they leave the warriors in the dust."

"Of course, not everyone is cut out to be a spellcaster, otherwise we'd still have a few more eyeballs and limbs, I suspect. None of us can cast a spell for shit," Florimund stood. "At some point, we warriors have to look for other ways to handle things. Ways to exceed the constraints of our bodies."

Florimund walked to the corner of the room, retrieving a glaive. He turned back to Argrave and Galamon.

"Does the big one care to have a spar?"

Galamon placed his hand on the pommel of his greatsword, adjusting his position. He looked down to Argrave, who gave him a nod of approval.

"My blade is enchanted," Galamon tapped his sword. "I'll have to use my axe."

"I'm too old for a real spar," Florimund shook his head.

"Don't listen to him," Morvan interrupted. "He's a damned force of nature."

Florimund grinned, then shook his head. "I'll use the blunt end of the glaive. All you have to do... is block or dodge a swing."

"Do it outside," the female loom worker chastised.

Florimund cleared his throat, and then stepped outside. Everyone rose to their feet, following. Galamon drew his axe and moved to stand opposite Florimund. The veteran southron elf twirled the glaive about before holding it in front of him, at the ready.

"If you've got enchanted weaponry, you've already realized the limits of your body," Florimund called out.

"Hmm," grunted Galamon.

"Let's begin," Florimund said. He stepped forward, swinging his glaive towards Galamon incredibly simply. Galamon pivoted, holding the axe out to intercept it.

Then, in a manner that made no visual sense at all, the back of Florimund's glaive struck Galamon in the neck. Galamon twisted his body, moving with the blow, and stepped away. He stepped back, then raised his head, white brows furrowed in confusion.

The old southron elf smiled, while some of the veterans hooted and hollered. Florimund planted the bottom of the glaive in the ground. "You've got damned sharp instincts, quick reflexes. Had I been using the sharp side, I don't think my blow would've killed you. You'd be bleeding bad, though, can guarantee you that."

Galamon rubbed at his neck. He stepped forward, holding his axe out. "Again," he commanded.

Florimund kicked the bottom of his glaive, setting it spinning about in his hand. With a final flourish, he held it at attention. "Once more, then," he said, moving forward with a snarl.

The glaive moved once more. The blow was not exceptionally fancy or fast, and Galamon braced himself to receive it. Argrave paid special attention this time—the blade of the glaive seemed to move with a will of its own, and Galamon twisted the axe about, yet never caught it. Finally, it struck him squarely on the forehead.

"Ooh," Florimund winced. "A bit worse this time. You get caught up in your own head, make a mistake. Seen it happen a thousand times before."

Galamon stared at Florimund, unoffended. He hefted the Ebonice axe in his hand, and then took a step back. "Again," he repeated.

"The man loves to get beat," Corentin crossed his arms, one eye watching the spectacle.

Florimund took his stance, as serious as the first time. He stepped forward, swung, and Galamon waited. He did not move his axe about wildly. Instead, he calmly moved to receive the blow. It didn't look like it would catch anything, but then, a ringing echoed out.

The distortion settled, and the axe had met the glaive. Galamon locked the beard of his axe around the blade and pulled forward. Florimund was pulled forward briefly but released the glaive. Galamon advanced, then held his hand out and flicked Florimund in the forehead.

The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter, and Florimund stopped himself from falling by placing his hand against the ground. He rose to his feet, rubbing his forehead, then took the glaive out of Galamon's grasp.

Once the uproar had settled, Florimund called out, "I'm impressed."

"Yeah, you'd better be!" Yann shouted, then broke off into laughter.

"It's the blade that's wrong. Had to follow the way your hand, your arm, your wrists moved," Galamon noted, staring at the glaive. "That told me where the glaive really was."

"Took Durran twenty tries to grasp that principle, and I thought he was fast at it," Florimund shook his head. "Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe it wasn't. But you get the point I was making, no? This is what we achieve with the Way of Worldbending." Florimund held the glaive up into the air. "Blades that lie. Arrows that should miss. Outcomes that shouldn't be."

Argrave felt pride in his choice of companions, hearing that Galamon outperformed Durran.

"You didn't see the blade, either," Galamon claimed.

"Very sharp," Florimund nodded. "We have to learn our weapons extensively. The sensation of the weight, the resistance—we have to use that instead of our eyes. But back in the day, when our empire rode against the tribals, Brumesingers leaving a melody of war in our wake, each swing uncontested, our charge relentless... nothing could stop us," Florimund lowered his head, reminiscing.

"And what brought you here?" Galamon pressed. "What changed?"

"Everything. Everything except us," Florimund shook his head.

"Not too late for you," Argrave suggested. "Put aside your enmity, help Durran and his people wipe out the Vessels."

"Hey, there's a time and a place, huh?" Corentin reprimanded.

"The kid isn't wrong," Yann shook his head.

"We can't afford to wage war," Florimund stepped forward, using the glaive as a walking staff. "There's maybe a hundred of us. We're all trained, all dangerous, but... too few."

"Maybe I'm wrong... but Durran wants equipment, no?" Argrave raised a brow. "I'm sure you've told him the same thing you just told me."

"That's right," Florimund nodded. "You're sharp, too, it seems, though in a different way from that one," he pointed to Galamon. "I'll work something out with Durran. Settling a thousand-year grudge... can't be done with an outsider as a mediator," he looked at Argrave deliberately. "But I will tell you this. You wipe out the Vessels from Sethia, as you claim... I can make your elven companion's weapons like this glaive, here—the axe, the sword, the arrows, it matters not."

Argrave raised a brow. "You're serious?"

"Yeah, are you serious?" Corentin questioned. "We're talking about our people's secrets, Florimund."

"Come off it," Morvan interrupted. "Maybe our knowledge will live on. Look at us here—before long, we won't have any choice but to inbreed. Population's thin, thins every year. Can't we see the writing on the wall?"

Florimund turned and half-shouted, "Let's not have this conversation here, now," he said pointedly, and that seemed to gather everyone's thoughts.

Once everyone settled, Florimund directed his attention back to the two of them. “For now, you may consider yourselves to be welcome among us. We will spread word of you to our people... though I suspect everyone already knows of your presence. We will speak to Durran.”

“I was hoping you could stand as the point of contact between the two of us,” Argrave waved between them. “Difficult for me to do so, in my position.”

“Then we can do that. We will migrate, soon. Take the sword in the desert for us, when you leave—destroy it. That will sever the illusion magic. We will travel through the mountains, to Otraccia. Do you know of it?”

“I do,” Argrave nodded. “I’ll return in some days.”

“Then we will look forward to good news from you,” Florimund held out his hand. “I am sure the others will wish to say their goodbyes. Come, won’t you?”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 130: Dissatisfied Stalkers

“...so, in time, I’ll need to return to them to officiate things. The date of the attack, who they’re collaborating with... so on and so forth,” Argrave explained to Brium, sitting across from him. Yarra stood behind him, hands behind her rigid back like she was a bodyguard.

They had returned from the oasis town of the southron elves. It was very late in the evening, and Argrave was quite hungry—he had not eaten since morning. Business came before that, though. As Florimund had instructed, Argrave had broken the sword in the desert. The southron elves were soon to migrate, travelling through the mountains to another home of theirs.

Anneliese had ensured Yarra did nothing out of place the whole while, and as far as Argrave could tell, no one suspected anything. The manifold uses of druidic magic were making themselves known already, though the Brumesingers were far from manifesting their full capabilities. Argrave needed to feed them souls. A strange need, truthfully, but considering the commonality of death, it was much better than your standard pet food.

“Hmm... the southron elves,” Brium mused. “It’s a little unbelievable, but those illusion magics... no one else can replicate them, certainly. They’ve caused the Vessels no end of trouble. How many were they?”

“If you mean ready to fight? Near two hundred,” Argrave exaggerated, attempting to bolster Brium’s confidence.

“Then... excellent work,” Brium leaned back into the chair. “But it doesn’t escape me that you used Yarra to bolster your personal wealth—those pets of yours. They’re certainly more for you than for my cause.”

“Well...” one of the Brumesingers poked itself out of Argrave’s clothes, and he pet its giant furry ears. “I’m no saint.”

Brium chuckled—it sounded fake. After, he raised his hand to his face. “I think I’ve figured you out.”

Argrave furrowed his brows, thrown off. The Brumesinger, no longer being pet, hid itself away once more.

"You're testing the limits. I don't think it's of any genuine concern, presently," Brium held a hand out, reassuring Argrave. "I'll warn you, though. A limit broken before a Vessel will not result in merely a warning," Brium leaned in. "It should not escape you that the punishment for any crime is death. Considering what I know..."

"I also know that you're compelled to punish me. Not forced," Argrave returned. "We're doing great work together, so far."

Brium stared down Argrave, running a hand across his coppery skin. Eventually he nodded. "You've done well. The Vessels have been looking for the southron elves for centuries. Not a single success, before you came along—only abandoned towns, ruined places. There has been little cause to hunt them in recent decades. Their mages are all dead and gone, and we seized and burned their books of spells. Nothing more remains of them to challenge Fellhorn's authority."

"Any predictions on when Aurum and Argent will make their move?" Argrave probed.

"They're gathering guards," the Lord of Copper answered idly at once. "Negating my influence in the city. Trying to stifle my income, my workers. Vessels beneath me are being tempted with wealth, power... but the core of my power isn't in Sethia. I keep that which truly belongs to me in Cyprus. In here."

"But when?" Argrave pressed. "I don't want to be caught unprepared."

"A week, most likely two," Brium shook his head. "You have time to do more before the fighting."

Argrave tilted his head. "Not planning on letting me closer into the machinations?"

Brium's gaze intensified at that moment, as though challenged. "What are you implying?"

Argrave shrugged. "I just don't think that you're leaving things to chance with the tribals."

Brium stared at him for a long while. "I have to speak with Yarra. Go, rest," he finally said, pointing towards the door. "She'll rejoin you in time. For now, do nothing."

#####

Argrave stepped out of Cyprus a little relieved to be free of Yarra, though he was not pleased to be carrying around his own backpack once again. Between the three furballs roaming about in his duster and the backpack, he was hauling quite a large load.

"Let's return to our room quickly. We have a little time to talk. Things are going well so far," Argrave commentated, walking quickly down the road. He felt the old sting of the scars in his lungs.

He spotted someone ahead, wearing a set of baggy robes. They carried a large stick of sorts, the top of it wrapped in cloth. Argrave merely felt it was unusual, ready to pass it by. The person started to approach, though, and Galamon grabbed Argrave.

"That's a weapon. Be cautious," he urged, stepping ahead of Argrave.

Argrave kept his eye on the man. He questioned if they would simply pass him by, but the robed figure came to stand boldly before them. He didn't lower his hood, but as Argrave stared, he started to recognize the person.

"You're my saviors, is that right?" remarked Durran.

Argrave's breath caught in his chest at once. Durran had quite an eye-catching appearance. He had a golden tattoo just below his eye, acting like an extension of his golden pupils, and a handsome, confident face that practically screamed 'heartbreaker.' His eyes had a certain wildness to them, and his grin never seemed to fade.

"The hell are you doing here?" Argrave whispered, looking around frantically. No one was near, but that meant little—they were in the middle of a wide-open road, and anyone could be watching.

"Well, I don't really like talking through third parties. I like to confront my admirers directly," Durran said, staring uncaringly.

His words confirmed that the southron elves had already talked to him. It had been such a short time, and Argrave hadn't expected Durran to talk to him at all. The unexpected situation left him at a loss.

"You're tall. They were right," he nodded musingly.

"Yeah, great observation, hawk-like vision on you," Argrave whispered, eliciting a chuckle from Durran.

"Get the hell out of here. You maybe think there's a reason I went to a hell of a lot of effort to avoid talking to you directly? If Brium sees us talking--"

"So you do know me," Durran noted. "Pretty strange. I'm sure I'd remember meeting you."

"You had too much to drink that night," dismissed Argrave. "Forget this. Keep walking," Argrave directed his companions, and then moved towards the gate of Sethia.

"Gebicca died when I last saw her. I was the last she spoke to, and I stumbled across her by pure chance. I'm pretty damned sure she'd mention any meeting with a weird looking party like you three," Durran called out as they walked away.

Argrave paused. Durran strode back up to him.

"Let's have a little date, us four," he looked between them. "And don't deny me. You've already given me a key to turn your lives upside down. I don't think Brium would react kindly to the correspondence between you and my elven friends."

"Probably kill you, too, now that you've got some suspicion he's two-faced," Argrave called out his bluff.

"I think I could get away with it," Durran shrugged.

Argrave stared down at him, questioning if the man he knew was crazy enough to do something like this. The worst part was that Argrave wasn't certain.

"You're paying for our meals," he eventually decided.

Durran grinned. "We'll see about that."

#####

Elias stared out into the distance, where the looming walls of Elbraille were not even visible in the all-consuming darkness. He and Stain sat in their carriage, moving through the night and towards the city. Their cavalry marched quietly towards the gates of the city, but there was a somber air throughout the whole party. The death of Bruno had affected more than simply Elias, he knew, but he needed to put on a brave front.

"You're sure about this, Stain?" Elias questioned. "Can't see more than a couple feet away. Maybe we should light things up. We have the—"

"How many times do I have to repeat myself?" Stain returned. "The guy in this city—or girl, I suppose, no need for me to be like that—they're trying to manipulate the populace, stir them against Duke Marauch. If they wanted to do something against you, they'd want to do it in public. In daylight."

"But what if they don't?" Elias insisted. "This would be the perfect opportunity for them to strike."

"If they had the strength to strike, they wouldn't need to work up the people. The force inside can't be strong. We've got the strange purple-eyed one watching for attacks—you're safe, future brother-in-law." Stain crossed his legs. "Trust me. This is the way to go. Why else did you bring me along, if not to get into the mindset of deplorable bastards?"

Elias ground his teeth. "Not the way I'd phrase things."

"And that's why I'm needed. If you can't even think of saying nasty truths, you certainly can't predict the nastiness Vasquer's going to toss at us." Stain shook his head. "You deal with the noble pomp, I deal with the ignoble reality—killer thing we've got going, here."

"What about once we're inside?" Elias turned. "I'm sure the Duke will welcome us, but once we're inside... what then? There's still someone trying to turn things against us. We won't be safe."

"We'll have to win back the people." Stain spread his hands out. "I'm sure red-haired, red-eyed you will have no problem with that. Give a speech, talk about how honorable you are. Wave your banner around. Mention your father. The name of Parbon has weight. The commoners will swoon at the mere sight of you."

Elias swallowed, then moved back to the window. "Just... feeling pressured. This has to go right."

Stain crossed his arms, saying nothing as the carriage moved steadily onwards. Inwardly, though, he was considering that the death of Bruno was a break for them, militarily speaking. Killing hostages was against all 'noble sensibilities,' and the northern nobles would not be so steadfast in their support of Vasquer. In turn, more southerners would be willing to support Parbon.

He kept it to himself, though. Another ignoble reality Stain had to deal with.

Elsewhere in the city, Induen sat, looking out through the window. Though he could not see the carriage moving by, his men had informed him that Elias, the son of Margrave Reinhardt, was moving into the city during the night. Induen could not provoke the crowd, and as the news of Bruno's death spread to the people, support for Vasquer would be lessened.

Induen prodded the tip of a white-gold dagger against his finger. "I planned to deliver this dagger back into the Margrave's heart, by hand," Induen mused. "Prove that I repay my debts."

The royal knights behind said nothing, fearing to provoke anger by sticking their heads above the cloud. They knew well when their master was in a foul mood.

"I am thinking it would be even better if this dagger was returned to the Margrave in his son's coffin. I'd stab another heart, metaphorically speaking. A heart maybe even more vital to the Margrave than the physical one." Induen looked at the gleaming enchanted dagger, twisting it about in his hands.

"It appears I must struggle with the young lion." Induen set his dagger on the table. "We'll carry out the plan tomorrow. The executions will continue as planned. I won't give the boy the chance to work anything out. I'll keep him trapped in the Duke's castle, whittling away at him until he's a knub. Waiting for a mistake."

"As you command, prince Induen," said the royal knights asynchronously.