

Chapter 136: Waves Collide, Amplifying

Brium stared down at the area beyond the walls of his tower, Cyprus, pushing a curtain aside to look through the barred window. A great abundance of people stood at attention behind him—most of them were ordinary humans, while two were Vessels. They were all armed for war. The Vessels were in their liquid form, silent and still, water tendrils wound like a snake poised to lunge.

At the walls surrounding the foot of the copper tower, a great blockade waited, tense and cautious. Soldiers formed the bulk of the ward, while the Vessels, some bearing gold and some bearing silver, acted as the commanders. They were organized, divided into three units numbering near two hundred each. The frontliners bore great tower shields burrowed into the ground, mindful of the archers posted on Cyprus' walls. Those behind the shield-bearers kneeled, watching the walls and the giant gate of the tower between the small cracks in their allies' shields.

The industry of Sethia had ceased and many of the people came to watch. Unlike the raid at Argent, the guard was organized, deliberately keeping people inside the walls. But even the guards, too, were consumed with curiosity and nervousness, casting glances towards the tower of Cyprus. People resorted to climbing the walls of Sethia to get a better view. The archers atop the city's walls did not hinder those people.

"It's like two animals snarling in each other's face, practically at the throat, yet neither doing anything..." Brium mused. "Neither want the danger. Threatening. Posturing." The Lord of Copper turned his head back. "Though we aren't equals. One is a lion."

"My lord," Captain Jeralian spoke. "I don't think we can delay much longer. They've been demanding you appear and be judged for near an hour."

"It isn't as though we'll struggle in the fight ahead..." Brium shook his head. "But has he really disappointed me like this? Yarra wouldn't let him. She's more than a match for his party."

"My lord," continued Jeralian, frustrated. "What should I do?"

"Go and join the garrison," Brium waved his hands, not even deigning to look back. "It'll be another hour yet before they genuinely act. Gold and silver—shiny metals and intimidating besides, but ultimately weak and useless. Everything is in place."

The Captain of the Guard moved off, his order received. Brium continued to watch.

"The Lords of Silver and Gold demand that Brium, Lord of Copper, appear to receive judgement for his heretical ideals!" the commanding Vessels shouted, remaining in physical form to do so.

A man wearing red and gold clothing, his face hidden by a red cloth wrap, also climbed up the walls of Sethia. He looked around, watching the soldiers blockade the gate to Cyprus. He reached into his pocket and pulled free a disc. It was silver, polished to the point it reflected the sun nigh perfectly. He held it level with his face, tilting it up and down in the direction of Cyprus.

The light of the suns above reflected on it, blinking at the archers on the opposite wall of Sethia. Though some were annoyed by the light, one of the archers reacted as though awoken. He stepped away from his companions, looking around, and went to an empty spot on the wall. He retrieved an arrow from a hidden crevice and nocked it silently.

Before any of his fellow archers could realize what was happening, the man pulled back his bowstring and fired the arrow recklessly at the blockade. The arrow sung as it travelled, leaving a noise like windchimes in its wake. A purple light trail appeared where it travelled—those closest saw that this trail of light was composed of strange runes.

When the arrow impacted with a soldier's shield, black sand exploded in all directions with tremendous force. Screams of confusion and pain both split the air. The watching crowd in Sethia grew tense with uncertainty, murmuring to each other in shock. A sandstorm started to writhe in the wake of the explosion, black particles twisting about and battering those closest.

When the initial confusion settled, a single cry dissolved the uncertainty of the blockade.

"Attack!" one of the commanding Vessels shouted, moments before their body dissolved into water.

The cry of war was soon echoed by the other commanders who followed the first Vessel in assuming their liquid form. Great masses of water exploded outwards, coursing towards the walls at the foot of Cyprus.

"What?!" shouted Brium, leaning close to the window. His composure was broken, but that did not last for long. He turned his head back. "Send the signal," he directed one Vessel, his confusion and rage vanished in wake of a cold military demeanor. "And you—ensure that archer is caught."

The Vessels could give no affirmative, but both moved at once, one writhing up the tower's stairs to a higher level. The other moved past Brium, breaking the bars on the window to enter the fray quickly. The soldiers in the room moved, knowing their duty.

Brium sat on the window, watching the unfolding chaos. His hand gripped one of the broken bars. His fingers swelled as they clenched the metal as though filling up with water. The iron began to compress, creaking.

Below, the soldiers marched to the outer wall of Cyprus. The disciplined archers took fire at them as they approached, their job becoming only easier as their targets marched closer. It might have seemed nonsensical. Walls were made to defend—without an opening, nothing could be done to those inside.

One needed a siege engine to break walls. The Vessels filled that role.

The commanding Vessels flowed past the warriors they led, infantile forms trailing along. Their liquid bodies braced against the walls, tendrils of water gripping into the stone. Then, like great battering rams, tendrils of torso-thick water struck out in unison. On the first blow, the thick iron gates rung out like giant gongs, each Vessels' blow leaving inch-deep impacts into the metal. The second blow came, wrenching the gates from the walls. The doors barely remained standing, stone crumbling where the hinges had been freed. When the third barrage of water struck the iron, the gates exploded backwards as though blasted, crashing into the poorly maintained gardens of Cyprus.

Before the dust even settled, the attacking soldiers marched through the open gateway. The defenders dropped boiling oil at them through murder holes as they passed. It proved to be of varying effectiveness. Many blocked the assault with their shields, while some were hit, screaming in agony as the oil burned them.

The commanding Vessels did not follow their soldiers in assault. Instead, they writhed up the side of the walls, cresting the parapets and confronting the archers. As soon as the archers spotted the Vessels, they let out a primal screech of fear and ran. The closest chose to jump off the wall rather than confront the servants of Fellhorn.

The Vessels rampaged unopposed, pressurized jets of water cutting through any opponents with little resistance. They flowed along the wall, leaving a trail of blood and gore in their wake. Yet as one passed over a grate in the wall, a great geyser of water erupted. The assailant was one of Brium's Vessels. The ambusher sought out the infant form of its foe, and the surprise attack landed cleanly. A burst of blood marked the first death of a Vessel.

At the top of Cyprus, the Vessel Brium ordered to 'send the signal' materialized in physical form. Nude in light of her transformation, the woman stepped up to a strange apparatus, grabbing a bag of loose powder and dumping it into a metal cone. She pulled a latch nearby, and then stepped back.

A great copper flame erupted into the sky. The sound was deafening, the crude explosion echoing out for miles. The flame was the same size as the tower itself and persisted for only a second or two before dissipating. It left a trail of smoke drifting into the sky, making Cyprus seem like a spent candle.

Sethia fell into chaos—the token fighting force assaulting Cyprus was not the extent of the forces within the city. Vessels of differing allegiance moved to action, emerging from their estates and businesses to survey the situation and take action. The civilians in the city ran in a frenzy of fear and dread, their reckless stampede worsening the discord.

No one seemed to know the meaning of the flame signal, but soon enough, astute observers noticed the distant mountains stirring. Flying dots emerged from the rocky peaks, and the people felt their hearts beat faster. Soon, these far-off figures took form, solidity, winged forms resembling a locust plague come to ravage crops.

As the flying figures grew closer, the roars of the dreaded wyverns echoed against the black walls of Sethia. The people encased knew what those cries meant. To some, it heralded a forgotten past. To others, it was only a call heralding a coming flux.

Yet just as the wyverns told the people what approached, actions within the city made it clear that it was not coming—it was already here.

Cloaked figures bearing daggers glowing with purple runes stayed near the entrance of prominent places, waiting for Vessels to walk past. When they emerged, the hiding assassins ambushed their prey, stabbing with their daggers. Each blow landed sent black sand dancing through the air. A great many of the assailants failed—Vessels were difficult to fell.

Elsewhere, archers fired at the Vessels that had assumed a liquid form. The chiming of the arrows drowned out the panicked screams, and purple runes danced in Sethia. Each arrow exploded just as the

first had, killing indiscriminately. Many more civilians were killed than Vessels. Nevertheless, the assault was devastating.

In minutes, every military force was mobilized. The guards of the city chose their allegiance. Though those belonging to Argent and Aurum were more numerous, the servants of Copper were well-organized, obviously anticipating the rebellion. Brium's men quickly grouped up, seizing a portion of the city that was well-defended. They were joined by Vessels of the same allegiance.

A great many of Fellhorn's faithful were torn between moving to confront the wyvern threat coming ever closer or the traitors in their midst. The purpose of the entire event—seizing Cyprus—seemed to have been forgotten as the city was torn by infighting.

Yet beyond the black rock and dirt hills surrounding Sethia, in the vast sand dunes of the great Burnt Desert, there was a wind stirring. It could not be a normal wind—it picked up black sand, winding it about as it rose ever upwards into the air.

This wind continued to speed up, picking up more and more black sand, until it became a small tornado. Purple light shone within the whirling sand and wind, the twisting force rising ever upwards towards the sky.

This tornado of black sand bent downwards, bowing towards the town of Sethia. Like a tensed coil, it sprung forward, scattering purple light and clouds of sand in every direction. The corkscrew headed for the tower of Argent with a singular focus. People manning the silver tower screamed in fear and panic.

The veritable railgun struck the side of the tower with considerably less force than it appeared to have. A great curtain of sand descended, forming a stairway right up to the broken window of the tower of Argent. Near twelve people stood at the foot of the sand mound. Most striking among them were three exceptionally tall people with pale skin.

"Thanks for the ride," Argrave called out, purple runes swirling around him.

"That was the last Sand Courser we had," Florimund shouted. "How you knew of it baffles me."

"Don't think too much. Just focus on the battle ahead," Argrave returned, placing his feet on the sand before him. "You boys have fun!"

Argrave started to climb up the newly made entryway, heading for Argent. Though he tried to run, he soon slipped, and Galamon had to stop him plummeting ten feet to the ground below. After this, the three of them proceeded slowly up to the silver tower of Argent.

The veteran southron elves turned towards the chaos ahead of them. Their explosive entrance had drawn much attention. Their figures were vague and uncertain, black armor shimmering against the sand. Each step they left seemed to be jittery, repetitive, and illusory. Their march forward was structured yet seemed unstructured. Such was the power of their magic.

Argrave made it to Argent and looked out across the vast chaos of Sethia.

"Christ. Talk about high stakes." Argrave mused.

"Go inside," Galamon grunted, pushing Argrave into Argent.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 137: Golden Lady

Argent was a decadent place. The walls and floor were made of silver, polished so as to reflect all within its walls. Just about everything else was an imperial purple—furniture, carpets, curtains. These decorations had gemstones, and though bordering on gaudy they did further the beauty of the place. It was truly a home for a lord, by Argrave's reckoning. It was a shame, then, that such a pretty place was marred by the heartless bastard owning it.

The moment that Argrave's feet met the silver ground of Argent, he activated the Blessing of Supersession. It felt like a cork in his chest had been removed—a cork holding back all the world's oceans. His own magic supply felt meager and useless as absolute power rushed over him. The feeling was growing familiar, and that disquieted Argrave.

After a second of allowing himself to adjust to the feeling, Argrave held his hand out, using the C-rank [Electric Eel]. The magic constructs started to form in his hand, then jumped up into the air. One, four, thirteen, sixteen—their numbers amplified by the second. He threw away notions of the magic debt he'd accrue, focusing instead on one thing—ending this quickly.

"You said it's on the seventeenth floor," Galamon said, looking towards the stairs. "Is that up or down?"

"It's the second highest floor, so up," Argrave clarified, stepping towards the stairs.

The floor they were on was empty. All within had undoubtedly moved to confront the chaos outside and were on a lower floor—perhaps some who had been outside would be moving to confront Argrave, having seen his flashy entrance, but he doubted they'd make it here quickly.

Argrave kept a steady speed, diverting much of his attention to keeping the ever-growing cloud of electric eels from bumping into a wall and dissipating. He was tempted to send his Brumesingers ahead to scout, but he wasn't confident he could maintain focus if he accepted yet more stimuli.

The stairs were, fortunately, a straight shot to the seventeenth floor. Galamon led, and Anneliese covered the back, her single Brumesinger trailing closely behind. She held Garm in hand, the severed head fully exposed. He watched Argrave, expression pensive—doubtless he had questions about the Blessing of Supersession. They kept a steady pace for a long while, passing by room after room of varying purpose.

After a time, Galamon stopped Argrave. "People above. A group. They're scared... not warriors," he disclosed, voice echoing out from his helmet.

Argrave paused, brain struggling between maintaining and growing the cloud of lightning above and digesting the information given to him.

"Oh," Argrave nodded, the answer coming to him. "The breeders. It's how the Lord of Silver maintains their appearance. They're harmless, but there could be guards—Vessels. Be cautious."

Galamon nodded, and then stepped up with quiet steps. Once they got far enough up the stairs, Galamon ducked quickly, dodging a burst of water struck the ceiling behind and dented the silver. Anneliese stepped forward, conjuring a B-rank ward with her ring, and then the party advanced upwards.

Jets of water assailed the ward, chipping at it, yet it remained firm—the attacks could not even be compared to Yarra's. Two bodies of water danced about the luxurious room. A group of people was huddled in the back, but Argrave could not focus on them.

Galamon stepped out from the ward, his bow readied. He fired an arrow at one Vessel. The thing did not bother moving—the projectile aimed at a great mass of water and did not approach its infantile form, so perhaps it did not fear the attack. But the arrowhead was made of Ebonice, and where it touched, great portions of its body were rendered useless.

With its movements hindered, Argrave urged a great deal of the eels swirling above him to pursue the Vessel. It tried to flee, but with a diminished mass it was slow. Near twenty sparking constructs struck the heart of the Vessel, and it immediately lost all purpose, leaving behind only a charred lump. Its water flooded the room, pushing aside beds.

The second Vessel in the room closed the distance instead of playing defensively. Galamon set aside his bow and retrieved his axe, stepping out to receive it. As it writhed along the surfaces of the tower while heading towards Galamon, it peppered them with small attacks.

The Vessel engaged with Galamon cautiously, striking out with non-committal attacks while its infantile form stayed in the back. Argrave looked for another opening, another opportunity to jump in, yet the Vessel remained cautious. Feeling frustrated by the loss of time, Argrave brought the bulk of his electric eels, sending them after the Vessel in a bullheaded rush intended to end things quickly.

The Vessel retreated, fleeing from the electric eels. Argrave's attacks were fast, though, and soon enough, they managed to hit home. Writhing like a beheaded snake for but a moment, the Vessel died and its water dispersed, flooding the room. Argrave looked about, assessing for any danger. Eventually, he relaxed a little.

Screams echoed out from the back, and Argrave's gaze was directed towards the huddled people in the back of the room. The majority of their features were snow white—hair, skin, even eyebrows. There were many women, while only a few males in their number. Nearly all of the females were pregnant.

"The Lord of Silver is chosen from these people's offspring. Their appearance is perceived to embody 'silver,' and so they're kept here," Argrave explained to his companions with a bitter mutter. "The other lords each have something just like this."

His voice seemed to spark fear—the majority of the albinos seemed to have a great deal of difficulty seeing properly, judging by where they looked. Argrave continued to use [Electric Eel], intending to replenish the now-diminished supply.

No one took action, and so Argrave realized he'd have to do something. "The Vessels are dead," he called out. "You should stay here, out of sight. Soon enough, everything is going to be over."

"Argrave!" he heard Anneliese call out and whipped his head back.

She conjured a B-rank ward as she moved, then pulled Argrave into its cover. A jet of silver liquid slammed into the golden shield. It succeeded in halting the attack only for a second before its sheer power punctured the ward. Argrave tried to pull his head out of the way, but he felt heat on his ear—he'd been cut. The jet hit the wall behind, puncturing the metal and exposing the sky beyond.

The Lord of Silver, Quarrus, stood at the stairs, descending from a higher floor. His white hair danced through the air, almost alive, and his pink eyes were cold. Argrave prepared to cast his own ward, but the lord's hand reformed from silver water into its physical shape.

"Brium's mercenaries," he said coldly, lowering his hand. His body began to bubble beneath his silver robes, expanding. "More capable than I imagined. Yet that ends."

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Battle made Durran forget all else. He'd forgotten his father's decree that he would be exiled, he'd forgotten the coming confrontation with Titus...

Perhaps that was why Durran enjoyed it so. Or perhaps it was in his blood. He was from the proud southern tribes, incubated in the fires of war.

The wind whipped at his face and he clenched the reins of his wyvern tight in hand as it soared above the city of Sethia. The battlefield had become a site of wanton slaughter. The wyverns of the southern tribes attacked the Vessels, leaving those on Brium's side alone—for now, at the very least. Durran was nervous with anticipation, having informed his men of the betrayal to come.

And dealing with hundreds alone, fighting boldly on the outskirts of the city, were the southron elves. Durran had heard tales of their terrifying prowess, and that proved to be true—Durran could not count them because of their strange illusion magic, yet perhaps ten of them faced hundreds, dancing through the ranks of the enemy and leaving innumerable dead in their wake.

"Durran," shouted Boarmask above the whipping wind. "I need you to land. I need you to let me off!"

"What?" Durran returned. "Why?"

"Titus!" Boarmask shouted. "His men—they're killing civilians!"

Durran looked down to Sethia below. It was difficult to spot Titus' men. They moved mostly covertly. Yet still, as Durran flew about, he saw archers fire strange, enchanted arrows that seemed reminiscent of southron elf magic. Though aimed at Vessels, the damage caused by each projectile was devastating. People were buried beneath explosions of sand, whipped by sandstorms...

"Alright!" Durran shouted back, pressing down on his wyvern's neck. Recognizing his command, the great beast descended towards the city. It eventually landed on the walls of Sethia, and Boarmask removed what was keeping him strapped to the wyvern and jumped down.

"What will you do?" questioned Durran.

"Help the people get to safety!" Boarmask shouted. "And deal with Titus, should I find him," he said grimly.

In the far distance, a Vessel took aim at Durran. A jet of water pumped through the air. Unable to twist his body, he held his hand out and conjured a D-rank ward—it shattered, yet the jet was diminished enough that water splattered his face harmlessly.

"Good luck, pig!" Durran shouted to Boarmask as he pulled on the reins, and the wyvern jumped free of the city walls, ascending once more.

As he flew, Durran noticed something emerge from the top of the tower of Aurum. He thought he was hallucinating—the tower seemed to be growing. Further scrutiny clarified the image. Golden liquid poured out from the windows of the tower, rising up into the sky. It was like the purest honey at points, molten gold at others, and before long, Aurum seemed to possess a golden crown to match its splendor.

“The Lord of Gold...” Durran muttered to himself.

Crislia, the Lord of Gold, took her place atop the tower of Aurum. The sunlight above passed through her form, dappling the black desert and the war-ravaged Sethia with resplendent rays of gold. The mass of metallic liquid contorted, shimmered, as if adjusting.

With nary a sound, spikes of gold shot out, each and every directed towards one of the many wyverns roaming about. The attacks were deadly and rapid, killing dozens in seconds. They tore through the great beasts, the pride of the southern tribals, as easily as parchment. Their prized mounts descended en masse in a fountain of blood.

Durran pulled on his wyvern’s reins, and the beast turned only barely enough to dodge the jet of gold directed at him. It tore through a stone building below, destroying it utterly. Durran felt the fear of death in every facet of his being... and he started to laugh. He spurred his wyvern onwards, flying towards the golden monster.

The Lord of Gold’s form began to shimmer once again, and Durran knew it was preparing for another assault. Durran clenched on the reins tighter, roaring in tandem with his wyvern. Then, from Cyprus, a great blur of copper sprung forward as if launched. Brium slammed into the Lord of Gold, and the seemingly indomitable force was blown backwards.

The Lord of Copper and Gold remained suspended in the air Aurum, both falling ever so slowly, stunned. Liquid gold and copper rained down, scattered from the intensity of the impact. The metallic liquid drops turned to water once they contacted the earth. Durran pulled his wyvern around, trying to assess the situation better.

The two stunned Lords surged to life, both masses of metallic liquid writhing, grappling each other. The battle seemed incomprehensible to a human eye—two masses of liquid contorting, shifting, straining in every direction. The Vessels’ heart—their infantile form—was not even visible. Durran knew only that he saw more gold than copper.

Brium pushed away suddenly, disentangling from the struggle. The Lord of Gold strained out, remaining fixed on the tower. As if coordinated, several purple streaks shot out from the city of Sethia. Durran was certain they were Titus’ men, but he could not confirm that.

The arrows struck the Lord of Gold in tandem, and black sand burst outwards, powerful enough to contest the veritably godlike Vessel. Then, Brium’s assault resumed. The mass of copper liquid collided with the gold once more. A single copper spike shot through the gold form, and Durran barely spotted a flash of crimson on the other end.

Crislia, the feared Lord of Gold, started to sag. Her golden form turned to sludge, it seemed, blackened and rotted as she was inside. Then, it became water once more, and a great deluge of water fell upon the tower of Aurum, flooding all within its outer walls.

Durran, knew, then, that the Lord of Gold had died.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 138: Mirror Room

Argrave had been preparing for—and loathing—the possibility of a confrontation with the Lord of Silver, Quarrus.

One of Quarrus' attacks had been sufficient to completely destroy a B-rank ward, and even left a hole in the silver wall beyond it. Argrave was confident in his enchanted armor... but he couldn't deny his heart was beating the fastest it ever had. He pulled his duster's hood over his head, drawing it tight as he watched the Lord at the stairs.

The title of 'Lord' wasn't one fabricated by the minds of men—it was a seat bestowed by Fellhorn. The Vessel's non-physical forms took on some qualities of the metal they were named after. The liquid was denser, packing a harder punch while simultaneously offering better defense. Those qualities were dangerous enough... yet the true issue lay in the fact that the metallic veneer obscured the Vessel's heart—their infant body.

Argrave had a plan. All of his companions knew it, even Garm. The setting—a room in Argent—was precisely as Argrave expected. They had all they needed to bring this plan to fruition. Yet the fact remained this: they were facing a force vastly more powerful than they were.

"Galamon," Argrave called out, keeping his eyes locked on the Lord of Silver ahead. "A minute left 'til the cork comes back on. Use the egg—stall, please."

"I'll do my duty," Galamon said before Argrave had even finished speaking.

Argrave felt guilt and relief twinned when Galamon stepped forth, Ebonice axe in hand. Argrave stepped back with Anneliese, heading towards the center of the back of the room, opposite Quarrus.

The rings on the Lord of Silver's hands clattered to the ground. His earrings phased through his ear, passing through his now-liquid body. His necklace, bracelets—they all fell, scattering down the stairs as Quarrus' flesh faded in way of his silvery water.

"I need to spend my time readying the eels to capitalize on the opening we'll make. I'll trust you to lead me," he told Anneliese bluntly as used the C-rank [Electric Eel], summoning sparking constructs. "The Brumesingers will help Galamon."

"Right," she nodded, not taking her eyes off the opponent ahead.

Argrave cast a druidic spell—a subset of the spell [Pack Leader]—and his small foxlike druidic bonds clambered down, bunching near his feet. He had given them an order to protect. They raised their heads and sung, their howls like windchimes. Mist started to rise out from their gray fur like steam, spreading across the room.

Quarrus' liquid form steadily surged outwards, clinging to the walls so as to surround their party. The already silver walls were replaced by liquid, almost as though they'd turned to mercury. The water left by the deceased Vessels flowed towards his form, subsumed into the Lord of Silver's Vessel. The

windows were shrouded, and all sunlight ceased—the only thing keeping the place lit was the electric eels dancing above Argrave’s head, bathing the room in an eerie blue light.

The room’s reflections had been bad enough before, but as the silver occupied all of the walls, their reflections stretched on infinitely. Argrave saw himself, the breeder slaves, Galamon, Anneliese, and Garm, each and all reflected without end. The complete inability to stop Quarrus’ advance gave Argrave a sense of dread and powerlessness—not panic, though.

Spread out as he was, Quarrus could attack them from all directions. The tradeoff for spreading himself thin meant weaker attacks. ‘Weaker’ meant he was still strong enough to cut through flesh like butter, though.

Argrave had been counting on Quarrus doing this.

Galamon raised up his hand, holding a black object with an egg-like shape. It had purple runes on its surface. He tossed it on the ground forcefully...

And the room became black at once.

Galamon had used one of the southron elves’ war relics. Black sand spiraled out, a great winding tornado shrouding the room in chaos. The sand battered at Argrave from every direction, disorienting him yet further. The only thing visible was Galamon standing in the center—the sand was least dense there.

Argrave didn’t know much about the Vessels’ anatomy, but he knew they still needed to see, just as any human or elf. Already, Quarrus sent attacks at the elven vampire. The Brumesingers’ mist warriors appeared at Galamon’s side, drawing attention and causing the Lord of Silver to aim poorly.

Anneliese led Argrave away, seeking cover behind furniture in the grandiose room. Without sight, Quarrus sent out his attacks randomly. Metal creaked loudly when attacks missed, and screams echoed out from the breeder slaves, both rising above the din of the chaos. All the while, Argrave readied his eels ever diligently.

Twenty or so seconds passed, but they felt like an eternity. As the sandstorm thinned, Quarrus’ aim became better. He ignored the mist warriors, focusing only on Galamon.

With near forty eels in the air, Argrave shouted, “Ready!”

His words were met by a deadly barrage of silver from the lord surrounding them. Anneliese conjured a ward as she led Argrave along. The Lord of Silver’s attacks, though spread-out and ostensibly weaker, still pierced the B-rank ward. Argrave took hits in the shoulder. The enchantments on his armor protected him, yet it felt like a mule had kicked him.

Galamon reached into a satchel, retrieving a cube. He was about to press something on its surface, but Quarrus diverted all of his attention to the elf. Numerous jets of silver shot out from the wall, forcing the vampire to dodge. The dodge had been anticipated, though—more attacks followed, a thick volley striking Galamon just below the shoulder.

Argrave barely processed what was soaring through the air until it landed a few feet from Argrave. Galamon's arm had been severed cleanly, the cube still clenched in its hand. The vampire's cry of agony split the air, reminiscent of the guttural roar of a demon.

The assault did not relent there. Quarrus sought to finish Galamon, striking from all angles. The vampire moved differently than he had before, dodging more like animal than something intelligent. It proved effective—Galamon dodged the next wave of silver spikes, then ran, path unpredictable. The sight of Galamon's movements brought back repressed memories, and Argrave felt fear as he recalled Barden.

Quarrus hounded Galamon relentlessly. The elven vampire ran with speed unmatched, blood pouring from his arm. He headed for the back of the room. There, the breeder slaves sought refuge. Galamon seized many of the slaves, screaming, and overturned a bed, hiding himself beneath it. Quarrus hesitated in the attack, as though fearing to damage the slaves nearby.

Argrave felt repulsion, guilt, horror, as he knew what Galamon was surely doing. With blood, Galamon would regenerate. In his frenzied state, many would surely die. At the same time, beneath all the guilt was a twisted relief that his companion would not die.

Anneliese crawled out, grabbing Galamon's arm and sliding it over to Argrave. Realizing her intent, Argrave kneeled, pulling at Galamon's gauntleted fingers. His grip proved tenacious, but Argrave freed the cube.

"Galamon!" Argrave shouted, the southron elf war relic in hand. "The arrowheads!"

Yet his voice was returned with nothing. Quarrus devoted his attention to attacking Argrave and Anneliese, evidently unwilling to damage his valuable breeding stock to kill Galamon. It was a symptom of arrogance—the Vessel did not believe his life was threatened.

"Galamon!" Argrave shouted, conjuring a ward with his ring to block a barrage of silver liquid. He could feel the magic in the ring diminishing—he was running out of wards to conjure. Four, maybe more.

"The arrowheads!" Argrave shouted once more, his voice joined in chorus with Anneliese.

Another voice broke through the chaos. "Hold me up!" Garm shouted.

Anneliese looked down to Garm in her hands.

"Trust in me!" the head shouted.

Argrave nodded vigorously, and Anneliese raised Garm without a second's delay. A spell matrix conjured before his eyes, and then a black and red wave scattered about the room. He heard another guttural howl—Galamon's, undoubtedly.

"Throw the arrowheads!" Garm shouted, voice enhanced by a strange magic.

The Lord of Silver attacked once more, foregoing small rapid attacks in favor of a single strong one. It proved effective, this time—it broke past Argrave's ward, taking him in the leg. Argrave fell to the ground, screaming. As he lay there, a bag landed beside his head, black arrowheads spilling out.

Argrave pushed past the pain, grabbing the bag of arrowheads. He pushed an indent in the cube, and it lit up with purple runes. He loaded the spilled arrowheads into the bag, then cast the cube inside, giving the bag a shake.

In no position to manage a good throw, Argrave held the bag out to Anneliese. She understood what he wanted, taking the bag in hand. She tossed it to the center of the room. As it bounced before coming to a stop, Argrave feared the bag would open, and the cube would slide out... yet it did not.

Argrave took cover behind a bed, bringing Anneliese along with him. Purple light exploded outwards from the bag. Argrave felt small fragments batter his body and lost all hearing—all sound was replaced by a constant ringing.

The Ebonice arrowheads had been caught in the center of the war relic's explosion, fragmenting and scattering about the room. Once even the smallest shard of fragmented Ebonice met with the Vessel's body, they would dispel his power vested in him by Fellhorn. It was but a moment... but that moment was enough to expose Quarrus' heart.

Argrave spotted Quarrus' true form at once, newborn form suspended in the center of the room as it clung to the ceiling. Though the Ebonice fragments had struck some of Argrave's electric eels, dispelling them, enough remained—four. He willed them towards Quarrus' infantile form. The Vessel saw its coming doom and tried to relocate its body, but it was split apart too severely to flee.

The electric eels struck home, sparking. Argrave saw something fall. He couldn't distinguish it at first, but he realized Quarrus had severed his connection with the water to avoid being hit. The Vessel's infant body landed atop one of the breeder slave's beds. It cried loudly, like any infant might.

Argrave sat up in panic, causing another wave of blood to pour from his leg. He raised his hand, ready to dispatch it with a final spell. One of the slaves stood, running across the room. He feared the woman intended to protect the child. She reached her hands out, and Argrave steeled himself to finish things as his hearing returned.

Yet he did not have to. The Lord of Silver's slave dealt the finishing blow, screaming out in rage and sorrow. Silence followed, and time seemed to freeze. Then, all of the water in the room turned black, then exploded outwards, surging out the windows and the freshly-made holes in the wall.

Argrave collapsed backwards, barely able to keep his head above the rushing tide. Anneliese pulled him atop one of the beds.

"You are bleeding. Stay still," she directed, setting Garm aside. "I will heal you."

"Just the leg," Argrave shook his head, teeth clenched tight. "Just enough to walk. Then... check if Galamon is fine. Physically... and otherwise. We have to hurry. Not much further yet."

"I live," cut in a cold growl, and Galamon moved across the room. He held his helmet in hand. His mouth and neck were covered with blood. The stump where his arm once was already twitching and writhing. It grew, reconstituting.

Argrave tensed as Galamon approached, fearing the vampire. Galamon strode up to Argrave's bedside and grabbed Garm by the hair.

“What did you do?” Galamon demanded of Garm.

“Saved everyone,” said the head.

“The hunger... it’s afraid. Afraid of you,” Galamon insisted.

“It’s necromancy. Obviously,” Garm spat.

“Galamon...” Argrave raised his hand up. “Let go of him. It’s over.”

Galamon looked down at Argrave. It wasn’t rage in his eyes, nor bloodlust. It was something else. Argrave couldn’t place it. But eventually the vampire acquiesced, setting Garm down gently. Argrave’s Brumesingers jumped up to the bed, sitting beside his stomach.

“I... will watch the stairs,” Galamon said, putting his helmet on. He grabbed his arm off the ground, then moved away.

Argrave looked to Anneliese, seeking her insight.

She shook her head. “He isn’t fine. But he can get through this.”

Argrave nodded, stifling his uncertainties. He knew the spell Garm had cast. He wasn’t worried about Galamon’s condition. The spell, [Voice of the Corrupt], merely terrified the spirits of the undead—Argrave supposed Garm had used it to bring Galamon back to his senses.

But that spell was B-rank, meaning Garm was capable of using spells of that rank. That, alone, was alarming enough... yet the spell used fragments of souls. Typically, a necromancer would use sacrifices to fuel it.

Failing that, one’s own soul would degrade.

Argrave stared at Garm, complicated thoughts disturbing his brain.

No time for the third degree, not now. He’s an ally—even if I can’t trust him, his life is tied to ours, and I know he wants to live. The Wraith’s Heart is close at hand... and after that, the Lord of Copper. Argrave lifted his head, feeling the soothing healing magic from Anneliese seize his leg.

“Let’s end this well,” Argrave said aloud, looking up at Anneliese.

She met his gaze, then gave a determined nod.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 139: Biggest Prize

Argrave grabbed a silver handle from a shelf, pulling free a black box. It was large, and he was unprepared for the weight—Anneliese put her hand beneath it to stop Argrave from dropping it. They lowered it to the ground together. It was a black cube chest with a silver locking mechanism.

The four of them stood in Argent’s treasury, entirely unopposed. The place was a fitting treasury for the Lord of Silver... but quite disappointing for Argrave. Fine art, silver statues, or sculptures of Lords past might indeed be quite expensive, but Argrave would have preferred enchanted items. In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ you might be able to sell an expensive painting to a blacksmith—that wouldn’t fly, here.

Instead, Galamon wrenched free gemstones from statues and poured boxes of jewelry into their lockbox. Once the box was full, he moved on to the backpacks, haphazardly tossing valuables in alongside the books and supplies he held. The elven vampire still had a grim air to him—he was far paler than normal, and instead of dour, he seemed enraged. His arm had healed to the elbow already, yet it seemed to be taking much out of the vampire. He drank from his flasks very frequently, draining them one by one.

Argrave knelt down to the chest, lifting it open—Quarrus had not bothered to lock it. There was a silver medallion within atop a pillow of purple silk. It was a strange, primitive looking thing, with strange letters on it. In its center, a woman held a horn up, pouring water from it.

“The inheritance medallion,” Argrave raised his head to look at Anneliese. “With this gone... no more Lords of Silver. No one will ever hold this seat again.”

Anneliese looked at him seriously. “Is that... prudent, taking it?”

“Well... the ancient gods are a bit more vindictive than the others. At the same time, they don’t pay much attention to the mortal world. I think.” Argrave took the medallion. “Destroying it might be problematic. Merely taking it, though...” Argrave weighed the medallion in his hand, then stuffed it into his pocket. “Every bit helps.”

Argrave stood from the box, walking to a corner of the treasury where things remained more on the curio side of things. He opened a few boxes—most of them were worthless things, truly just oddities—but eventually, he saw what he’d been looking for within. He turned the box in question about.

A gray, slightly transparent model heart lay within the plain box. Argrave touched it. The thing was lifelike enough that Argrave would not have been surprised to feel heat, but it was dormant. In the wake of the grim battle not moments ago, he could not muster the excitement he’d been anticipating at obtaining the Wraith’s Heart, the final piece he needed to become Black Blooded.

“Time to go,” Argrave turned around. “Leave the rest of the treasure. Maybe the freed breeder slaves can take...” Argrave trailed off, feeling the words weren’t fitting with Galamon’s presence.

“We should assess things in Sethia, alter our plans accordingly,” Anneliese suggested.

“Getting out is more important than doing some people-watching. Quarrus made a big commotion, both by fighting and dying—might be some of his underlings are sauntering up those stairs. While it’s a fight we can win, I’d rather sidestep it altogether,” Argrave commentated, stepping towards the stairs.

“...what of the albinos?” Anneliese asked quietly. “They saw—”

“Leave them,” Galamon interrupted. “Please. I’ve done enough damage.”

Argrave stared at his vampire companion. He couldn’t recall him ever saying ‘please’ before.

“Galamon... you couldn’t—”

“Walk, Argrave,” he interrupted. He raised his severed arm up—the forearm was already taking shape. “I could’ve done something. I took responsibility for all the pain my hunger causes when I chose not to die all those years ago.”

Argrave could say nothing in response, and so he turned towards the stairs.

#####

Durran's wyvern reared back its head, swinging its horns upwards into the Vessel's body. The water resisted like taut rope, but eventually the wyvern's strength prevailed, and water scattered. The Vessel's heart pulled away, seeking safety. Durran cut the straps on his saddle, freeing his body from the wyvern's back. He strode up his winged reptile's head, jumping from its snout in pursuit of the infant form of the Vessel.

The distance between him and his target seemed too great, even with the reach of Durran's long glaive. As he dropped, he readied a spell in one hand. He threw his glaive forward, and then sent out a burst of wind magic to propel his weapon. The glaive whistled through the air, striking the Vessel's physical form cleanly.

Durran fell more than dozen feet, landing on solid stone. He grunted in pain, glancing down at his leg—blood dripped out of his wyvern scale boots, onto the paved streets. Something had broken, obviously, and badly. Water rained down on him from the dead Vessel. He laughed as it drenched him, teeth still clenched tight in pain.

He stood on one leg and hopped down the street, keeping a hand to the wall to support himself. He retrieved his glaive, then whistled. His wyvern craned its neck down to reach him, and Durran grabbed hold of its horns, maneuvering gracefully until he took a seat on the saddle. He pulled up on the reins, keeping a low profile to avoid being pulled from the back of his mount by fierce winds.

Durran's wyvern was one of the few still remaining in the sky. Others had been injured and could not fly. Others were outright killed. Their attacking force had been devastated... yet the city of Sethia more so. At this point, ruined buildings had become more common than standing ones. Corpses lay everywhere. The streets were buried beneath black sand and rubble.

As he flew higher, his gaze went to Argent. Water poured from one of its top floors. The Lord of Silver had been fighting there... and judging by the waterfalls coming out of the windows and freshly made holes, he had lost utterly. Durran couldn't picture what had gone down there. He had seen the Lord of Gold—he had been seconds from dying to her. He could not picture a way to end her.

But more presently, he saw the Lord of Copper.

The copper mass of liquid seemed indomitable as it writhed about the city, dispatching opponents indiscriminately. Brium had not yet betrayed them, but Durran could see it coming as clear as day. This well-executed betrayal on Brium's end showed his true nature... and more simply, Titus had confirmed it.

The men underneath Titus were much of the reason the city had become as it was. Though Durran did not know how, they brought a great trove of weapons to the field—southron elf war relics. Titus' people destroyed many Vessels, yet their victories came at a great loss of life.

Durran held his hand to his leg, casting low rank healing magic he knew in some desperate attempt to heal his wound. As he soared above, he saw the last of Brium's guardsmen storm the final holdout of the

forces beneath Argent still standing in Sethia. An overwhelming feeling of dread came over Durran as he realized that things were coming to a close and the truth would come to light in seconds.

#####

Brium took form atop one of the highest buildings in Sethia—the belltower. The bell had fallen down and crashed amidst rubble, but the top of the building was largely intact. Brium, human form reassumed, sat on the edge, observing the battlefield.

He was furious. Things had gone very well—his forces had defeated all of those within Sethia with ease. Though he was worried about the confrontation with Quarrus, his worries were unfounded. The mercenary, who he initially thought had disappointed him, proved to be far greater than what he promised, single-handedly eliminating the Lord of Silver.

Yet Titus had ensured that his conquest earned him not a verdant paradise, but a war-torn ruin. The southern tribals and the citizens both died in numbers far too great. Brium had wanted Sethia—he seemed likely to obtain a shadow of its glory now, now.

And even as he watched, the southern tribals moved away from his men, moved away from the heart of the city. Their movements made it obvious—they knew of what Brium intended to do. Another machination of Titus, to be sure.

As Brium sat, far removed from the conflict, his vision twisted. He was drawn to the sight at once, for his vision was typically flawless. In the far distance, two balls attached by a rope twirled through the air—they stayed suspended in midair, unmoving, purple light twirling around them. Brium squinted. They seemed to be growing, far in the distance. Brium felt curiosity, but no danger.

Brium's head reeled back and he grunted in pain. The balls hadn't been growing larger—they'd been growing closer. Magic must have affected his sight. He stood, climbing further up the roof. His vision was dyed red and distorted, and he was near certain his cheekbone had been cracked.

As he turned, he saw a glaive swinging for his chest. Brium raised a hand, but the glaive soared over and struck his neck. No blood came, though—his flesh had already liquified.

"Damn," cursed a warrior whose words sounded muddled—his voice sounded like something was wrong with his nose. "Should have gone for the neck first."

Brium's flesh morphed into liquid, and his copper body spread out. The southron elves swarmed near him like pests. The Lord of Copper could not distinguish where they were—they seemed to be twenty and five simultaneously, blinking in and out of existence.

"Think we need the biggest prize, boys!" Corentin shouted, voice distorted and echoed by the strange illusion magic of his people. "Well, the biggest left unclaimed. It's third place, but it's on the rankings. Only way the people won't forget our generous contribution, am I right?"

"We can't make a trophy out of it," Florimund noted, voice similarly garbled. "Turns to water, after all. At least we can drink him. Wonder if he tastes like copper."

Brium took in the waters vested in him by Fellhorn, letting their nature calm his rage before he blindly attacked the new foe.

Crislia and Quarrus both died because of arrogance. I will not meet the same fate.

The Lord of Copper surged down the belltower, striking its base. The thing cracked incredibly loudly, then began to crumble. The bell near the top fell once more, ringing once before being smothered and muted by rubble. His vision was affected by the blow to his eye, but he still had sight sufficient to get to a place of safety.

Brium took flesh once more. "We go on the defensive! Follow my lead!" he shouted. "Heed my words, as the new Lord of Sethia!"

Leaving this directive, Brium once again assumed his liquid form. The people under his command obeyed his command quickly and relayed his command just as fast. In not a minute, the quieting battlefield once again became consumed by conflict.

"It runs well," complimented a voice from behind Brium. A mighty slash followed it, meeting the Lord of Copper's form. It was ineffective, but Brium reeled away due to the fact that he was entirely ignorant of his foe's approach.

"This'll be troublesome," noted Florimund, standing atop a high building. Brium fired a copper jet, yet it seemed to pass through his chest as though the elf wasn't present at all.

"We have to hit its heart, don't we?" Morvan said, standing atop Sethia's walls. "A bit hard to see... but as long as we keep at it, we're bound to hit something. Or... I guess we'll die."

"Told you not to throw that damned sling," Yann rebuked. "Could've chopped his head off."

"Don't give him a hard time. That big pale bastard, Galamon, said he axed one on the head—it lived. Wouldn't have been that easy," Morvan returned defensively.

The southron elves stood before the Lord of Copper, isolated amidst enemies. Yet the Lord of Copper stayed still, cautious of his incomprehensible foes.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 140: Division of Power

"The dangerous thing about Brium is..." Argrave trailed off as he stared out over the city of Sethia, standing atop the mound of sand that had been built by the Sand Courser.

Argrave had chosen what he thought was the 'right thing.' He'd endeavored to liberate the city from the hands of the Vessels, even if it did create some uncertainty and loss of time. Yet now... Sethia was the worst he had ever seen it. 'Heroes of Berendar' never had an outcome with such devastation, such loss of life.

"What is it?" Anneliese interrupted Argrave's thoughts.

Argrave shook his head. "The dangerous thing about Brium is that he always fights as though the opponent is stronger: cautiously, with contingencies. All the desperation of a cornered rat. Guess that was something taught by being surrounded by two powerhouses—silver and gold." Argrave knelt down. "Those damned southron elves... I'd ask what they're thinking, but I know. Honor and glory."

"Argrave," Galamon called out. "Skyward."

Heeding Galamon's words, Argrave looked upwards, scanning the blue sky marred by drifting black sand. A gray wyvern cut through the air at them. Argrave stood, readied, yet it began to slow.

Durran's wyvern gripped onto the side of Argent, using wings and legs both. The claws against metal creaked unpleasantly—sounded like nails against a chalkboard, almost—yet the creature did stop.

"Hey," Durran called out, shouts rising above his wyvern's labored breathing. "I've got a trade for you."

"War profiteering?" Argrave returned. "Hardly the time. I've got things to do."

"Heal my leg," he pointed down. "And I'll take you to the skies."

Argrave furrowed his brows, looking to Anneliese. She nodded and whispered, "He is being serious."

Argrave turned his head back. "We want to get near the fight with Brium."

"Gods above..." Durran shook his head. "Fine. I'll land near the bottom of this mound—come quickly. Think I feel my damned leg bone pushing against the armor."

Argrave flashed a thumbs up, then turned to move. Behind, Durran's wyvern soared through the sky. Powerful winds assailed them, loosening sand, and Argrave slipped. He collapsed to his back and started to slide down the hill of sand nauseatingly quickly. The Brumesingers in his clothing yelped in terror as Argrave used all of his spatial coordination to stop from careening off the side.

The terror ended when Argrave's feet met the ground outside Sethia. He straightened his back and shook his duster free of sand, doing his best to act as though he wasn't on the verge of vomiting in fear. Durran's mount landed a fair distance away, walking on its two legs towards them.

The southern tribal fell off his mount's back ungracefully, landing on his side. Anneliese rushed down, but instead of tending to Durran, asked Argrave at once, "Are you hurt?"

"Some bruises tomorrow, maybe," Argrave shook his head, very proud his voice didn't waver. "Deal with him."

Anneliese moved to Durran and started to treat his wound. The man did indeed have bone sticking out of his leg, but with everything still attached, he could be healed. Argrave and Galamon put their things in the wyvern's saddle, preparing to ride. They paid special attention to Garm's situation, ensuring nothing would come free. In two or so minutes, they were ready to move. It felt like hours to Argrave.

"Magic... is a thing of beauty," Durran sighed as he tested his leg.

"Ruminate later," Argrave directed, pointing to the wyvern. "Liftoff, pilot."

With one final step, Durran moved towards his mount, gracefully assuming the rider's position. Argrave got atop its back as well, followed by the other two.

"Heavy load," Durran noted.

"She can take it," Argrave shook his head.

Durran pulled up on the reins, looking back. "How do you know it's a she?" he questioned as his beast took to the skies.

“Larger. Horns. Cleft tail,” Argrave said at once.

With a jump and powerful beats of its wings, the gargantuan reptile started to gain altitude. Argrave was fine with heights, but he could not deny he felt nervous.

“Did you really kill the Lord of Silver?” Durran questioned, shouting above the noise.

“No, I found him like that,” Argrave shouted back, holding onto the back of Durran’s saddle. “Genius question.”

Durran asked no more questions, holding his glaive in one hand and the wyvern’s reins in the other. He led his mount towards the distant battle between the southron elves and the Lord of Copper, where purple light and echoing booms danced about the air. Titus’ men, coupled with the southern tribals, had taken care of most other resistance.

Riding a wyvern was a terrifying yet wonderful thing. He could feel the beast’s presence beneath him, and his body shifted slightly every time it moved its wings. The wind battered at him intensely, wearing at his grip constantly unless he kept a low profile. The speed was not ludicrous, yet it was far faster than was comfortable. The experience made Argrave think of freedom, strangely.

With trepidation, Argrave freed one hand, using his own magic reserve to conjure more electric eels. He stopped at eight, for he felt half of his magic was gone by that point. The sparking constructs easily kept pace with the wyvern.

“I’ll land with my allies,” Durran called out. “They’re preparing to help the elves, looks like. This fine with you?”

“Yeah,” Argrave answered.

Durran started to bring his beast down, and Argrave soon realized where he wanted to land. Men cleared out of the way for the wyvern to land atop a largely ruined building. The wyvern collapsed amidst rubble, and Argrave gingerly hopped down from the creature, landing beside its wings.

The Brumesingers emerged, finding flat ground as solace. One of them climbed up to his shoulder and nipped his ear, as though to express its displeasure at the constant rapid movement—Argrave could not muster indignance.

“This satisfies you?” called out Durran, not dismounting.

“Yeah. I’ll take things from here,” Argrave nodded.

“That’s elven magic!” a man’s voice roared out. “All the deaths, tribals and city-dwellers alike, they were caused by southron elf weapons, southron elf interference!”

The voice was loud enough that it could not be ignored, and Argrave turned a tired head towards its source.

“They may be fighting at our side, but they are not on our side!” A grizzly tribal insisted.

“Belhard!” Durran shouted. “Now is not the time. Unity!” Many in the crowd echoed Durran’s sentiment, shouting their agreement.

“Unity cannot bring back my brother!” another disagreed—a guardsman from Sethia, likely under Titus. “That elven magic—we see it happening even now, in their battle against the Vessel! There is a reason our ancestors wiped the southron elves out. Let them fight the Lord of Copper alone. Regardless of the winner, we end them after!”

Argrave felt the need to say something, but he was an outsider flanked by elven companions—and moreover, none of these people knew him. His voice was a foreigner’s voice. He knew his contribution would be unwelcomed.

“Anneliese?” Argrave questioned, hoping she might think of something.

“...all I can think of is helping the southron elves now, having them speak for themselves,” she suggested.

“Alright. Best we’ve got,” Argrave nodded, then grabbed her elbow, moving her along to the distant fight between the elves and Brium.

But then, a bell rung out, and everyone’s attention was directed to that. Once the loud sound quieted, a voice rose above it, shouting, “People!”

Titus stood at a high point, overlooking the crowd. He held something to help project his speech—only a cone, but it sufficed.

“People on the roofs,” Galamon noted. “Archers. We should be ready to find cover... especially if they still have those elven arrows.”

Argrave scanned around, barely spotting them with Galamon’s directions.

“People of Sethia!” Titus shouted out. “The magic weapons used in today’s battle were not from the southron elves,” he disclosed grandly. “It is their magic... but they did not give them to the combatants!”

A chorus of voice saying a multitude of things followed, but Titus turned around and rang a large bell once again.

“The southron elves got involved in this fight because of one man,” Titus held his hand out. “They gave this man supplies, relics of their people... and even joined the fight themselves! They are our allies!”

Argrave frowned, catching where this was headed. The southern tribals within the crowd, too, caught on at once.

“Durrán distributed the elven war relics to agents within the city!” Titus pointed. “The elves trusted that man with their weapons... and he ordered the wholesale slaughter of the people within Sethia, to ensure his control of the city would be completely unopposed!”

“That’s nonsense!” Durrán shouted. “Complete garbage! I didn’t even know the elves were coming to the fight!”

“People of the tribes—who was the sole point of contact between the elves and the tribes?” Titus spread his arms out. “It was Durrán! He was the sole person to speak to them!”

Argrave had a bad sensation in his stomach as his brain followed people’s thoughts.

Durran was the intermediary between the tribes and the elves.

Durran was one of few tribals to leave the tribes and enter the city, usually secretly—the tribals had no idea of who he spoke to.

The elves had promised weapons alone to the people of the tribes. Argrave wasn't sure if this was public knowledge, but it was a damning thing if brought to light.

All of these points in tandem with people's grief and rage... simply put, Durran was shaping up to be public enemy number one. Argrave looked to Anneliese, and she looked very worried.

Argrave shouted out, "I brought the—"

His voice was quickly drowned out by the thousands of others. He had wished to bring his role in things to light—enough to stall for time to get the southron elves to weigh in.

"Argrave," Anneliese spoke into his ear. "We should prioritize dealing with Brium. None of the truth can be brought to light if the elves don't—"

An explosion rocked the earth, and Argrave's head darted to the side. A blast of purple magic of the same magnitude they had caused within Argent filled the sky above Sethia. Copper water showed the streets and roofs, reflecting the sunlight splendidly as they fell.

Then, the copper water turned to black.

"They... won," Argrave spoke as he realized. "We need to hurry," he pulled Anneliese forward. "If we're to remedy this, the southron elves might be the only way we have."

Anneliese nodded. She and Galamon followed behind Argrave, hurrying to the site of the battle.

The place was utter mayhem. The streets had been torn apart, the buildings were nearly all collapsed, and there was a great crater in Sethia where the battle had been centered.

Many of the veteran southron elves lie dead, their illusory armor still flickering and distorting their figure. Argrave scanned things, horrified, looking for any alive. He spotted one person kneeling before a body, and rushed up.

Florimund knelt there, hand to his chest. Morvan lay before him. It looked like he had been cut across the chest. The wound was deep, cutting past the ribs. He was dead.

"He's joined... his daughter, now," Florimund called out as they approached. "They're all joining family members. All except me."

"Florimund..." Argrave began, hesitating to ask him for help yet again in wake of the death before them.

"Don't call me dead yet," another voice cut in, and Argrave turned his head. Corentin pushed out a piece of rubble, then collapsed. "Got my leg. Gods damn it all..."

Florimund stood from Morvan's corpse, moving to help Corentin. He supported the man with his shoulder, and the two rose to their feet. The wound to his leg couldn't be healed—the flesh had been severed completely. Fortunately, the bleeding was staunch.

“Argrave,” Florimund called out. “We won.”

Argrave was stunned, but he replied, “You did,” almost habitually.

“And we won alone,” Corentin noted. “None will forget that. Florimund threw one of our relics, smacked it with the side of his glaive, right into the copper bastard’s mass. The thing exploded inside him. Devastating,” Corentin shook his head.

Argrave nodded, then decided to bite the bullet and tell them what was happening. “I can’t let you rest yet. There’s—”

“Someone was using our magic,” Florimund noted. “I know it. And we need to clear our names.”

“It may... be beyond saving,” Anneliese noted, watching the crowd. “The whole crowd is aflame. And many of them are collaborating with Titus. His people are the most numerous in the crowd—I am sure of it. If he can buy their loyalty in battle, he can buy their words in a crowd.”

Argrave took a deep breath, mind whirling. “Titus wants complete control of the city,” he said.

“I agree,” Anneliese nodded. “He wants to eliminate all competing leaders. There is only one left, now—Durran.”