

Jackal 151

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 151: Bitter

Ringling metal echoed through the obsidian abode of the Alchemist. Galamon took slow, heavy steps, eyes glancing around everywhere. He followed a trail of purple lights, though he didn't seem to trust them completely. The uniform hallways and sterile atmosphere of the place seemed to disquiet him.

He'd still not had the opportunity to repair his armor after the arm had been severed in the battle with the Lord of Silver, so he raised a bare hand to block his nose as though something ahead smelled foul. He stared down the hall, hesitating to move forward. He reached for his side, retrieving a flask and draining it utterly of the blood within. Once it was gone, he inhaled deeply, and proceeded uncertainly.

Ahead, someone breathed through clenched teeth. The breaths were shaky, but strong. Galamon kept his hand to his nose as though the smell was unbearable. He neared the threshold, steps quiet. He looked into the room first, eyes peeking around the corner, then stopped at the doorway.

Galamon's head turned slowly, drinking in all of the sights. The place was, bluntly put, horrifying. Sheets and blankets were piled up in one corner of the room. Some of them had enough blood on them to be called 'soaking wet.' Anneliese had set up a makeshift washbasin in another section of the room, which Galamon judged she was using for laundry.

And though Galamon had been worried he had drawn the ire of the Alchemist by hunting so many of the creatures in the jungle, the food waste remaining evidenced that had not been the case. Bones had been picked clean and piled neatly. Galamon recalled collecting fruits—he saw none, so he presumed they had been eaten fully, seeds and cores included.

The centerpiece of the room was the centerpiece of the horror. The bed was the stuff of nightmares. Bloody handprints marked the bedposts, the walls nearby. The bed... if the blankets had been bad, the feather mattress was worse. Galamon knew from experience that no man possessed that much blood. It was dark blood, too, looking infected. The obsidian floor was covered, some of it dry, some of it fresher.

Galamon would have been certain he was approaching a dead man had he not heard the breathing in the hall. He stepped into the room tentatively, Argrave's form obscured by the tapestries hanging from the four-poster bed. When he came into view, it took a moment for Galamon to notice Argrave was writing in something.

Argrave spared a glance upwards, then looked back to his book. He double-took, lowering the book.

"Galamon," he said, voice surprisingly steady given the state of the room. "Thought you were Anneliese."

Galamon surveyed Argrave. His skin was the palest it'd ever been. His lips were blue. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken. He was missing all of his nails. Strange, jagged abscesses lined his body. The list of symptoms went on and on. Despite this, Galamon felt an intense vitality radiating from Argrave—it was like the heat of a forge, the strongest of any living thing he'd ever seen.

"It's been, what, seven days?" Argrave continued. "Hard to tell. No windows. Even if there were, we're in a damned cave..."

Galamon nodded in confirmation.

"Seven days..." Argrave repeated. "First time I see you in a week. What, you finally get thirsty?" he questioned with clenched teeth. "Followed the sweet aroma, looking for a drink?"

Galamon lowered his head.

"Lying here in blood puddles and you're provoking the one guy I told you not to engage with!" Argrave shouted and tried to point a finger, but he couldn't raise his arm up. The movement seemed to dislodge something, because he started coughing. It was a terrible, wet hacking, punctuated by Argrave spitting blood out.

"There's your drink," Argrave pointed, then let out a long wheezing laugh. "Christ. I'm losing my mind," he muttered.

"I have no defense," conceded Galamon.

Argrave stared up at Galamon, breathing a little heavy. He adjusted his position, then endeavored to catch his breath, calming himself. As he wiped the blood off his lips, he seemed to be assaulted by pain, because he winced and put his hand to his chest. Galamon furrowed his brows and stepped forward, concerned.

"Listen," Argrave continued. "Listen. No—don't listen. Don't listen to a word I have to say. I'm in pain, I'm bitter beyond belief, and I'm saying a bunch of words we'll both regret," Argrave outlined. "I know you've been helping with the food. That's... Christ, that's been very helpful. Even eating makes me hungry. It's like I'm trying to gain 200 pounds this month. It's hell. So, forgive the ranting and raving, please."

Galamon stepped a little closer to Argrave's bed. "I make a mistake... and you're asking my forgiveness?"

Argrave snorted, but then winced as though the action hurt. Footsteps drew both of their attention, and Anneliese entered the room, hefting a sack behind her back.

"Argrave, I—oh," she paused, spotting Galamon. She stared for a bit, then smiled. "You have come. Good."

"You make her carry the food in?" Argrave gestured. "Couldn't have carried it inside on your way in?"

"...didn't want to attract attention," Galamon excused weakly.

Argrave adjusted his book. "Maybe you are an imbecile. I'm starting to question." He moved as though to write again, then stopped. "Durran and Garm, they're...?"

Galamon looked off to the side, thinking about how to answer this.

"Oh, I see. They're still running scared from the big guy." Argrave hefted the book, then laughed with a shake of his head. "Morons and cowards. I'm bleeding out my...!" he began, then stopped himself, taking deep breaths to calm. "Gotta relax..."

Galamon looked dissatisfied, like he had something more to say, but he elected to leave it unspoken. He looked around the room.

"I'll help clean," he decided.

"Scavenge for food, you mean," Argrave called out.

Galamon shook his head, a bitter smile seizing his face.

#####

"You came at a good time," said Anneliese as they walked down the halls of the obsidian palace.

"Sometimes... he cannot even speak, cannot think. Seizures and worse assail him."

"Sometimes?" queried Galamon.

"It comes and goes in waves," she explained. "It is... very..." she trailed off. "Let us simply say I am glad I am not to be helping him alone." She paused, then looked to Galamon. "You will come back, yes?"

Galamon nodded. "I will."

"No fear of the Alchemist any longer?" she questioned. "Had I drawn his ire... I understand your position, staying outside. Even still, it was foolish, what you did," she admonished.

"Nothing to fear," Galamon nodded. "Things were settled."

"Settled?" she questioned. "You make it sound like you talked with him more."

Galamon stopped walking, staring off to the side.

Anneliese came to stand some distance ahead, staring backwards. She studied Galamon, then crossed her arms.

"I know you feel guilty, but it does not stem from leaving Argrave alone for so long, does it?" Anneliese questioned. "Something else bothers you."

"Yes... and no," Galamon refuted. "I do feel guilty about being away for so long. It's just..."

"What did you do?" she demanded quietly.

Galamon hesitated to speak. He started walking again, and Anneliese followed, casting glances at him.

"The person who initially wished to speak to the Alchemist... was Garm," Galamon began.

"But he has no legs, so if you intend to cast blame—"

"I'm telling the full story," Galamon cut her off.

"It has been a very long week, and I am quite irritable as well," Anneliese continued. "Say what you wish to say."

"Garm and Durran weren't afraid to come," Galamon said plainly. "They're doing something with the Alchemist. Don't know why, but he had a change of heart."

"And what are they doing?" Anneliese demanded.

Galamon stopped. "Finishing up."

#####

Wanting something to end tends to make it end slower. Or at the very least, that's the human perception of things. That's definitely Argrave's perception of things. He certainly hasn't been bored... merely constantly occupied.

Pain unending. That's been his life. There was no reprieve from it. It warded away sleep, making each day take longer and longer. And it wasn't something that could be 'gotten used to.' It would fade in one point, surge in another. Sometimes, it felt like his appendix had burst—other moments, a kidney stone passing.

Argrave had tried many methods to cope with things. He tried to tell himself that some people lived like this daily; they lived with congenital defects, or were burn victims, things like that. It helped for a bit—he found some strength in that. After a while, though, it started depressing and angering him worse.

Elsewise, he often tried to distract himself—writing the report, for instance, or talking with Anneliese. Days of poor sleep rendered most activities extremely difficult and frustrating, though.

After a while, things started to get weird. He compared himself to martyred religious figures, lost in strange delusions that may have been dreams—he lapsed in and out of sleep constantly, awoken by new pains or more aggressive symptoms. He started talking to Anneliese or Galamon about things he'd said in dreams, and they'd look at him like a madman.

After a while, Argrave just stared at the bronze hand mirror, clinging to it desperately and trying to imagine himself playing 'Heroes of Berendar' again, a nice, cushioned seat beneath him. It was sad to long to play a video game when that world had become his reality, perhaps. He was beyond caring about how pathetic it was.

If Anneliese and Galamon had not been with him... he was certain he'd be dead. Though, perhaps that wasn't true—the Alchemist would keep him alive, he suspected, but his price for doing so would be an arm and a leg. Perhaps literally.

Amidst all the misery and shame from the entire experience... Argrave clung to something. It was a foolish thing to be proud of, he supposed, and he didn't think he'd ever tell anyone he'd been thinking about this at all.

Throughout this whole endeavor... he never screamed. Not once.

Thus far, it had been one hell of a challenge. Argrave might've shouted in anger, but he never screamed. It was a small victory in a battle with himself, but... clinging to that kept him sane, he felt. He had a goal beyond 'surviving,' another thing to occupy his mind. With Anneliese present, she could conjure a ward and let him scream all he wanted, but this small, pointless victory brought him fulfillment.

Despite the constancy of his situation, time flowed ever onwards, he knew. This pain would not be eternal. He stopped asking how many days had passed after a while. The Alchemist would visit, examine, read Argrave's report, and occasionally ask bizarre questions. The questions were largely focused on Argrave—personality, ethics, not merely factual things as was typical coming from the monstrous man. It was strange, but then the Alchemist himself was too strange to comprehend, and Argrave was a little too busy to contemplate deeply.

Like this, the suns passed by time and time again... and the month continued to pass.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 152: Standing Proudly Once More

Argrave blinked open his eyes. As he stared at the bloodstained purple blanket before him, mind blank, it took a few seconds to realize he'd just woken up. And not in pain, too—the aching was there, still, but hollower. He was used to being woken up by spikes of pain, so it was a welcome feeling.

He took the rare moment of respite to look around. After Galamon had arrived, the place had become much cleaner—the vampire was absent, now, probably getting food. Anneliese slept peacefully on the couch. Argrave stared off into space for a few seconds, then was reminded that he had no time to rest.

Argrave sat up, retrieving the book he'd been writing his reports on. Some blood had gotten on some pages, but such was life—if the Alchemist gave him flak, he wasn't sure he'd care anymore. He wrote, passing the time, observing his own body.

It wasn't his imagination. Though the dull aching was still present like boiling water beneath his skin, the spikes of pain were far less frequent, and infinitely less acute. Enough to sleep through, evidently. He was able to focus on the writing better than he ever had, he found.

After a time, he judged there was nothing more to write. He tapped the writing instrument against his cheek, thinking, then set both the book and the tool down, satisfied with himself. The hunger still gnawed at his stomach, and he looked around.

There was a platter of fruits—they looked like dragon fruits. They were too far to reach. He looked to Anneliese, then opened his mouth. He stopped, furrowing his brows. After a long while of indecision, he scooted quietly over to the bedside.

He wreathed himself in the blanket to cover himself, then slowly rose to his feet. He supported himself cautiously at first, almost afraid to leave the bed, but then rose up, back rigid. He shuffled over, then retrieved one of the fruits. It had been peeled already, and as he ate it, he found it tasted all the sweeter than the day before.

Feeling some joy for the first time in a long while, Argrave walked about the room, careful not to wake Anneliese. Walking brought him immeasurable joy. After a time, he spotted a pile of clothes. They'd been cleaned, he realized. He bent down and retrieved the simple underclothes he wore beneath his enchanted leather gear.

Argrave watched Anneliese to be sure she was asleep, then quietly clothed himself once again. It made him want to cry, strangely—he felt human again. Much of the deformities marring his skin had mostly faded, but he still felt the soreness as the clothes brushed against his skin. He tossed the blanket back on the bed, then let out a long, self-satisfied sigh.

Anneliese stirred at the noise, and Argrave froze. When she lifted her head, locking eyes with him, he relaxed—no point in staying tense if he'd been caught.

“Argrave,” she called out with a slight early-morning slur, quickly moving to stand. “What in the world are you doing?”

“Preparing for an admonishment,” he shrugged.

“Well...” she stood up, laughing slightly. “Then you know as well as I do that you should be back in bed.”

“I’ve got bed sores from laying there for so long. I need to move about, for my mental health if anything. Standing with my back straight on hard rock has never felt so satisfying before,” Argrave looked down.

“You have no bed sores,” Anneliese disagreed, striding up to him. She grabbed him by the shoulders. “Come on.”

“Please, I need to walk about. Gonna go mental,” Argrave pleaded.

She stared at him for a bit, surveying him for damages. Her gaze finished wandering at his eyes, and she let out a long sigh. “Alright. I will come along. Hesitate none in asking for help if things get worse.”

Argrave beamed. “I understand how a dog feels, now, feeling this excited for a simple walk.” Argrave took steady steps towards the threshold.

“Take it slow,” Anneliese called out exasperatedly, then quickly caught up to him.

Argrave felt considerable trepidation, but he pressed onwards as though he didn’t. It felt immeasurably satisfying seeing different sights once again, even if they were the same bleak obsidian walls all around.

Despite feeling a boiling pain within, Argrave felt full of vitality. His steps were easy and quick, and he almost felt the urge to run. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this good, at least physically. Normally, he’d always feel heavy-stepped and fatigued at all times. Part of that was insomnia—most of that was his body. His old body, that was.

“Think I’ll go and see where they pitched camp outside the place,” Argrave spoke to Anneliese. “Never thought I’d say this, but it’ll be nice to talk to Garm again.”

It took a few seconds for Argrave to notice Anneliese had stopped. He paused, looking back. He said nothing, examining her. Her arms were crossed, and she stared at the ground.

“What is this?” Argrave stepped towards her. He came to stand before her, and still she said nothing. “Come on, spit it out. What did they do?” he demanded.

“Argrave...”

“Asked about them, not about me,” Argrave shook his finger. “Did Garm provoke the Alchemist more? Is he that stupid? I have a hard time believing that,” Argrave shook his head.

She looked trouble, mulling over phrasing in her mind. Argrave tried to be patient, but soon enough that patience vanished.

“Where are they?” Argrave questioned. “Come on. Where are they?”

“They’re... he’s... he’s here,” she couldn’t look up.

“Here? In the Alchemist’s place?” Argrave confirmed, and when Anneliese nodded, he turned away, shaking his head.

After letting out many obscenities, Argrave leaned up against the wall. His brain worked, trying to put together what might've happened. Then, as if in epiphany, he lifted his head up. In another second, Argrave took off, walking speedily down the hall.

"Argrave...!" Anneliese called out, chasing after him.

Argrave wound through the complex palace of the Alchemist, passing by and ignoring many rooms. Whether by pure dumb luck or accurate deduction, Argrave entered an open room, striding in and moving his head about.

Durran had been laid across one of the tables. Argrave jogged towards him and grabbed his wrist, firstly—he felt heat, assuaging some of his concerns. He looked around the room for Garm. He saw a large stack of white books, but... other than that, not a single sign.

Argrave leaned in, studying Durran. He reached up and slapped his face, lightly, hoping to rouse him—no response. He heard footsteps behind him and turned around. "What happened to him?" he demanded.

Anneliese walked closer, and said heavily, "Durran will be asleep for some time."

"Yeah? And I assume this is no nap. Why?" he demanded, trying to keep calm.

"Garm is..." Anneliese looked to the side. "Garm decided to merge his soul with Durran's."

Argrave stepped away from Durran, his mouth agape. He didn't know how to respond to that. His mind ran through old lore that he knew, conjuring things he knew of the matter.

"So they're... Durran and Garm are..." Argrave looked back at Durran.

Anneliese stepped to another table, then picked up a book. Beneath it was a letter. She handed it to Argrave. "Garm wrote this for you," she explained. "It's a..."

Argrave took the letter from her hands, staring at it. His face stayed still for a long while, staring down at that letter without action. His breathing started to get a bit faster... and then he ran for the door, heading for the distant light of the outside.

#####

Durran opened his eyes, seeing the blue sky above. He wiped at his face, trying to wake himself up. He felt the all-too-familiar feel of hot sand beneath him. Sometimes, heat could persist in the black sand of the Burnt Desert all through the night, especially during summer.

But his thoughts caught up to him, and he quickly sat up, realizing the disconnect. He had expected to see endless sand dunes, but instead, he saw an endless field of black roses. His head darted around, taking in his surroundings in a half-panic. The terrain was split in half—on one side, a field of black roses. On the other, dunes of black sand, with wyverns flying all about the sky.

He stood, utterly confused, head darting every which way. Then, he spotted a figure wearing red robes. This man sat on a large rock amidst the field of roses, looking down at Durran.

"Pretty sight, isn't it?" the man questioned.

Durran sized the man up. He wore luxurious red robes. The sleeves had a strange sewn pattern on them—they looked like a rose’s thorns, and his shoulder pads were a rose’s petals. The man’s hair was brown, slightly wavy. He had a casual and cynical air to him, with bright blue eyes that made a handsome face sharper.

“Your half of this place... a little mediocre, honestly. I can’t say I feel all too sorry for you, though.”

Durran stepped closer. He was starting to realize the voice was familiar.

“Garm?”

“Sharp as a ball, I see,” the man smiled.

“So that’s... what you used to look like,” Durran realized. “Before your run of bad luck.”

Garm spread his arms out. “I was always all there... inside, at least. Feast your eyes on a High Wizard of the Order of the Rose... laid plainly before you.”

Durran said nothing, clicking his tongue as he watched. “Your other look was eye-catching. Now... you’re just a man.”

“Always was, despite what happened,” Garm spat, leaning back.

Durran looked around, sizing up the place. Slowly, he shifted on his feet.

“You said that our souls would fight for dominance,” he said carefully. “This is our arena?”

“Indeed. We stand amidst both of our souls, manifested completely,” Garm nodded.

“Gods above...” Durran looked about. “You say ‘soul fighting,’ I pictured two balls of light wrestling, not... this.” His eyes locked on something standing amidst the sand—a glaive, stabbed into the ground.

“Balls of light—pfft. Still as ignorant as ever about the soul.”

“Whose fault is that?” Durran turned his head back.

“Mine. But it’s not a fault—at least not from where I’m sitting. It’s just an advantage, now. Obscuring information and giving half-truths are what I’m best at when I’ve only a brain and a mouth.”

“And this place...” Durran turned around, staring off into the distance. He could still see wyverns in the distance. The sand dunes seemed to move on endlessly, stretching out like an ocean in a starless sky. Durran could see figures dancing on the edge—vague and indistinguishable, yet simultaneously familiar.

“For some, it’s a reflection of their personality—I’d say mine takes that side of the coin. For others,” Garm pointed out, “It resembles the place which embodies them most. A boring, dry, and hot desert. I suppose it is fitting, in a way.”

Durran snapped back to attention. “The insult means less coming from you with the field black roses. What is that? Some kind of childhood fantasy?” Durran pointed out. “*That’s* a representation of your personality? Romantic like a rose, but black in the heart? Wilted, battered? Please. Spare me.”

Garm let out a long, dry laugh, and slid down the rock he sat atop. Durran watched as he walked forward.

"I'm getting the inkling I should grab that glaive," Durran called out, stepping towards it.

"Hmph. Maybe you're a little sharper than a ball," Garm admitted.

"So, we're to fight?" Durran questioned. "No submission, give me the win? That was what we'd planned, anyway."

"I told you our souls would fight, and that's the truth. I'm not a fan of suicide, despite what I said. I told you my soul was damaged—who's to say? Could be a lie. Could be the truth. How would you know? We've established I'm a pathological liar... that I can't be trusted."

Durran's jaw clenched. "Was kind of expecting such a thing, frankly. You give off the vibe."

"Why'd you go through with it, then?" Garm held his hands out.

"A whim. The Alchemist wouldn't have gone through with this if you fed me lies. Argrave said that monster loathes deception—he'd correct you if you were wrong. I'm sure Argrave wasn't lying, at least. That means... nothing has changed."

"A fair point," Garm conceded.

"So, then..." Durran grabbed the glaive.

"One more thing to take care of, first," Garm held his hands up.

"No tricks. I know them all," Durran pulled free the glaive from the sand.

"So paranoid... bastard after my own heart," Garm shook his head. "Have it your way. Perhaps we can talk as we... take care of things."

Durran held the glaive at the ready. Garm stared back, blue eyes veritably gleaming.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 153: Last Will

Garm knelt down and picked a black rose from the endless field. He held it up to his face, twirling it about with his fingers. The black petals began to twitch... and then exploded outwards as a mass of flesh.

Opposite Garm, Durran panicked and jumped back at the unexpected sight. Garm could see his face morph with surprise, his sole desire becoming getting away. And the man did—he jumped back near fifty feet, practically flying in the sky. Garm had summoned some of his favorite creations, an Order of the Rose specialty: bats of flesh and skin, knives attached to their wings. Deadly, numerous creatures.

Fighting was different when souls battled. This battle was a representation of something their minds could not comprehend. It was like living in a lucid dream—will alone could conjure all manner of assaults, oddities. Garm had neglected to inform Durran of this, but the boy was sharp—he was sure things would be figured out quickly.

"Back when I was alive, I could make one of these bats with a single arm," Garm called out to Durran. Voices reached everywhere in this strange realm of the soul. "Enough skin for the wings, enough bones for the important bits... I look forward to trying it out again with a different set of hands, this time."

“Keep looking forward,” Durran called back, unbothered. Garm was surprised by his mental fortitude. He flailed about in the sky, falling. The boy was as sharp as Garm had expected, though—wind around him swirled, then morphed into a giant gray wyvern, lifting him up into the sky. “When we’re finished with this, I’ll be sure to enjoy it on your behalf,” the tribal answered back, vigor, excitement, and fear marking his voice.

“As green as you are? It’ll be some years before you come near my expertise,” Garm refuted with a grin. He held his hand out, a spell matrix swirling. When it completed, wind billowed beneath his feet, and he burst upwards into the sky. “That’s why you’ll lose.”

“You’re aged,” Durran refuted, wyvern gliding about. “Senile, even. Not a chance for you.”

“Tell me, then,” Garm began, his bats rising up alongside him. “What made you as you are? Cynical, bitter?”

“This is a fight, not a spar,” Durran cut him off, then threw his glaive at Garm. “No time for talk.”

“Fighting like this isn’t as you think,” Garm shook his head, then easily maneuvered around the glaive. It crashed to the sand below, spreading a black cloud of debris across the landscape. “Talk doesn’t distract. We’re souls, now, not brains. The least we can do for the loser is carry on some memories. I’ll remember you, to be sure. To prove my point... how about I break the ice?”

Garm sent forth his summoned bats with another spell, and the creatures frenzied to obey. They sought their target like a locust plague. Garm controlled them, talking all the while.

“Myself, I learned the world was a hellscape as soon as I was old enough to understand what ‘hellscape’ means,” Garm explained. “Parents dropped me in the canals at Nodremaid. I clung to the walls, not one year old—or so I’m told. It was a long time ago. Probably seven hundred years.”

Durran struggled to contest with the bats, casting impotent magic, killing one or two at a time. “You’ve got me beat there,” Durran admitted. “In terms of tragedies, at the very least. My parents were decent. I was the last and eighth child.”

Durran’s wyvern braced, and then spun about in an impossible manner, obliterating too many of the bats. Garm readied high-ranking electric magic—the knives stuck in the wyvern’s flesh would attract it, making aiming easier.

“But you were the heir to the tribe?” Garm questioned, sending a bolt of lightning as thick as a pillar forth. The wyvern howled as it struck its wing. “Unless your tribe has some bizarre, meritorious succession, let me guess—they all died.”

Garm battered his opponent with powerful lightning magic, booms echoing out across the infinite landscape. Magic cost nothing but willpower—might as well use the expensive lightning magic, he figured. But Durran stepped atop the snout of his wyvern, grasping its horn. He leapt from its maw, and the horn he held morphed into a glaive. In not half a second, he closed the vast distance between them with an inhuman jump.

“They died, yeah—putting it simply,” Durran confirmed, then slashed at Garm. The High Wizard could only raise his arm up to receive the blow, reeling away a great distance. “My uncle drove my older twin sisters to suicide. Don’t know why, but I can guess. Guy was always a worthless creep. Without proof,

without any testimony besides mine, the tribe left him unpunished. He was respected. They didn't know the details. So, he got off, scot-free. I didn't like that."

Durran's glaive morphed back into a wyvern, and he pursued Garm. "I found out, then, that if you want something, *you* have to make it happen. No one else will advocate for you," he continued, wyvern rushing down at Garm.

"You killed him? Good man," Garm complimented, then prepared a wave of wind to block the approaching pair. "People that toy with kids, they're like rabid animals—the best thing to do for all parties, the animal included, is end them."

"Funny," Durran laughed as he approached. Garm sent out his wind magic, and the wyvern rider was knocked off the back, falling towards a field of roses. "Some people would say the same of necromancers. Tell me, then—no parents, one year old... how'd you live?"

"On the streets, obviously," Garm answered. "The streets of Nodremaid, they're rough—Guardians of the Low Way patrol about. These things," Garm explained, conjuring a spell matrix as he landed amidst his field of black roses. At once, several of the roses blossomed into the Guardians of the Low Way. Unlike those Argrave and his companions had seen, these had not degenerated—they looked solemn, encased in iron masks and bearing sharp weapons. "It was a struggle to stay alive."

"But one year old, no matter how talented... someone had to help you," Durran insisted, collapsing just opposite Garm amidst roses. He rose to his feet, glaive ready to meet the approaching Guardians.

"Someone did help," Garm confirmed. "A teenager. Helped me learn the streets, gave me some food... then, when I was eight, he tried to sell me to some High Wizard of the Rose for experimentation. Idiot just got captured alongside me. No one misses street urchins, you see."

Durran had a captivating, dance-like fighting style—he would cast magic with one hand, letting it hang in the air for a moment, then he'd cut the spell with his glaive. The spell would wreath around his blade, adding significant power to each of his attacks.

"How do you do that?" Garm tilted his head, watching.

"Glaive's blade is wyvern bone," Durran explained as he dealt with the Guardians. "Magic is in their body. As such, spells can attach to the blade, I found out. It's a neat trick." He punctuated his explanation by throwing the glaive still wrapped in flames at Garm.

Garm ducked, conjuring a wall of earth to be doubly safe. The glaive sunk deep into the earth, poking out the opposite side. Durran vaulted atop the wall, lunging at Garm. The High Wizard was prepared—he used blood magic, conjuring a bloody sword and thrusting in one swift motion.

Durran twisted, barely avoiding being impaled, but the sword still grazed his abdomen. He landed atop Garm and forced him to the ground, then grabbed his hair, punching with his free hand. The blows hurt enough to remind Garm that he was alive, and that he still had a chance.

Garm prepared a powerful spell, but Durran scrambled away, moving back behind the wall. Garm rose to his feet, walking backwards with blood trickling down his face. His injuries soon faded as his body reconstituted itself—another benefit of the realm of the soul.

"Since we're talking, I assume you didn't get experimented on by that High Wizard?" Durran questioned.

"Wizards get arrogant," Garm explained. "They don't really expect someone to hit them in the head," he wiped the blood off his face, noting the irony. "I got the jump on him. He never expected an eight-year-old to know how to kill people, but on the streets of Nodremaid, you learn early."

"And you got away?"

"Framed the kid who sold me," Garm said proudly, stalking around the earth wall. Durran was gone. "Some of the guy's wizard friends came by to check on him later that day. I told them I was his hidden son, and that my would-be seller had killed him."

"Terrible lie," Durran admonished.

"It was a damned great lie. You had to be there," Garm turned his head to where the voice had come from. Just then, Durran lunged out. He conjured sparks, then swung his glaive. Garm ducked the lightning-wreathed attack, then tackled the man's knees. They both fell to the ground, and after a brief scuffle, Garm knelt atop Durran.

Garm smiled, ready to return what he'd just been given. "As a matter of fact, they inducted me into the Order of the Rose because of that lie," he disclosed, then punched Durran with one hand. The other prepared a spell.

Durran retrieved his glaive and swung it. Garm had been prepared to grab the shaft, stopping it, but it morphed into a dagger midflight, cutting Garm's throat. With blood pouring out, Garm fell backwards, and Durran got some distance. Garm didn't neglect the spell he'd been preparing, this time—a great lance of wind as big as Durran himself surged out, catching the man in the torso.

Durran flew backwards and collapsed. Silence set in as the both of them recovered from the devastating exchange.

Garm was the first to sit up. "Gods above..." he rubbed his bloodstained, but healed, throat. "You got far too good at this far too quickly."

Durran struggled to sit up, his torso still slightly gored by the powerful spell. He glared at Garm, not with hatred, but with fierce competitiveness.

"Rest of your siblings—what happened?" Garm questioned.

"Died in battle," Durran explained. "They died against other tribals more than they did Vessels, can you believe that? We were pushed to near-extinction, and still, they fought amongst themselves. Absolutely moronic." Durran rose to his feet, torso still a wreck. "But... they were family. Made the mistake of thinking I could do something good, for a change."

Garm stood, brushing his clothes off and readying himself. "Made that mistake once or twice, myself. It's why we're here, now." He laughed, then shook his head. "Thought maybe I could do better by my son than I was done." His smile faded. "But he was the one to kill me. My last student. My only child." He stared at Durran, true emotion coming through. Then, as if it was all a lie, that cynical grin returned. "Only child I knew of, at least."

Durran took a deep breath and exhaled. “I think I get it. All this fighting—it’s just pageantry. End of the day, it’s like you said. This is just a battle of will.”

Garm nodded. “That’s right. Maybe my son wasn’t my last student, after all. You should be honored.” Garm fixed his robe. “Unlike last time, there’ll be no dying.”

#####

Argrave sat by the great willow tree, staring out of the opening in the mountain they resided in at the edge of the world. An endless plain of skies waited beyond. He held Garm’s letter in hand. He had read it countless time, but even now, it wasn’t setting in. He started to read it again.

Argrave,

You might be furious. You might be feeling betrayed. You might be feeling saddened. Perhaps that last one is wishful thinking on my end.

But, at the end of the day, this was my choice. Doing this was my only chance at real freedom. I know that you’ll disagree. You probably would have done much and more to return me back as I was. But that’s just the thing; I hate relying on others, and I hate being in debt. You seem a bad debtor, moreover. Galamon told me of his ten-year sentence to servitude.

Don’t rip up the page, I’m just joking.

So, I concocted this little scheme. I’m sure Galamon or someone else explained things to you. Or maybe things have already finished, and one of us told you. Quite frankly, I don’t know how this ends. Might be Durran walks out. I’d give him 99% odds. Might be I walk out. I’d give me 100% odds.

You can see why I avoided gambling. Too much confidence in the unlikely.

Regardless, I’m leaving this writing here as a contingency of sorts, to explain things. The Alchemist graciously helped me write out all the spells I know. Just as Durran, you and Anneliese are free to learn from the books.

The more important matter: my eyes. I’ve had the Alchemist remove my eyes. I suspect the eyes of an A-rank mage will be immeasurably useful to you, for reasons I doubt I need to explain. My ascension to A-rank made them different from others’ eyes, too—you can cast spells with them. The Alchemist confirmed he would be willing to help you with that. It should work flawlessly. You and Anneliese can decide who gets them—Galamon has already refused.

Of course, I promised the Alchemist you’d do something for him. Ask him for the details. It’s nothing big. In fact, you’d already intended to do it.

I don’t care for sappy stuff, but I wish to let you know I consider you a friend.

See you soon, or never again.

Garm, High Wizard of the Order of the Rose

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 154: Cynical Bastards

"Set aside this fight, for now. Let me ask you a question," Durran hefted his glaive, pointing it at Garm. "Say you prevail. What next?"

"I'll work at regaining the power I had," Garm answered at once.

Durran lowered the glaive. "You see, I've noticed a little problem you have. I ask that question, and you first talk about what you're going to do for yourself."

"I can't help anyone without power," Garm shook his head. "That's why you're doing this, no? I offered you a route to power, and you lunged for the opportunity."

"More I learn about you, the more I realize how your perception of me is flawed. There's a key difference between you and I," Durran settled back, sitting cross-legged amidst the field of black roses. "And it's how far we're willing to take things."

Garm raised a brow, and also sat down patiently. "How so?"

"Let's reflect on things," Durran raised his hand up. "You deliberately withhold information whenever it suits you. You lie constantly to get what you want. You don't care about how your actions bother people, nor about those you hurt. Moreover..." Durran picked a black rose. "These things you summon. They're made of human flesh. I can't just gloss over the fact that death is such a casual thing for you."

Garm snorted. "You're denouncing me as a bad person? You joined me in this deception. Don't get sore when you got caught in your own trap."

"You don't really care about other people," Durran held his gaze. "That's the impression I get."

Garm stared in silence, then raised a brow. "Is that a bad thing? I do intend on helping Argrave, if that's your concern."

"I know what I've seen," Durran said flatly. "And I've seen that when you want something, you'll do whatever it takes to make it yours. Person like that with power... well, it's dangerous. Letting you roam free would be dangerous. If not for the present, for the future. Gerechtigkeits might be a supreme enemy... but what comes after, that's just as important. That was my mistake at Sethia."

Garm scratched his cheek. "A man can't change?"

"My uncle was someone who did whatever he needed to get what he wanted," Durran said calmly. "You yourself said people like him were like rabid animals, and that the best thing to do was put them down. For themselves as much as everyone else."

"I said people that toy with kids are rabid animals. You're comparing me to your molester uncle?" Garm veritably growled.

Durran shook his head. "I don't think you have that twisted inclination, no. But if you did, nothing would hold you back. You've got no conscience. No morals."

Garm threw a dagger at Durran, and the tribal warrior quickly rolled to the side to dodge it.

"All this guilt I've been feeling—it's suddenly gone," Garm spat.

“Your life has been miserable,” Durran continued as Garm rose to his feet, readying spells. “I’ll admit that. You’ve gotten plenty of life lessons that taught you to be as you are. In your situation, you had to take what you wanted, because no one was going to give it you.”

Garm conjured a whip of lightning and swung it at Durran. The tribal warrior caught it, shattering it with one hand. He stabbed his glaive into the earth and walked forward. Garm stepped backwards. With each step he took, the black roses unfurled into bats of flesh, flying towards Durran.

“It’s how my people—the southern tribals—became as they were. Life in the desert is harsh, and so they learned how to take what they want by the blade. It worked well, for a time. They conquered the empire of the southron elves. But eventually... they hit a wall. And they were eaten from within.”

Durran’s hand liquified—he was mimicking the power of a Vessel in this lucid dream-like state. Great spouts of water hunted each bat that came towards him, killing them relentlessly. Ahead, Garm used Argrave’s favorite spell, and electric eels danced upwards into the air, forming a great cloud of sparking terror above.

“Thing is... a hard life is no excuse to trample on the lives of others,” Durran continued. “You’re tough. Tougher than me, probably. You’re more ruthless, certainly.”

A cloud of near one hundred electric eels shot downwards at Durran. He pulled an axe out of thin air, and swung it upwards. Garm only realized it was made of Ebonice when everything he’d conjured dissipated, and sparks of lightning scattered across the vast expanse of land ineffectually.

Durran lunged forth and grabbed Garm’s neck.

“My brothers and sisters were all tougher than me, more ruthless than me. Better embodiments of southern tribal traditions, by all rights.” He held Garm there, squeezing tight. “When I was the last living, my father said I was ‘good enough.’ And that’s just the thing,” he continued. “I am good enough. I can get the job done. And unlike you... I won’t leave a wasteland in my wake.”

“Like at Sethia?” Garm smiled mockingly, barely resisting Garm’s grasp.

“If you were Argrave, you would have sided with the Vessels from the beginning,” Durran pulled him closer. “Am I wrong?”

“And I would’ve been RIGHT!” Garm shouted. “Much less danger, much less sacrifice. Less a battle, more a slaughter.”

“But the Vessels would’ve kept their grip over the Burnt Desert for time eternal. And my people would be dead. I owe Argrave—I haven’t forgotten that.”

“I hate this self-sacrificial bullshit you people engage in,” Garm snarled. His body started to contort unnaturally, popping and breaking. He seemed to be shrinking. “It’s a damn shame. Work twice as hard to live half as much,” he mocked.

“You grind your fingers to the bone building others’ homes. Absolutely nauseating,” Garm continued. “At the end of the day, if you’d stop worrying about what’s right and worry about what’s good, you’d live twice as much and work half as long.”

"That's your problem," Durran shook his head. "You think living well and living right are mutually exclusive. For most people, the two are one in the same."

"Don't lie to yourself," Garm disagreed. His transformation had finished—once again, he was but a head atop a stake. His eyes were missing, now. "You would be much happier if you lived as I do."

"I think you agree with me," Durran shook his head. "And that's why you did this. Because you've changed."

"But that's just it. You'll never know what's in my head. You'll never know my thoughts. Mutual understanding—that doesn't matter."

Durran shook his head. "We have mutual understanding. The same kindness you hate so much, Garm, is exactly what you wanted as a kid. Maybe we're alike in that way. But rather than becoming those who mistreated me, I'd much rather be their better. That way, the next generation can be spared of cynical bastards like us." Durran let the words hang, then thought of another example. "Like your son."

"Stop talking. You're insufferable." Despite his harsh words, Garm's voice shook slightly.

Durran was not sure if it was fear... or something else. And he would never know.

#####

Galamon sat near the incapacitated body of Durran. He was unsure of what, exactly, was going to happen. Matters of the soul, of death... simply put, there was a reason Galamon never studied magic. He was smart in many areas, but he had difficulty wrapping his head around things of a mystical nature. Ebonice suited him for this reason.

He wasn't looking, but he could feel the body's heartbeat quicken, as though the person had just woken up. Galamon knew, then, the battle was finished. He stood, walking over to the altar-like table where Durran rested. The eyes were closed.

"It's over, then," Galamon said, though the person had given no indication they were actually awake.

One eye opened, and a golden eye locked on Galamon. Slowly, the man sat up. He looked at his hands like they were foreign objects.

"Who won?" Galamon asked tentatively.

His head turned, and the two eyes started at Galamon for a long while.

"Why? Did you make bets?" Durran looked around. "Given no one else is here, I'm guessing not."

"Garm's gone, then," Galamon concluded, with so much certainty it was not a mere guess.

Durran sighed. "Yeah. That was..." he shook his head, then stared off into the distance, as though there was much that he wanted to say. "He was a good man," Durran lifted his head up. "He tried to do what he thought was best, at the end." He lowered his head. "I've learned from him. And, in a way, I'll continue to learn from him, for the rest of my life."

Galamon stared down Durran for a few seconds, scrutinizing him. Slowly, he nodded.

“Argrave knows about this... earlier than intended. He improved a lot, today. He went off into the jungle when he found out what’d happened. Anneliese followed.”

Durran ran his hands across his face. “Damn it. I was hoping...” he stood up off the table, rising to his feet. He swayed for a bit, then steadied. “I should talk to them. Apologize, something.”

He started to walk, but Galamon grabbed his shoulder. “No,” he stopped him. “You shouldn’t.”

Durran furrowed his brows, staring up at Galamon. “You really think so? I mean, even if it was Garm’s idea, I still deceived them much more than they deserved. Not to mention... I’ve deprived them of someone.”

“They will talk. Alone,” Galamon emphasized. “Interrupting them now would be a great disservice.”

Durran nodded. “If you think that’s best.” He shook his head. “Might be I’m hated for this.”

“Might be,” Galamon shrugged, taking his hand off Durran’s shoulder.

“How reassuring,” Durran noted sarcastically.

“You made your choice. I’ll offer no empty comforts,” Galamon declared. “But you made your vow, too. As long as you hold it... as long as you help... I cannot imagine they will remain frigid towards you. But bear this in mind.”

Galamon stepped closer, looming over Durran. “When you take a life for the sake of duty, I expect that duty to become your single-minded focus.”

“I’ll do more than my part,” Durran agreed, nodding. “Garm gave his life for mine. I will never forget that.” Durran stepped away, leaning against the table. Thinking of something, he questioned, “What do your people say of Gerechtigheit?”

“Much,” Galamon declared simply.

“Then it’s about time I get to work, no? Educate me, please.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 155: Stupid Heart

“Argrave,” Anneliese called out, short of breath.

Argrave turned his head from where he sat beside the great willow tree hanging off the ledge. This was where the cave housing the Alchemist’s home ended, leaving only a sheer cliff at a high point in a mountain. With the unending plain of clouds ahead, it appeared like the end of the earth stretched before him. The suns were setting, hueing the white fluffy clouds with reds and oranges.

Anneliese took some time to catch her breath, and then took slow steps towards him. Argrave turned his head back to the view before him, watching silently. She came to stand beside him.

“I feel blindsided,” he said, gaze wandering the cloud steppes. “Always had a theory about suicide. I thought there were some types of people that just wouldn’t. No matter how rough, they’d never do something like that.” He exhaled through his nose lightly—the smallest laugh. “I thought Garm was one

of those types.” He brought his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. “Thought I was, too. That’s something to note.” He paused. “Don’t worry. I’m not suggesting anything.”

Anneliese shifted on her feet. “It was not... suicide, exactly,” she argued as she sat down beside Argrave, staring out.

“I know a fair bit about souls. Read a lot of lore about them. Garm used [Voice of the Corrupt]. The damage to his soul would be significant. What’s more, Durran’s got an iron will.” Argrave shook his head. “It was hopeless from the beginning. Garm must’ve known that.”

“But Garm was arrogant,” she pointed out, staring beyond. “Maybe he genuinely thought he could win.”

He shook his head deliberately and slowly. “I can’t believe that. Garm might have had more experience... but in a fight between souls, that really matters none. You can do one such fight in ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ It’s a fancy fight... but given what I know of the lore, if one soul is damaged, it’s like pitting a bear against a dragon. The bear might be dangerous, but...”

She sighed. “Of all people... Garm.” She looked at him. “We knew him less than a month. And though it is horrible to say... I do hope Garm lives. But even still...”

“Even still?” Argrave pressed.

“He was deeply unhappy. Miserable. Maybe... maybe he jumped at the first chance he saw, no matter how poor his odds were,” she mused. “Anything to avoid living as he was for a while longer.”

Argrave said nothing, considering his own position on the matter. He knew Durran better than her, even if it was in a different medium. But, in this reality, he’d known Garm for longer. The man had been obstinate, stubborn, but there was a strange charm to his constant bitterness. He was like Rowe, in a way. Ultimately...

Argrave sighed. “I just want this day to end.”

Anneliese stared at Argrave, watching him. A silence settled in between them for a long, long while.

“Argrave. Please, break this cycle.”

He turned his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Holding your thoughts inside. Losing yourself in other things until you forget about it. Every time you get like this... it is worse than the last. Then your nightmares get worse, and you keep burdening yourself more and more and more.” Anneliese shook her head, unruly white hair swaying.

His gray eyes stared her down, steady as stone. After a time, he turned back to the view. The suns were setting lower, adding shades of purple and pink atop the clouds.

“Ignoring these things is a good skill to have, for a guy in my position,” he shrugged, seemingly nonchalant. “I can’t let thoughts, emotions, distract from the ultimate goal.”

“Again, you hesitate to speak,” she shook her head frustratedly.

“That stuff isn’t easy for me,” he ground his feet against the ground. “Not to mention my current in-agony state.”

"Agony makes people *more* emotional, typically, yet even now you choke yourself." She sidled closer. "Please," she stared at him intently.

"Please, what?" Argrave looked to her.

"Stop choking yourself."

"And do what, spill my guts?" Argrave threw his hands up. "What's the point? I'm positive you know what I'm feeling."

"But not *why*," she insisted. "That is the crux of things. There is only so much I can deduce from what I notice. There is so much you keep hidden, private." She pointed at him. "You refuse to disclose even the simplest things—your name!"

"Argrave," he rebuked.

"You know what I mean—acting ignorant does not become you," Anneliese gave him a stern-eyed glare. "The name of who you were before," she elaborated.

"Why is that important?" he held out his hands. "I'm here, now. That life is gone. That guy is dead."

"Is he?" she questioned loudly. "I talk to him right now. I grow frustrated at his obstinance. I worry for his well-being when he runs out, barefoot, into a jungle when he was sweating blood and having seizures not yesterday!"

Argrave stared at her, eyes wide when the ever-calm Anneliese yelled. After a time, he found the situation rather funny. He turned his head and laughed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to run out. I got... a little overwhelmed when I heard the news."

"Yet you will not say why," she noted, annoyed.

"Why is that important?!"

"In case you have not noticed, I am always fascinated by 'why,'" she pointed out, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him.

Argrave rocked with her pushes, then chuckled, much of the tension dispelled.

"I feel pretty good, actually. The aching... it's lessening. And that run—by god, you wouldn't even recognize me." He held up his hand. "My nails are even growing back. I think things are getting better, even if I'm not out of the water."

"I am glad of it. Hopefully, things will—" she stopped, then frowned. "You are too good at controlling the conversation. I will not drop this subject."

He laughed again. "I'm caught."

"Argrave, I insist on this because I am worried," she said levelly. "You act exactly like Garm."

Argrave turned his head quickly, almost offended.

"What did he do? He lied and tricked us all. It may have been for a good purpose, but at the end of the day, he is lost to us." She pointed at Argrave. "Just because it is in a different manner does not change the fact that you are doing the same thing. Self-sacrifice."

Argrave frowned. "I can't recall the last time I tricked you," he pointed out.

"And all that Garm did was *withhold. Information.*" She poked his arm as she said those last two words. "Does that sound familiar?"

"No," he lied, adjusting his sitting position.

Anneliese stared at him patiently, waiting for him to speak.

"Alright," he nodded. "I do... understand your point. I'm not conceding that you're right," he added.

"As I recall, you once said I was smarter than you, and you would never refuse my advice," she smiled sweetly.

Argrave frowned but couldn't hold the expression for long before he broke off into a chuckle. "People always turn your own words against you in the end."

"Do you trust me?" she questioned.

"Of course," Argrave answered at once. "That isn't what this is about. Never was."

"I think that you do distrust me," Anneliese refuted.

"Ridiculous," Argrave shook his head quickly. "Honestly, after what happened today, Galamon, Durran, and Garm going behind our backs like that... I think I trust you the most of everyone."

"Then why do you keep me at a distance, even still?"

"It's precisely because I trust you so much," Argrave looked at her insistently. "Of everyone... hell, I said it earlier this month. *I don't want you to think less of me.* I said it, plainly. The idea makes me very uncomfortable. The mundane nonsense that worms its way into my head—if I tell you that... Christ, I'd die of embarrassment."

"You do not trust I would treat you the same if I knew more about you," Anneliese summarized, tone flat.

"No...!" Argrave insisted, holding his hand out. But his visceral reaction faded, and he truly processed what she said. His face turned pensive, and his hand lowered. "I..."

"You see, now?" she raised a brow.

Argrave could only turn his head away, with nothing more to argue against. Ahead, the field of clouds had been dyed beautiful colors by the setting sun. It was like a painting, so beautiful it was, the dangling leaves of the willow tree only adding to the beauty.

"Why would you accept me if you knew me?" he finally spoke, voice quiet. "Argrave, royal bastard of House Vasquer, powerful mage blessed by Erlebnis, vanguard against Gerechtigkei... and behind that,

there's just some fucking guy." He shook his head. "Some strange goblin creature who locked himself in his home, writing about a game for fun. How do the two compare at all?"

"Argrave..."

"All of this, all of me, everything I've done... it's with someone else's body," he turned his head to her. "That gnaws at me, every day. I'm an imposter. A phony. I'm wearing someone else's shoes, and I'm walking about like my feet are massive. My feet are small—I'm just wearing big shoes, Anneliese. My hair, my eyes, my voice... even my skin's an adornment," he whipped his head back to the skyscape, blinking quickly.

Anneliese crawled forward a little and grabbed Argrave's shoulders, turning him around.

"Argrave," she said insistently, staring him in the eyes. "When you were born, did you choose your appearance?"

"What?" he questioned, confused.

"In your previous life... did you choose how you look? Did you choose your parents? Did you choose your social status or financial status, your physique, your intelligence, your talents? Did you choose your name?"

Argrave wiped at his eyes, refocusing. "Well, no, but I could have chosen the last—"

"No," she repeated, giving him a light shake. "You chose none of that."

"But I grew into it," he insisted. "I was born, I grew, I had parents, I had a life—now all of that is *gone*, and I'm in this slowly spoiling world with a responsibility so heavy—"

"You have no responsibility," Anneliese declared.

He hesitated a beat, then continued, "But the bronze hand mirror—"

"Everything you have done... you have *chosen* to do." She took a deep breath and sighed.

"Responsibilities are things fabricated by the mind, by society. You have no responsibility to do anything about anything. *This was your choice.*"

Argrave stared at her amber eyes, throat tight and breathing heavy.

"I have never known Argrave," Anneliese shook her head. "I have known *you*. I know the man who chose to throw himself headlong into unimaginable danger with not an ounce of hesitation. Your first response to your situation was to *endeavor to stop an invasion*," she said plainly. "Despite your sickly body, and despite your weakness. *And you succeeded.*"

"From there," she continued, still holding his shoulders, "You braved a cavern full of horrifying bugs. You navigated that city of Jast like it was your own property and negotiated a pivotal alliance between nobles by the end of it all. You went into the Low Way, getting caught between vampires, a knightly order, and twisted abominations, and emerged on top. You spurred a revolution against a tyrannical cult. And now... you have become Black Blooded. I don't say this to flatter you—I say it to emphasize your choices, your actions."

Argrave's breathing calmed a fair bit. "Well... each had varying degrees of success... and I wasn't alone..."

"You were the impetus," she insisted.

He raised a brow, then conceded with a shrug. "I guess..."

"That was not Argrave. That was you. And I know you. You used to hate getting dirty or touching people, but you overcame that. Your response to discomfort or nervousness is to make jokes. I know that you enjoy explaining things, and I know that you enjoy learning magic. I know that you care deeply for the people around you—indeed, all people. You are a man who deceives everyone, most of all himself. You are a prolific liar—astonishingly so. Truly, it is almost unnerving how quickly you can fabricate things."

His growing smile paused.

She leaned in a little closer. "I do not know Argrave. But I know you. I like your witty comments and your humorous interjections. I am constantly astonished by your diligence and your willpower. You are admirably tenacious. The tenacity you have displayed these past days... it is unfathomable." She shook his shoulders. "This is *you*. All of it. You are the tall, confident, handsome man I know... who calls himself 'Argrave.'"

Anneliese's words rattled his cage, bringing up something Argrave had been trying to keep locked away. He felt unbearably nervous as he lifted his hand up to her face. His fingers brushed her cheek, and she took a deep breath of surprise. She didn't pull away, though, and he stared into her beautiful amber eyes. He leaned in, slowly, heart pounding the fastest it ever had...

Their lips met, and they shared a kiss. Beyond them, the suns continued the set, painting a serene scene of purples, oranges, pinks, and blues across the ocean of clouds.

Argrave pulled away and rested his forehead against hers, staring into her eyes. Both of them had red cheeks.

"I've wanted to do that for a long while," he admitted quietly.

Anneliese stared back into his eyes. It felt like the two of them had entered their own private little world, and everything around had ceased to be. Sounds, sights, smells, pain, all gone. There was only the two of them.

"I know," she said after that long moment.

Argrave lowered his head to her shoulder, laughing heartily. Anneliese soon joined him, both falling into a disorganized heap of giggles. All the tension, sadness, anger, dispelled at once, and they both held each other. By the end of things, they laid on their backs, staring upwards.

"Definitely could have chosen a better time for that," Argrave commented. "I bet I look terrible."

"I thought... you were not attracted to me," Anneliese admitted quietly.

"What?" Argrave sat up quickly, supporting himself with his elbow and staring down at her. "Why would you ever think that?"

"I would notice... I suppose..." she shook her head. "Romantic feelings. But then they would vanish, like you were... disgusted by them."

Argrave frowned. "Not disgusted, never. Just... I didn't think it would be a good time for such a thing... and..."

"And?" she pressed, raising her hand to his face.

"I felt I was inadequate," he looked off to the side. "Well, correct that— 'feel.'"

She sighed. "Need I give you yet another monologue?"

Argrave laughed, then turned back to face her. "Look at you. You're drop-dead gorgeous, you're probably the most talented spellcaster in the world, you're way smarter than I am... I don't think anyone could be a worthy partner for you."

She smiled, cheeks reddening. "You are," she pinched his cheek. "You nameless man. Will you tell me your name, now?"

"Payment for the kiss?" he questioned playfully.

"That would be an unfair barter," she shook her head.

He grinned. "You're right. Kiss from you—that's worth the world."

"No," she laughed. "I get both a kiss and a name. That's too much for me."

Argrave laid back on the ground, joining her in laughter. "My lord. Can't believe you think you're not smooth."

She held her hand out. Argrave took it.

"Vincenzo—Vincent," he said.

She leaned up. "Vincenzo Vincent?"

"No," he snorted. "Vincent's a shorthand. Vincent, Vince, Vinny, Vin... take your pick. Vincenzo Giordano. That's my name. I'm an Italian American... though you don't really know what that means, and my parents were the black sheep and didn't care much about heritage, anyhow... don't even have the accent..."

"Vincenzo Giordano," she repeated slowly, and then squeezed his hand a bit tighter.

Argrave felt strange, hearing that name again after so long. It wasn't entirely pleasant, but... it wasn't unpleasant, either.

"Would you like me to call you that? When alone, or..." she trailed off, staring at him.

"No," Argrave shook his head. "'Argrave' isn't bad. I don't hate it. And frankly... hearing that name again does make me a bit uncomfortable. Reminds me of things. I'd rather just treat 'Argrave' as my new name."

"If it makes you uncomfortable...forget it," she shook her head, and then laid back down.

A quiet silence set over them as they laid there. The suns had vanished, now, leaving only night behind.

"If you want me to open up a little... honestly, the only thing that kept me going was discipline." Argrave held her hand a little tighter. "Getting up... was the hardest part of each day. Maybe that's why it was hard to sleep."

"I hope you say 'was' because that has changed."

"For the sleeping part—I suppose we'll have to find out. But..." Argrave trailed off. "My health is going to better. Stellar. Hell, this little moment we're sharing, it's easy to ignore the pain. I'm Black Blooded, a monument to health and wealth." He thought of something and laughed.

"What?" Anneliese asked, confused why he was laughing.

"I thought the best gift I'd get here was becoming Black Blooded. Turns out I was wrong again. Instead, I got you."

She shook her head, but Argrave could hear very faint laughter. After a while, she sat up.

"Argrave," she began, freeing her hand and placing it on her lap.

"Yeah?" he adjusted his head.

"When this is all over... do you want to find out why you came here? What happened to you?"

Argrave raised a brow, then lost himself in thought. "The way things are shaping up..." Argrave began. "There's going to be a lot of devastation. Between the plague, the civil war... most of all, Gerechtigkeits... and those are just the ones most immediately obvious," Argrave shook his head. "If I have a large part in things, as is almost necessary... it stands to reason I'll need to be a part of the rebuilding, too."

"A position of prominence..." Anneliese noted. "Leadership, guidance... perhaps even sovereignty."

Argrave went silent. He stared up at the stars, just barely visible beyond the ceiling of the cave.

"The thought had entered my head," he noted. "Royal bastard, heavily involved, hopefully a force for good... maybe people might want that as a king. But bastardry is a heavier stain than you might imagine."

"I'm not suggesting you take it," Anneliese shook her head. "The opposite, in fact. You'll have toiled for three years, sweating blood. Quite literally, after this month," she noted. "Once He Who Would Judge the Gods is gone... maybe... we can abandon it all."

"Already planning an elopement?" Argrave smirked.

"Be serious," she insisted, grabbing his hand and shaking it. "I see how much you put into this. I said it earlier, but you are astonishingly resilient. Some selfishness would be long overdue once things are over."

"You're planning for something we've yet to do," Argrave pointed out. "The odds are far from being rigged in our favor. Fighting a world killer—not exactly a guaranteed win, little lady." He gripped her hand. "There's something selfish I do want to do, though."

“And what is that?”

“Make the whole world know about us,” he suggested. “We have an opportunity to become really unbearable, and I think it needs to happen.”

She smiled. “Unbearable?” she repeated.

“You know the type. Constantly being lovey-dovey, no matter where.” He smiled, then shook his head.

“Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself, imposing my thoughts like this. I just... I’m happy. And I feel lucky.”

“Me too,” she nodded. “But... a position of prominence, as I mentioned... already, Nikoletta’s father wished to engage you to—”

“Stop that,” Argrave interjected at once. “If there’s one thing I’m not willing to compromise on, it’s you. No political nonsense is going to stop that.”

She said nothing in response, but she did smile. Argrave looked back towards the stars.

“I think... I’m looking forward to the future,” Argrave realized.

“Argrave... please do not become like Garm,” Anneliese insisted.

Those words felt like Argrave had been pushed back into reality. He felt guilty he had been able to put that aside so quickly... but the mind avoids the negative. His mind more than most.

“The idea of it makes me nauseous,” she continued. “Do not sacrifice yourself for anyone. And... if not with anyone else... at least promise to be totally honest with me.”

The two of them stared at each other. Argrave stayed silent. He found it was a difficult promise to make. There was much he wished to hide from her, much he wished to never again let see the light of day.

“Alright,” Argrave nodded, though the words were difficult to say. “I promise.”

Contented, she laid down, resting her head on his chest. Argrave wrapped one arm around her, feeling full of life.

Cupid heart, stupid heart... where will you go from here?