

Jackal 156

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Chapter 156: No Return Policy

Argrave and Anneliese talked for a long while before Argrave's hunger started to eat at him, and they elected to return. On the way back, Argrave's Brumesingers greeted him, climbing all over him like a friend sorely missed. Argrave could almost feel their worry for him.

Their fur was growing shades darker. It seemed they had food enough to live well in this place. It was a testament to the Alchemist's callous nature, he supposed. It also served as a reminder not to step out of line.

But after a time, Argrave left them outside once more, entering into the Alchemist's home alongside Anneliese. As they walked through the halls of the Alchemist's home, faint voices echoed through the halls. They cast a glance at each other, and then Argrave rushed towards its source.

Argrave turned the corner to where Durran's body had been resting. Galamon was looking at him, evidently hearing his approach long ago. Durran—or was it Garm? —twisted his head to look at Argrave.

"Argrave," Galamon greeted.

Without words, Argrave stepped up to the other person in the room. A pair of golden eyes watched him, the purple light of the Alchemist's abode reflecting off the golden tattoos on his skin.

He stared for a long while. Eventually, Durran took a deep breath. "Garm is gone," he disclosed.

The words hit harder than Argrave thought they would. Perhaps he hadn't accepted it. Perhaps he was holding onto the belief that some strange miracle would happen. But now, seeing Durran standing, it was like he'd seen the body in the coffin.

"I am sorry for deceiving you," Durran continued, looking at Argrave. His gaze shifted to Anneliese as she entered. "For deceiving all of you. But what happened... it was something I strongly feel needed to happen. And Garm wanted this."

At that moment, Argrave recalled something his father had told him once. He turned his body slightly to the side. Then he rotated again, throwing a punch as though something was behind Durran. His middle knuckle struck the man right in the nose.

Take a stance, rotate your hips, keep your wrist straight... and punch right through 'im, his dad had insisted.

Maybe his dad was right, or maybe he was lucky. Regardless, Durran's head jerked back and his knees buckled, and he stumbled backwards before falling against the ground. Argrave stood there, still tense. That was the first time he had ever punched anyone. Durran wasn't small, by any means—well built, tall for normal-sized people, but Argrave had downed him. His hand hurt, but he felt a strange rush of relief.

He heard Anneliese gasp, and even Galamon looked a little surprised. Argrave stepped forward. Durran already regained his bearings. He scrambled upwards, ready to fight. Argrave only pointed.

"Don't ever pull anything like that again," Argrave declared.

Durran rose to his feet, one hand on his bleeding nose. His wide eyes stayed locked on Argrave for a long time, and then he nodded.

"I don't want to see you for a while," Argrave lowered his hand. "We'll talk when I've got a cool head. Right now, I'm feeling like doing something we'll both regret."

"...alright," Durran answered, voice nasally.

Argrave turned and left, storming down the hall. Anneliese quickly moved after him.

Once they were a decent distance away, Argrave asked, "Why did I do that?"

"Because you were angry," Anneliese answered.

"I already regret it," Argrave shook his head. "God damn it all. I can't be doing stupid things like that. He's supposed to be another member of our group."

"It may be good thing," she mused.

Argrave paused in the halls, turning. "How?"

"He may feel that he has been punished for what he has done. Subliminally... if this can be overcome, he would see you as a leader more naturally. After all, a leader needs to deliver punishment."

He stared with a frown for a while, and then began walking back to his room once again. Once he passed the threshold to his room, he paused in his tracks, spotting the great Alchemist looming overhead.

"Refrain from that wandering again," he commanded at once, holding Argrave's report in his hand. "I do not need unnecessary variables in my observation." He closed the book, then turned his head.

"Regardless, your writing has regained some clarity. I expect you to describe how your body felt during that foolish outing."

Argrave nodded slowly, feeling unsettled, tense, and angry. The second he wanted to hold Anneliese's hand, she was already doing so. He found out her empathic abilities were nicer every day, it seemed.

"Garm said that he promised I would do something for you," Argrave spoke. "What was it?"

Anneliese looked at him, evidently ignorant of this promise.

"You will stop Gerechtigheit," the Alchemist said plainly. "At any cost."

Argrave took a deep breath, almost finding the promise funny. Anneliese had said he had chosen to fight Gerechtigheit, that it wasn't a responsibility—yet now, he was making a promise to do so.

"Yes, I will," Argrave nodded.

If the Alchemist had a reaction to the vow, he displayed none. He held his hand out. His finger unfurled, revealing a set of black eyes with golden irises. Argrave flinched a little. Eyes made him uncomfortable.

"Who receives these? The head was not clear."

Argrave stared at them, greatly disturbed. That was the saddest part of all, by his estimation. His throat tightened, and Argrave swallowed to dispel the feeling. The eyes seemed to have some intangible magic swirling about them, barely perceptible.

"Can I think about it?"

"Can you think about it?" the Alchemist repeated. "You query me seeking answers regarding something only you can answer. Do I have control of your faculties? I replaced your heart, not your brain, and even then both are yours alone."

"I need time to think," Argrave rephrased, feeling exhausted.

The Alchemist's fingers popped as they curled, hiding away the two black eyes. He walked away without giving a confirmation, leaving Argrave even more battered.

"I think that's his way of saying yes," Argrave sighed, releasing Anneliese's hand. He strode to his bed, recalling only now how filthy the place was.

Anneliese walked up, and perhaps noticing his disgust, pulled off the blankets. "I will replace these," she stated.

"No," Argrave stopped her. "Let's sit for a minute."

She held the blankets, frozen, then nodded. They both sat.

"Garm's eyes," Argrave said, shaking his head. "Christ. What a blow."

"...they would be helpful," Anneliese conceded. "He wrote a letter to me, too. He described them. Apparently, they'll function as any other A-rank mage's eyes, retaining their ability to perceive another's magic, and moreover—"

"You can cast spells from them," Argrave nodded. "He wrote the same to me." He turned his head over to her. "A bit morbid, inheriting someone's eyes. Since you remembered, can I take it that you...?"

"Argrave..." she looked down. "I am... not entirely sure I can..." he saw a chill run through her. "The idea of subjecting myself to the Alchemist makes me afraid."

Argrave nodded. "Then put the idea out of your head. A good thing, too," he noted, putting his hand to her cheek. "Elsewise I'd never be able to see those beautiful amber eyes again," he said, trying to distract her with a compliment.

It seemed to work, and Anneliese regained some vigor. Argrave fell back to the bed, thinking on the matter. He pondered his eyes, then started to laugh.

"First I'm Black Blooded, now I've got golden eyes with black sclera... can't get much edgier than that. What's next, I wonder? Cursed arm? Third eye?"

Anneliese looked down at him. "I get the impression you do not want them."

Argrave bit at his lip. "I stand out enough as is. With eyes like that, covert operations are... well, hell, covert operations were never on the table. I stick out way too much," Argrave shook his head. "People might distrust me. Might think I'm possessed, or... inhuman, who knows?"

Anneliese watched him. "You feel conflicted. Talk to me," she reminded him.

"I don't know..." Argrave trailed off. "Would feel... very, very wrong to refuse them. A man donates his organs to me, I toss them out because they're the wrong color? Talk about desecrating the dead, spitting on a last wish," Argrave shook his head.

"Why not present them to Durran?" Anneliese suggested.

Argrave looked at her. "Garm never mentioned Durran," he pointed out. "And... I don't know. He's very free-spirited. I'm not sure if... well," he trailed off, but Anneliese nodded understandingly.

"Do you recall Helmuth?" Anneliese questioned. "The man had eyes like purple vortexes, as I recall."

Argrave leaned up quickly, clarity coming to him as soon as she posed the question. "Yeah... yeah, you're right," he nodded. "I can just say it's because I'm a spellcaster. Handwave things away, call it magic,"

"Indeed," she nodded. "It will certainly take some... getting used to, nonetheless."

"Yeah. I can't even imagine what it's like, perceiving magic." Argrave shook his head. "Honestly... now that I think about it... a little exciting, honestly."

"I referred to my own adaptation," she shook her head. "I fear I will recall Garm when I look at you."

"Look on the bright side," he said cheerily. "These weren't my eyes to begin with."

She was taken off guard and laughed. "One way to look at things..."

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"You will have them?" the Alchemist questioned. "Annoying."

Argrave frowned, but had regained his bearings and did not so easily ask questions as he had in days past. He didn't care to push his luck.

The Alchemist stepped around Argrave's bed. A day had passed, and the place had become much cleaner. The couch that Anneliese had been sleeping on had been moved away. She didn't need to sleep there, anymore... although Argrave wasn't sure either of them were ready to do more than actually sleeping. He had been concerned he might thrash in his sleep and disturb her, but their night was peaceful.

"I will not suffer yet more variables to disrupt my observation of your body. I will implant the eyes when the process is done... meaning I must preserve them until that time. A taxing, laborious task. Annoying," he repeated.

Argrave said nothing, lowering his head.

"The worst of your metamorphosis is over," declared the Alchemist. "You may thank the blood of Vasquer flowing within you. Feathered serpents have magic in their blood innately—in other such bloodlines it manifests as a high affinity for magic, generally. Here, it made your transition faster, easier, it seems. Something to note for the future. It may be a correlation, not a causation." The Alchemist shook his head. "Unfortunately, I can conduct no more tests."

Argrave brightened at the Alchemist's words, then paled when he realized what he'd been through was 'faster,' and 'easier.' If he had not been a Vasquer, what would things have been like, he wondered?

"I think you will fail against Gerechtigkeits," the Alchemist said. "But everyone you brought is very confident in you."

The words were unexpected—frankly, Argrave wouldn't have believed they came from the Alchemist had he not seen the man's mouth rise and fall and voice them.

"I don't think I will," Argrave shook his head. "But that's why I have to use my words. Make others aware, get them to finish things for me just in case. It's my specialty," Argrave smiled.

"The calamity changes every millennium," the Alchemist said.

"I know," Argrave nodded. "It's changed greatly from last time. It's sowing dissent. Targeting leadership, my... family... being the primary examples. Gerechtigkeits plays the puppet master. It's using us for its own end. Has been for years, now."

"Hmm," the Alchemist turned away. "Then it learned."

"And just as we won't fight it alone... it won't fight us alone," Argrave stated seriously. "When the time comes, I will ask you to help us."

The Alchemist put his hands behind his back, staring down at Argrave. Maybe it was a delusion, but the ivory-skinned monstrosity seemed the most human he ever had. As he always did, the Alchemist left seemingly mid-conversation, leaving Argrave feeling as disconcerted as ever.

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Chapter 157: All Eyes Ahead

Argrave laid his head back against the pillow, blinking rapidly. The Alchemist's finger curled inwards, stashing away the Unsullied Knife.

Eye replacement surgery had to be one of the most unpleasant operations imaginable, doubly so because the Alchemist was an unfeeling bastard who made him stay awake for the entire process. Even if it was painless, being blinded temporarily was terrifying beyond compare.

The Alchemist didn't have the grace to replace each eyeball individually—instead, he took both of them out, then replaced them one after the other. The only thing comparably horrifying was confronting death when he'd bonded with the Brumesingers, or perhaps the other thing the Alchemist had done to him.

"It is done," the Alchemist concluded. "This change will not be inherited by your progeny... unlike the Black Blooded transformation."

"My eyes feel hot," Argrave rubbed at them.

"It should be agonizing. Perhaps you are numb to pain," the Alchemist concluded. "The Black Blood must integrate with these eyes. In time, they will 'heal.' The color is brought about by necrotic decay coupled with necromancy. With your body as the template, you will regain your eye color. Half a year, according to my estimates."

Surprised and somewhat relieved to hear his eyes wouldn't remain like this forever, Argrave dared to open his eyes... and at once, saw for himself just how absolutely powerful the Alchemist was. He could see the magic practically bursting from his skin like a black cloud of death within him. It felt like looking at the sun, and Argrave quickly turned away.

He spotted Anneliese. She had magic within her, too, permeating throughout. Though it was the same black mist, it was nowhere near as dense as the Alchemist's. He was worried that this change would be eternal... but as soon as he wished for it, the black mist faded into oblivion like it never was.

I can see magic with will alone, Argrave noted, finally starting to feel things were worth it.

Argrave had yet to breach B-rank magic, and A-rank was even further beyond his ken. He had something special in mind for the ascension to A-rank. The increase in power at that point would be comparable to his Black Blood. Yet for now, the ability to discern magic power would be immeasurably useful... doubly so now that they were to head back into Vasquer, and once again confront mages.

His vision felt clear, too. Maybe he was delusional, but he felt like he saw things in better detail. Garm hadn't been falsely bragging about having good eyesight, evidently.

"If you lose them, I will not heal you," the Alchemist finally said, acting like losing eyes was as inconsequential as losing a ring. "Our business is done. Begone. Leave no messes."

Argrave watched the Alchemist leave, then fell back into the bed, acutely aware of his eyes. He turned to Anneliese.

"How bad is it?" he questioned.

She stared at his face. "Compared to your first two weeks incapacitated, it does not look bad at all. Bloodshot, perhaps."

"No, I mean... how does it look?" he rephrased.

"...unsettling," Anneliese finally said. "A little," she softened the blow.

Argrave sighed. "Half a year like this... allegedly. Might be helpful some places. Might cause trouble in others. I'll have to look for myself."

He reached for the bronze hand mirror, hefting it up as though to look for a change.

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

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

Argrave hadn't been idle. He'd been saddled with a massive magic debt to Erlebnis after the raid on Argent and the battle with the Lord of Silver. Every single day, he paid close attention to how much magic he had, diligently repaying things. It took perhaps three weeks to fully repay the debt. The rate was utterly ridiculous. His magic regenerated so much faster than before.

"You think Garm left behind some good blood magic?" Argrave questioned Anneliese.

"None of it is 'good.' It hurts you. Do not use it," Anneliese crossed her arms and shook her head.

Argrave got up out of the bed, squeezing his eyes shut even still. "Black Blood has an amazing synchronism with blood magic. I'll heal quicker from any damage, too. I have to use it."

Anneliese looked off to the side, obviously miffed and concerned.

"I'll look for myself," Argrave shook his head.

"Hold on," she stopped him. "The Alchemist said we needed to leave no mess."

Argrave looked around at the room. Despite Galamon pitching in, the place was a mess. The room had been mostly black, before, but now Argrave found it a tossup between red and black. Cleaning this up... would be a painful endeavor. Blood doesn't come up easily.

"Christ," Argrave muttered. "At least there's no carpet."

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Argrave stepped outside the gargantuan bulging door of the Alchemist's palace. The man hadn't come to see them off, and it felt strange to leave without a single word to their host. But their host was weird, and the term 'host' only applied because of the stringent requirements.

Once again, Argrave was fully ready. He wore his black enchanted leather armor, the matching duster overtop it. It was a little less loose than it had been before, like he had grown larger. His Brumesingers rushed out from the jungle, and he knelt down to retrieve them. Anneliese's own fox creature followed just shortly after, running into the palace. Argrave stood up, stroking the giant ears of his sorely missed pets.

The road ahead made Argrave feel strangely nervous. Anneliese walked up behind him, and he looked back.

"I laid in bed for a month... but I really want a break," Argrave said quietly, offering his hand.

She took it. "Take one, then," she suggested.

He looked sorely tempted, but after a while, he turned his head back to the road. "I've got one thing I wanted really bad," Argrave clenched her hand a bit tighter. "That'll have to tide me over for the next few years."

With that, Argrave released her hand and stepped forward. They walked past the jungle until it thinned, opening up into a clearing. There, Durran read, leaning up against a tree. Galamon stood there, arms crossed, ready for their approach.

"Leaving?" Galamon said simply.

"Yeah," Argrave confirmed. There was an awkward air between them.

"I'll pack," Galamon stepped away.

Durran stared up at Argrave uncertainly, like he didn't know where he stood, but then moved to pack as well.

“Durran,” Argrave called out. “Let’s walk for a minute.”

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“Are you sure you’re better? You look terrible,” noted Durran as they walked through the jungle.

Argrave touched his face, glad to receive some honesty for once. Anneliese always softened her words, and Galamon and Argrave hadn’t talked much at all since he’d enabled Garm to do as he did.

“I feel good,” Argrave confirmed, moving his fingers about. “But my nails still haven’t grown back. Didn’t really know how frustrating that would be,” he held his hands out. “Putting the gloves on was painful.”

“It’s more the sunken eyes and pale skin than some missing nails. You look like my father did. He was dying, need I remind you,” he shook his head. “No such luck, though.”

“Well, you won’t find that luck with me,” Argrave stopped, deciding to tear off the band-aid. “Listen. I’m sorry I punched you. Not exactly a good welcome.”

Durran paused, staring up at Argrave with his golden eyes. He fixed his dark hair. “Galamon said you lie a lot. Guess he was right.”

Though he was flabbergasted for a moment, Argrave started to laugh once he’d processed what Durran said.

“Don’t apologize,” Durran shook his head before he could recover. “It’s over and done. I won’t act like I would do something else in your shoes. And you did save my life.”

Argrave gave a steady nod, and then stared down at Durran. “You said something back then that’s been stuck in my gears. You said this ‘needed to happen.’ This business with Garm.”

“That...” Durran scratched the back of his neck. “I’ve been thinking that over myself. Garm wasn’t entirely honest with me, let alone with any of you,” he admitted. He seemed to hesitate to say more. “Maybe it was made up—something to convince me to do what he wanted. But he said his soul was damaged, and if he did nothing, his memories would fade away regardless.”

“What do you think?” Argrave questioned, trying to think of the lore he’d read long ago.

“I don’t know,” he admitted plainly. “But... for what it’s worth, I believed him back then.”

Argrave nodded. Strangely enough, that did make him feel better about things, if only just. He scanned the golden tattoos all about the tribal’s body as he lost himself in thought, then locked gazes with him. He decided to get to the point.

Argrave crossed his arms. “Why exactly are you tagging along?”

“I’m an exile. Even if it hasn’t been made official, it’s inevitable. I was always a bit of an outsider among my people, but after Sethia, I doubt any will welcome me. I have no home,” Durran shook his head.

“Galamon tells tall tales about a taller calamity coming to ruin the world. I figure that’s a worthwhile endeavor to set my sights on, if only to disprove its existence. More than that...” Durran pointed up at Argrave. “It seems to me you’ll be travelling a lot. Meddling a lot.”

"More than I care to," Argrave confirmed. "But you seem... if not a leader, at the very least, heavily independent. Definitely not a follower."

"Questioning if I'm worth the trouble?" Durran raised a brow.

"I'm questioning if you can be obedient," Argrave shrugged. "I know you're worth the trouble. You're talented. And you're hardworking—a talent on its own. But I know you. You're pretty whimsical." Argrave uncrossed one arm, gesturing towards Durran. "Hell, once the southron elves told you we'd spoken, you went and found me just outside Cyprus. I can't abide idiotic things like that."

"That meeting went fine, no?" Durran shook his head. "You act like we're old acquaintances. Not saying you're wrong with these assertions, but... whenever I ask questions about how you know so much, Galamon and Anneliese both clam up, like there's some grand conspiracy."

Argrave juggled the pros and cons of informing Durran of his background. Maybe it was his imagination, but he felt he was thinking much clearer these days. Perhaps physical health *did* improve mental health, and that wasn't just something he'd read somewhere ages ago. That clarity of mind told him it would be best to keep things quiet, at least for now.

"You'll learn when you're older," Argrave shook his head. "Listen. Trust will come with time. The three of us are rather accommodating. As long as you stay consistent, open-minded..." Argrave shrugged. "You'll be welcome."

Durran shifted on his feet. "I know. I'm the tag-along, with all the burdens that follow. But I made a promise to Garm. I'll keep it."

Argrave stared down at Durran. The man held his gaze for a bit, but eventually looked away first.

"Gods above. Those demon lamps you got for eyes—great reminder of that promise," Durran scratched his cheek.

Argrave chuckled, then held out his hand. They shook on the matter.

"One more thing," Argrave raised a finger, then reached into his pocket. He had to pull aside a sleeping Brumesinger, but he retrieved his bronze hand mirror. "Look at this."

Durran furrowed his brows but took the mirror. He looked at it.

"What's this? Some kind of voodoo mirror?" he paused. "Am I going to regret looking at this?"

"See anything strange?" Argrave pressed hopefully.

Durran hesitantly moved it about. "Just a mirror, leader man," he shook his head, perplexed.

"Guess you're not ready," Argrave said, retrieving the mirror. He stowed it away and walked back.

"What does that mean?" Durran called out as Argrave walked away. "Hey! Wait!" he shouted, rushing to catch up.

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“Feels like I’ve fallen behind,” Argrave mused as he examined the books that Garm had inscribed before his death. Or maybe the Alchemist had inscribed them—Argrave was not sure of the process.

“You had plenty on your plate,” Anneliese disagreed. “And my studies idled as much as yours.”

Argrave said nothing, opening the book. A spell matrix appeared in the air.

“A lot of these are... very rare,” Argrave noted. “Labels, descriptions... Garm was meticulous.” He shut the book and retrieved another. “Holy shit,” he exclaimed. “[Bloodfeud Bow]? My god,” Argrave stepped away, eyes wide.

“Blood magic?” Anneliese questioned disapprovingly.

Argrave examined the spell matrix with wide eyes and mouth agape. Eventually, his open mouth contorted into a cheek-to-cheek smile. He shut the book, then held it up. “This spell... is utterly broken.”

“It doesn’t work?” Durran questioned.

“No,” Argrave shook his head. “On the contrary, it’s... hoo.” He felt lightheaded from excitement. “It’s B-rank, but... it’s so much more than that.” Argrave shook his head, then sat down atop a rock. “You can charge it up. Nearly infinitely,” Argrave held the book close. “As long as you’ve got life left, this spell can keep getting stronger. Provided you give it enough fuel, it can fire a single devastating attack that can pierce through any damn defense you can even imagine, and then keep going.”

“But that would be... incredibly reckless,” Anneliese said concernedly.

“Well, yeah, but...” Argrave stood. “Think about it. This thing synergizes perfectly with [Electric Eel]. Shatter defensive wards with one attack, send in the eels at the same time... I wanted to get it, but much, much later. But now...” Argrave stared at the white cover.

His excitement started to fade when he was reminded that he’d never be able to thank Garm.

“Because of Garm, I have it now,” he said flatly. “All this and more.”

Silence took over their party, barring Galamon, who still put away books in his backpack. Eventually, Argrave looked off to the side.

“It’s a long way to the southron elves again,” Argrave shook his head. “And a lot of stuff to carry. Let’s hurry up. I’m eager to see how things changed in our month’s absence.”

“But how do we get out?” Durran questioned.

“Same way we got in,” Argrave looked off into the depths of the cave.

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Chapter 158: Stepping Aside

Argrave hadn’t spoken to Galamon much at all since Garm was lost to them. Argrave couldn’t deny he was upset Galamon had gone behind his back so blatantly. They sat cross-legged amidst the sand dunes, the night sky above. The chill of winter had set in; they were well into the heart of the cold season. There was an awkward air between the two of them. It reminded Argrave of a dispute with his brother or father—they’d just avoid each other, saying only words that needed to be said...

"You look better," said Galamon.

...until they started talking again, like nothing had happened at all. Maybe it was unproductive.

"I feel better," returned Argrave.

But even if it was unproductive, Argrave liked things this way.

"That's good," nodded Galamon, white eyes focused on his armor. It was already well-maintained, but he kept it impeccably so.

Argrave stared as his hands moved, rubbing sand and oil against his armor for reasons Argrave couldn't begin to guess. He looked around. Anneliese was taking care of something, while Durran read Garm's writing, even now—the tribal seemed to be enchanted with it. Though Garm had left some writings related to the soul behind, Argrave still felt hesitant to read them for some reason.

His mind wandered, and he wondered what it was like to wear armor all day. Brows furrowed, he turned to Galamon.

"You think I should learn how to fight?"

Galamon paused, then turned his head towards Argrave slowly.

"...put Durran down easily enough," he noted with the faintest smile, then focused back on his work.

Argrave laughed a little, feeling some strange mix of pride and shame. "I bet he could take me down twice as quick if the aggressor and defender switched places. But seriously... It'd be good to be versatile. If things go south..."

Galamon polished, but Argrave could tell he was thinking of an answer.

"The southron elves put it well. Magic has no ceiling." He looked at Argrave. "Focus on it, you'll keep getting better."

"But things happen," Argrave held his arms out, then uncrossed his legs. "Good to learn a trick or two, no?"

Galamon took a deep breath. "For you..." his white eyes scanned Argrave. "Your frame got bigger. I used to be your size... long time ago. I could give you advice for some things." He shook his head. "Even still, I'd focus on learning to be agile. Magic will always be more powerful than a blade. Just dodge, get distance, obliterate them."

"Let's hear this advice, then," Argrave suggested eagerly.

"Eat more," Galamon said plainly. "You eat like a bird."

Argrave hadn't been expecting that. He'd been shoveling food into his mouth for the past month to the point of vomiting, and the idea of eating more now wasn't particularly pleasant.

"Like a bird?" Argrave repeated, drawing lines in the sand. "Must've never seen a pelican."

Galamon said nothing in response.

In truth, Argrave didn't fancy the idea of learning how to fight. The few hard knocks he'd taken hadn't been pleasant. He still shuddered when he remembered getting his cheek caved in by Induen, or the battle with Quarrus. Getting up close and personal offered the potential of a lot more of that.

Besides, Argrave would much prefer to focus on what he was good at. He could read a book for hours and have a blast, but exercise was different. Whether before or now, he never cared for weightlifting or running. He didn't care about looking well-built, either. Dressing nice, wearing jewelry—that was the easier route.

Something caught his eye—Anneliese returned. He smiled and waved, and she waved back, walking towards them. His thoughts returned back to exercise, but with Anneliese's presence now involved. His opinion started to take a sharp turn.

"I think I want to build myself up a little," he said decisively, watching Anneliese.

Galamon looked to Argrave, then spotted Anneliese as well. The big elven warrior laughed quietly.

"Something funny?" interrogated Argrave, watching Anneliese as she rummaged through her backpack for something. She picked up her small Brumesinger, moving it aside, and then reached deep inside.

"Sometimes, you do something for someone, and they don't even know it," Galamon shook his head. "A nice feeling."

Argrave looked at Galamon, puzzled.

"Regardless... hope you two stay happy," he concluded.

"Well..." Argrave scratched his cheek, embarrassed. "You and me both," he finally said. "Thought you might be against this sort of thing."

"Why?" Galamon asked, genuinely puzzled.

"You seem like the 'you stick with your own people!' type of guy," Argrave shrugged.

Galamon laughed loudly, startling Argrave. The man had a scary, grating laugh that would be right at home in a horror movie. Eventually, he settled down, scratching his cheek. "Long time ago, you'd have me completely right."

"What changed? Living in exile?" questioned Argrave.

"Saw the worst of the Veidimen. War... awakens the worst," he shook his head. "When war consumes the land, rapists, butchers, sadists—they all come out of the woodworks like rats fleeing from a burning building."

"Then," he continued, putting his gauntlet back on. "I came here. I realized... things are just the same. You have good people... and terrible people," he finished. Galamon stared at Argrave for a long while, white pupils steady. "That's part of the reason I let Garm do what he did. I recognized him."

Argrave tensed when the sore subject was brought up, saying nothing.

"The two of you are good," Galamon concluded. "Not to mention... quite compatible."

Argrave didn't really know what to say, but Anneliese walked up, a book in her hand. Argrave's Brumesingers jumped free from his clothing, surging before her feet. She stood before him, staring down.

"It grows late," she greeted. "We ought to retire. An early morning awaits, especially if we intend to reach Otraccia by the end of tomorrow."

Argrave nodded. "You're right, little lady." He stood up and stretched, and his druidic bonds returned to him. "Let's go."

#####

Durran stared out at the city of Sethia. Perhaps that was not accurate—he stared *above* Sethia, at the clouds looming above it.

Argrave had to prod him to get his attention. The tribal warrior turned his head to Argrave quickly, stunned and blinking quickly.

"Sorry, sorry. It's just..." he shook his head. "Never seen clouds over Sethia before."

Argrave pondered that. Springs, rivers, and such still existed in the mountains, and it was a bit difficult to believe that clouds couldn't be blown over Sethia. Presumably, the Vessels' presence in the city had something to do with that—the air around them always felt dry, after all. The clouds could be taken as a sign that the city was truly free.

From such a distance, Argrave could not deduce how well the city was doing underneath Titus. What he could notice, though, was that Aurum, the tower of gold, had been completely taken down. The other two remained standing, but construction around them implied that might not be forever.

"Wait until you see snow," Argrave pulled Durran along. "Crazy stuff. It's white, cold, and it turns into water."

"Pfft," Durran laughed, regathered. He followed Argrave, and the two of them joined up with Anneliese and Galamon. They passed through a narrow bit of mountain, and beyond, the place opened up into the small town of Otraccia.

The place seemed much, much busier than before. All in all, the place didn't seem as gloomy as before. Argrave looked around. The southron elves noticed them, and though caution was their first reaction, many recognized their party.

A woman stepped up, crossing her arms before the four of them. Much of her jet-black skin was concealed by thick equipment, likely intended for a forge.

"So, you're the reason my father can't walk anymore," Iltuda began.

Argrave turned his head. Once his eyes fell on her, she visibly flinched. He was taken aback by that reaction, but he realized his eyes—Garm's eyes—must have surprised her. Considering her own eyes were pitch black, he was a bit offended.

"That's a very pleasant greeting, Iltuda," Durran spoke before Argrave could. "Set a hostile tone right off. Very prudent. It's like you're eager to meet your maker."

Durran stepped forward, and her eyes widened again—evidently, she'd not expected to see the man.

"Durran," she greeted, taking off her thick forge gloves and holding her hand out. He shook it. "Why are you...? A great many people are searching for you."

"I imagine," he nodded. "They found a spike that fits me perfectly, and they can't wait to put my head on it. I'll pass. A friend of mine told me that's a miserable experience." He looked back to Argrave.

"Argrave, this is—"

"Iltuda," Argrave finished. "The best blacksmith for the southron elves."

Though she hesitated, she did eventually hold out her hand to Argrave. He shook it.

"Durran knows this, but... don't take the rudeness to heart. Our people only say what we really think to people we trust." She shook her head. "My father said good things about you. All of you. He's been saying a lot, lately, considering he's chair-bound. Wants me to forge him a new leg."

Argrave nodded understandingly. "If it'll keep him quiet..."

She laughed. "I see you catch on quick. Or maybe you already got used to the way we talk, what with dealing with the old ones."

"Argrave!" called out a familiar voice.

Responding to his name being called, Argrave turned his head. Florimund strode out of the crowd. Argrave stepped past Iltuda, moving to greet the man. He raised his hand up, and Argrave raised his. They swung at the same time, catching into a handshake.

"Gods above..." he noted, staring at Argrave's eyes. "Those eyes... this is that change you were talking about? Being Black Blooded?"

"Yeah," Argrave nodded, though it was only a half-truth—it was easier to let him believe what he wanted than explain things.

"You look... better, somehow," he continued. "More robust. With those eyes, you remind me of some of the half-elven children. The ones that had kids with the golden-eyed tribals. Black on the outside, gold pupils..."

"Sharp instincts," Argrave nodded. "I am a great deal healthier."

"That's good." He finally released Argrave's hand. "I'm glad you came by. I thought you would refuse our favor, in part."

"I never refuse anything free," Argrave shook his head.

"Hardly free, considering you dealt with the Lord of Silver," he shook his head.

Argrave smiled. "Speaking of looking better... it looks a lot more lively around here," he glanced about.

Florimund looked around, taking in the sights. "Things... things are..." he paused, then looked back. "I told you I felt hopeful, before. That feeling has only gotten stronger."

Behind, Durran furrowed his brows, but Argrave continued oblivious.

“How so?”

“That city of Sethia... Titus has emerged as the undisputed leader. He linked the southron elf war relics to other local leaders within the city, used it to seize their assets justifiably. He rounded up all of the relics and returned it all to us as a show of good faith. Might not be all, granted, but...”

Argrave raised a brow, surprised.

“Trading has already begun,” Florimund continued. “And it’s been equitable. His men have even protected some of us from the more deplorable, elf-hating humans.”

“What about the tribals?” Durran pressed, stepping forth. “What’s happening on that front?”

“I don’t know much,” Florimund shook his head. “Apparently, your father has recovered. And... a lot of people are moving to Sethia. The conditions within the city... I haven’t been,” Florimund shook his head. “All the people who have say conditions are nice. And that big, golden monument has been torn down. Titus minted coins with it.”

Argrave didn’t know what to think of these developments. It was so far removed from what he was familiar with... and all within a month. The possibilities running through his head were infinite. Durran seemed deeply bothered by the news—this was the man who’d very nearly framed him dead, and he was hearing nothing but praise.

“Since you’re here... I take it you’re taking us up on our offer? Imbuing some of your weapons with southron elven magic? Ittuda has been practicing,” he pointed.

“That’s right,” Argrave nodded quickly. “And... Galamon’s armor needs repairs, if you can manage that.”

“Done. You are more than welcome to stay here while this happens,” Florimund spread his arms out. “This new hope I feel... it comes in large part because of your efforts.”

“Good,” Argrave nodded. He had been hoping for this. There was much he needed to do, least of all cement their party of four’s plan for the plague.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 159: Back to Work

Argrave had wanted a break. In a way, the week spent at the oasis town of Otraccia became just that.

The normalcy of opening new spell books and delving into them for hours at a time became a welcome respite compared to the unending torture that had occurred at the residence of the Alchemist. He felt like someone who had just recovered from surgery returning to their job—and in a way, that wasn’t too far off.

The Alchemist had said that every function of Argrave’s body would be improved. That statement was entirely true. He could focus for longer without exhausting himself. He functioned better with less sleep. And, moreover, he did basic exercise every morning, and ate plenty of what Galamon suggested. The activity was basic, as mentioned—nonetheless, the improvements felt tangible, especially endurance-wise. It was like he was on the classic diet of chicken, rice, broccoli, and steroids. Hopefully his face wouldn’t swell.

Durran was restless, constantly inquiring about the state in Sethia. He seemed to have difficulty believing that things were going well under Titus, and though Argrave shared that sentiment, he wasn't near as invested as Durran. Indeed, despite his unease with the development entirely foreign to 'Heroes of Berendar,' things did seem to be improved.

Galamon finally got a chance for a break, too. Beyond giving advice to Argrave, he did little as he waited for the changes to his armor. His greatsword was being modified to accommodate southron elf magic, and the original enchantment would remain fully intact.

Though the offer extended to all of his weapons, Galamon claimed enchanting the dagger would be impotent, and the Ebonice axe interfered with the southron elf enchantments. Moreover, he needed to see the axe blade to dispel magic. However, the enchanted arrows Galamon still had were enchanted with southron elf magic. The arrows would not betray their flight path as they moved—trivial, considering most people can't dodge arrows, but it might come in handy.

Garm's gift of sight had proven to be much more beneficial than Argrave had initially predicted. Perhaps the High Wizard of the Rose had predicted such a thing. Not only could Argrave see other people's magic, he could see his own. Watching it manifest from its raw, almost gaseous state within the body to a genuine spell proved invaluable for comprehension. Argrave understood spells of C-rank better, though he heeded Anneliese's advice and refrained from tackling B-rank quite yet, despite the tremendous increase in advancement lent to him by his Black Blood.

Regarding his new changes...

"You want me to drink your blood?" Durran questioned incredulously.

"Naturally," Argrave nodded as though it was a normal request, acting deliberately obtuse.

Durran frowned intensely, sizing up Argrave suspiciously. "Don't you have someone for that? He's standing right over there," Durran gestured towards Galamon.

"You got aboard this ship a bit late, so you probably don't know about the Amaranthine Heart juice. Magic in liquid form is black," Argrave explained. "When people talk about me being 'Black Blooded,' it means that I have magic in my blood stream. Hence, I'm curious if ingesting it would produce the same effect as it did previously."

This wasn't something that could be done in 'Heroes of Berendar,' and Argrave felt it was long overdue to try out something beyond the game's purview.

"Can't you ask your lady friend?" Durran stepped away. "Snuggling, sharing a bed—fluid sharing isn't such a big step forward. Little bit of blood drinking might be weird, but I'm told some people are into it."

Argrave laughed and shook his head. "Come on. Don't be a coward," he insisted, wagging his finger at Durran.

Durran took a great breath, and then sighed. "Gods above... fine. You got some ready, or...?"

Argrave took off his glove and rolled up his sleeve. "Cast some magic," he prompted Durran, then pulled out a knife he'd taken from the kitchens.

The tribal looked at Argrave like he was mental, but he did cast a spell. Argrave cut his own arm without much hesitation—after what he'd endured, cutting his arm came quite easily. His blood was indeed much, much darker, yet still decidedly red. Durran drank.

After a time, the tattooed tribal looked a little puzzled. "Yeah... I... felt something bubbling, near my chest. Felt faint, but... present."

Argrave drank some of his own blood. Indeed, the feeling was present, but it was far diminished. More importantly, it even worked on himself...

"What is this?" Galamon questioned, having arrived before them all but silently.

"Look at this," Argrave spoke to Durran. "He smelled good food, and he comes rushing over." Argrave faced Galamon. "Don't worry your little head. Just testing something."

The big elven vampire frowned.

After Anneliese and Galamon caught wind of what he was trying, they quickly put an end to it. Argrave assured them he only intended to use it for emergencies, but even that seemed to make them uneasy.

#####

As the days passed by, Durran's insistence on learning what happened after they left only grew worse. Argrave relented to travelling out with him to get a closer look at Sethia, and his companions accompanied him.

"If you won't let me go inside, at the very least let me contact Boarmask," Durran pleaded, one knee in the black sand of the Burnt Desert as the four of them stared near the crater leading into the city of Sethia.

Sethia had changed considerably. The vast amounts of sand burying the place had been removed, cleaning the place up. Aurum, the gold tower, was gone, and Argent was clearly next on the chopping block. The walls of the city had been badly destroyed, but already, patchwork fortifications had been erected to ward away the elements.

"How will you signal Boarmask? Shout loudly?" Argrave shook his head. "It's been a month. Even if you have some signal system, he's probably stopped checking for them by now. On the off chance he's still holding out, we'd still have to wait. I don't want to risk lingering near Sethia and drawing unwanted attention."

"Yeah. I got annoyed for waiting on him, too, so we worked out something that'd work quickly," Durran explained. "Mounted a mirror some ways away. Come on."

Durran led them around the crater surrounding Sethia, herding them to a small circle of rocks. He picked up a metal mount that had a mirror attached to the end. He wiped the sand-covered mirror down with a cloth, and then positioned the mount. Light shone off the mirror splendidly. After some finagling, the ray of light struck a prism hidden within a bell tower. A rainbow consumed the interior—though obviously noticeable to anyone looking for it, it wasn't excessively eye-catching.

"Now, we wait elsewhere," Durran explained, stepping away.

Argrave looked to his other two companions, consulting them. Based on expression alone, none seemed to protest. Anneliese obviously wanted to follow, as a matter of fact.

In the end... I'm curious, too, Argrave decided, then followed Durran without words.

#####

Argrave sat within a small alcove, where ashes evidenced a fire had once been lit. Durran waited impatiently, tapping his wyvern scale boots against the ground.

"Much longer, Durran, I'm going to call things off," Argrave spoke up. "No time for—"

Galamon grabbed Argrave's wrist, bringing him to attention. He rose to his feet, hand on his axe, waiting for someone to come.

Argrave could hear the faint sound of metal clanging against metal. Soon enough, a bulky man entered into view, a backpack slung over his shoulders. Boarmask had removed his armor, and the muffled sounds evidenced he'd hid it within his backpack.

"Durran," the man greeted. Argrave knew his name was Rolf, but few others did. He had straight blonde hair and bright blue eyes—the archetypal appearance of a paladin, and the man's personality matched up well enough. He was once called the Romantic Warrior—romantic meaning 'idealistic' rather than 'loving.' He was just, mostly, and devoted to the Vasquer pantheon. There was definitely no romance in either, a fact his story revolved around.

"Didn't think you'd have—" he paused when he met Argrave's gaze, obviously surprised.

"You see something you like?" Argrave interrogated. "Don't worry about my lamps. I'm sure you know high-rank spellcasters can look quite weird."

Boarmask entered further into the alcove, giving Argrave a wide berth. "I suppose you'd have to be high-ranking to deal with the Lord of Silver as you did. And I'm glad of it. Since you came here with Durran... I suppose you're allies, at least for now?"

"For...ever, hopefully," Argrave nodded.

Boarmask paid little heed to the difference between 'for now' and 'forever,' stepping within and setting down his backpack. The thing clattered noisily. Galamon watched him cautiously, obviously ready to protect Argrave as needed.

"That's good. Then I'll start talking. Titus is always well-protected. He keeps some highly-trained bodyguards with him, some of whom have enchantments from Vasquer to better help protect. In addition, most of the guard within the city are—"

"Relax, steel-plated assassin," Durran interrupted. "Start with the city—how are things for the people?"

Boarmask leaned up against the wall, putting his hands on his knees. "Titus is very good at winning over the people, and that's all that I'll say."

“All you’ll say?’ Stop with the bullshit, tell me what’s happening,” Durran rose to his feet, stepping up to the unarmored knight. Befitting the pure warrior from ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ Boarmask was larger than Durran—not by much, though.

Boarmask stared at Durran, then shifted on his feet, crossing his arms. “Sorry. Just been a tense month, prowling Sethia alone. Couldn’t wear my armor. Too easily recognizable. Felt unsafe,” he lowered his head wistfully.

“Are you stalling? Get to the point,” demanded Durran.

“Titus had everything ready for the aftermath,” Boarmask said bitterly. “Healers, food, construction supplies... caravans came into the city for near two weeks after the Lords were killed before the neighboring cities heard of what had happened. By that point, Titus had already sequestered enough for the whole of winter.

“He declared you innocent,” Boarmask pointed to Durran, “Instead, he framed other prominent Sethia locals, having them imprisoned and tried. By this point, even though he has no title, Titus is the sole leader of Sethia. The people love him fiercely. He’s been doing his best to establish the city once again, both militarily and economically.” The blonde man rubbed his hands together. “That’s why things will be difficult for us.”

Durran looked troubled. He stepped away to the edge of the alcove, staring out across the sand. “Are we sure Titus didn’t get replaced by someone else? Maybe it’s a different guy with the same name.”

Argrave lowered his head, concealing a small laugh with his hand. Boarmask took him seriously, evidently, for he asked confusedly, “What are you talking about?”

“He’s adept, thoroughly prepared, and he’s not exactly ruining people’s lives,” Durran said slowly.

“But he has no problems ruining the lives of innocent people,” Boarmask refuted incredulously, as though he couldn’t believe what Durran was saying. “The attacks in Sethia—he was the main contributor to all the collateral damage! He framed you and would have had you killed. He’s framed more, since. All of this kindness, it’s a ploy to earn support, and nothing more!”

Durran had no response to that.

“Don’t just stand there,” Boarmask continued, stepping up to Durran and grabbing his shoulder from behind. “The man is a monster. A butcher wearing a king’s mantle.”

Durran jerked his shoulder away, turning around. “And we should do what, throw the city into chaos while raving about justice?!”

Boarmask stared wide-eyed, flabbergasted by the outburst. Argrave glanced around, surveying his party’s opinion. He could practically see it written on their face—both agreed with Durran more than Boarmask.

“And what of the future?” Boarmask pressed. “We allow someone callous to sit on the throne. No matter how benevolent he may be now, when things go awry... a man like that would do *anything* to retain power!”

"Well, it's clear his strategy right now is to make sure everybody is taken care of," Durran said with a droll anger. "Enough supplies for the winter, you said. He's building an economy, you claim."

"And a military? What might that be for?"

"When your only neighbors are the Vessels, what else?!" Durran spread his arms out in emphasis.

Boarmask stared at Durran, jaw clenched tight and brows furrowed. "Then what is your plan? I cannot accept you would suggest letting things be. The man tried to kill you."

Durran closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to calm down. When he opened them again, they were full of resolve. "I'm not fond of force-feeding people another way of life when they've already decided on one. I wanted to lead my people into a new age. As is clear, I'm not good enough to do so," Durran shook his head. "We gave Sethia a choice. Sethia made that choice. Now... I won't be involved with this. I won't cause chaos once again."

Boarmask stepped away, expression stern. He turned around, obviously stunned, and paced about for a time. "You're going to simply... give up?" His gaze jumped to the rest of Argrave's party. "All of you?"

"Killing Titus solves nothing," Anneliese pointed out quietly. "He is a strong, decisive leader. Without something prepared for the aftermath... all we do is ruin chances of peace in the city. And, from my perspective... Titus does love this land. Truly."

Anneliese's words swayed Argrave, and all of his indecision vanished. He nodded in agreement.

Boarmask glanced around the room, his expression slowly losing anger and tension both. He walked to his backpack, then leaned down to pick it up. His gaze settled on Argrave.

"I thought, perhaps, one Vasquer might be worthy of their ancestors," Boarmask said. "It appears I was wrong."

Argrave felt great indignance at the claim, but he kept calm. His Brumesingers mirrored his true emotional state, though, growling at the blonde-haired man. Boarmask slung his backpack over his shoulder and walked out quickly, as though he couldn't wait another second to leave.

Silence hung in the alcove. Argrave took a deep breath and sighed, a whirlwind of emotion and thought disturbing his mind.

He wanted a perfect solution. None existed.

"...I learned what I wanted," Durran broke the silence. "Now I'm eager to leave."

"Long journey ahead," Argrave said distantly. "After we get what we need from the southron elves, it'll be ten to twelve days, I suspect, since we'll be avoiding towns. As we planned, we'll stick to the eastern mountain ranges—they have few water sources, but that's no problem for spellcasters. Plenty to eat along the way... even if it might be bugs." Argrave tried not to shudder, the image of a centipede dangling above his tongue. "After... we'll take a ruined mountain highway, right into the lion's lap."

Durran and Galamon looked confused, but Anneliese caught on.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 160: Sunset for the Desert

"Argrave," Anneliese called out, drawing him from a book. He read beneath the shade of a palm tree just beside the oasis. His Brumesingers stood near the buried bodies of the veterans that had fought at Sethia. He had thought the southron elves might be bothered by this, but rather, they saw it as an honor. They hoped the Brumesingers would replicate the forms of their fallen warriors, some day.

"Hey," he greeted, shutting the book at once.

"Reading what Garm wrote for you?" she questioned, walking up.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "The stuff about the soul. Galamon had said it might interest me, and... well, it certainly sounds familiar." He weighed the book in his hand. "Just as he wrote, whenever I tried to learn a spell 'Argrave' knew, I learned it very quickly. I guess if I ever tried torturing people, I'd be good at that, too."

Anneliese raised a brow. "I take it 'Argrave' was not a good person?"

"If Felipe was their father, they're a bother," Argrave rhymed with a snap. "But what do you need? Some questions about our journey back north? About Orion? I was vague about him, but he's... Christ, he's my biggest worry. We stand to be here a couple more days. Plenty of time to settle anything that needs settling, I reckon."

"Yet you are sad," she noted.

Argrave turned away, then turned back. "I hope that isn't obvious."

"To me it is. To others... I know nothing of what they notice," she shook her head. "What troubles you?"

"Just thinking... maybe if I had talked to Garm more, something like this wouldn't have happened," he admitted.

Her face fell a little. "Then it is not me alone thinking like that."

Argrave gave a slow, bitter nod. "Ironically... heh," he scratched beneath his nose. "If I had trusted him less, he'd be alive now." He lowered his head. "Why was I so quick to bring Durran along? I smelled trouble. I knew something was brewing. If I had just..."

"I would feel a hypocrite consoling you when I feel the same. But truly, these thoughts do nothing for us. Nothing for Garm." Anneliese held her hand out. "Come with me," she insisted.

Argrave looked at her hand. He decisively set the book down and took her hand, standing quickly. She led him through the oasis town, and they waved to the few acquaintances they'd made amongst the southron elves. Eventually, she ducked into a cavern. Her Brumesinger was lounging away from the sun there, fluffy ears twitching.

Argrave was perplexed, but he said nothing. The dark cavern opened up after not ten steps, revealing a plateau beyond. He sized up the place, searching for something she might wish to show him. He soon realized he was looking in the wrong place, though. The suns were setting.

"I hoped you would be willing to do this, for me," Anneliese began, stepping towards him. "Every time the suns descend below the horizon... we could watch them, talk... for an hour or so."

With things falling into place, Argrave couldn't stop a smile from appearing on his face. *She's more sentimental than she lets on*, he realized. But the fact she suggested this meant that moment back then had meant as much for her as it had for him.

He held his hand out. "What if we're underground? That happens a lot," he asked teasingly.

"Argrave, I—"

"Of course we can," he interrupted her before she could misinterpret his answer as hesitance. "That sounds nice. Something to look forward to at the end of the day."

Her small frown quickly turned into a smile. "That is... good," she took his hand. "I feared it would be difficult to persuade you, especially since your health has improved. But I think this will be good for you, genuinely."

Argrave furrowed his brows. "You're not doing this out of obligation alone, I hope."

"Well..." she paused, pulling on his hand slightly. "Even though you constantly joke, all you talk about is how we are to deal with Gerechtigkeits, the plague... how else am I to ask you questions, learn about you?" She led him towards the edge of the plateau, where she sat. "So, sit. Vincenzo," she said pointedly.

Argrave scratched the back of his neck, and then obediently sat. "The only person that still called me 'Vincenzo' was my ma. Most people said 'Vinny.'"

"Your mother?" Anneliese repeated. "A fitting point to start..."

#####

Galamon waved his hand, and his kriegsmesser whistled through the air. The blade of wind created by its enchantments seemed to emerge from a location wholly separate from the blade... but once Galamon brought it to a stop, the blade distorted back into where it actually was.

The elven warrior held it up, studying it without much emotion. If Argrave willed it to be so, he could see the densely packed magic imbued in the blade by the enchantments, placed impressively closely alongside the runes of the southron elves. Garm's eyes continued to prove their usefulness.

"Looks impressive," Argrave said as he stepped forward.

"Of course it does," said Ituda proudly. "They both do."

Durran hefted his glaive aloft in turn, though he did not swing it as Galamon had. The haft of the glaive had runes just as the blade, shining purple even in the daylight. The black wyvern bone complimented the runes well.

"Never worked with wyvern bone before," Ituda commented. "Had to read some old texts written by grandfather, back when the stuff was in abundance. Despite that... worked out well." She looked at Galamon, jet black eyes scanning his person. She was examining his repaired armor, not his body,

though. "Might've worked on adding runes to the armor... but that isn't something that can be done in seven bloody days."

Argrave stepped away, satisfied. "You've done plenty. In fact, everyone has been far too accommodating," Argrave complimented loudly, looking to Corentin, Florimund, and several other southron elves who had treated them well.

"Gave up a leg fighting for your little coup of Sethia," Corentin noted, and though his words were harsh, he still had a smile on his face. "And now, you made me wait for a new one because your boys needed some little toys."

Argrave glanced down at the man's leg, where a stump just below the knee had been hidden by white wrapping. The grizzled, one-eyed veteran walked with crutches even now.

"I didn't..." Guilt made Argrave trail off, flustered.

"Hahaha," Corentin laughed, then pushed Argrave. "You should know I don't care by now." His gaze wandered to a set of gravestones. "I got off light. But each and every one of the men buried there followed with the knowledge such a thing might happen," he finished.

"They... were some funny guys," Argrave reflected, knowing that empty platitudes would earn no respect from the southron elves. "And all of them left descendants behind. If things continue as they are... their line will continue forevermore. And a damned good bloodline it is," Argrave looked about.

"Don't get crazy, now," Florimund held out his hand, and several present laughed. That they could laugh amidst grief was a testament to the strength of their people, Argrave supposed, but he felt too uncomfortable to join them.

"Then..." Florimund stepped forth, offering his hand. "Though I hope to see you again, if you say you head to the northern kingdoms once again, I fear that wish may never come true."

Argrave shook his hand, and then Florimund did the same for the rest of his party.

"It's not like we're leaving now, but we'll probably be gone before dawn tomorrow. You might not see me again..." Argrave stepped away towards the exit of Otraccia. "But I can guarantee you'll be hearing my name again."

Florimund grinned. "Cheeky boy, are we? Well..." he nodded thoughtfully. "I'll keep my ears open. Provided I don't die of old age before then, naturally."

With a single wave and a wink, Argrave turned and left, steps weighed down by the books in his pack but lightened by the fire in his heart... or so he told himself, at least.

#####

"Back to the road again tomorrow," Argrave told Anneliese. "It's become clear to me the future is unpredictable. Going forth... looks like I'll have to rely on knowledge of what is, not what should be," he shook his head. "Precisely because of that... this plague worries me. It's not just a disease, it's—"

"The point of this time, Argrave, is to avoid discussing these matters," she said pointedly.

He let out a long sigh, then wrapped one arm around Anneliese. "You're right. Sorry."

She rested her head on Argrave's shoulder, staring out across the vast expanse of black sand painted by the light of the setting sun.

"We leave tomorrow, though," Argrave repeated himself. His voice grew quieter, and he continued, "I don't really want to leave."

"You will never again be sick," Anneliese pointed out. "And travelling will come much easier to you, now. Moreover, we are not slated to traverse the Low Way again, if I understand you right."

"Yeah, that is true," Argrave nodded. "We'll get those daggers for Galamon, a flying druidic bond for you to scout with... both of which aren't especially dangerous. Relative to the Low Way, at least. That's on the path."

She lifted her head and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Then perhaps there is little to worry about."

"Spending time with friendly people, learning fulfilling things... moments like these," Argrave turned his head to face her. "It'll be hard to get started again. An idyllic life like this..."

"You say that, but you are already prepared to leave," she noted. "You never lack for willpower."

Argrave laughed. "You're not wrong."

"Then what is on your mind?" she insisted. "Why are you worried?"

Argrave kneaded his palm. "You and Durran stand to be at the highest risk in the northwest."

"You claimed you were going to take measures," she pointed out. "And both of us are healthy. I am young, and I have been travelling with you. We Veidimen are a hardy people. And the winter will stifle the plague, you say."

"I can take measures... but that isn't immunity from the plague." Argrave shook his head.

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Do not worry. Do what you can, and that will be enough."

He stayed silent, then nodded with a smile. "You're right. I'll do what I can. Not worrying, though? That'll never happen."

"I am not so helpless," she refuted. "Mages of higher ranks are healthier than average humans. And despite your recent changes, I am still one rank above you—B-rank."

He smiled. "I know. And you'll rise further yet, I know." He paused, staring at her awkwardly.

"What?" she pressed, staring steadily.

"Honestly..." he rubbed his hands together nervously. "The fact that you... that I..." he shook his head. "The fact that 'Heroes of Berendar' existed made everyone feel like an outsider. Everything was something foreign. Even... even you," he said quietly.

Anneliese shifted but said nothing, waiting patiently.

“Now, though... it’s starting to feel like I have some connection to this place. This plane. This whatever,” he shook his head. “It always felt like the world was my enemy, and I needed to struggle against it to stay alive.” He held Anneliese a bit tighter. “Now, I’ve got a reason to keep living other than just staying alive. And I’ll make sure that we make it through this together.”

She kept her amber eyes fixed on Argrave, then returned his embrace just as tightly. “I understand,” was all she said. And that was enough for him.