

Jackal 171

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 171: Out of Containment

The Margrave leaned back in his chair at the dining table, staring at his now-empty platter of food. He tapped one foot on the ground, glancing towards the door. Argrave had still yet to return.

Reinhardt's old friend, Duke Enrico, had been entirely right from the beginning. Having a motive other than mere rebellion would be good for the rebellion, upsetting though it might be. The Margrave did not wish to play the kingmaker. He merely wished to do what was right.

But part of doing what was right was accepting the tragic realities of the world—few people, least of all the nobles beneath the heel of Vasquer, acted with righteous intentions. For all intents and purposes, Argrave doused their flames of ambition. He would be Reinhardt's claimant, and with an undisputed figure, the opportunists' influence would be mitigated after the war ended.

From all that he'd talked about with Argrave, he'd come to know the man better. He was far closer in character to someone like Enrico than Reinhardt himself. The Duke of Mateth had transformed his seat into a bastion of wealth. Reinhardt was a man of war. He would win the conflict, but in the wake of a devastating war, the realm did not need someone like himself on the throne—the realm needed someone to rebuild it.

Of course, as a bastard, Argrave's education might be lacking... but character and will were paramount, by Reinhardt's estimation. Provided the relationship lasted, his choice of partner might prove problematic for realm stability... but then again, Enrico had told Reinhardt that Argrave had some sort of close relationship with the tribe of snow elves, and the woman herself seemed quite keen.

Each issue had its counterpoint. With the situation as miserable as it was, it was a wonder anyone like Argrave existed. Above all, no better alternative existed.

Margrave Reinhardt found comfort in the fact that the founder of House Vasquer, the leader of the legion of ten thousand snakes, had been known as deceptive, even dishonorable. But the first Vasquer cared about the people, and he built the longest-lasting human kingdom in the known world. Margrave Reinhardt would be happy to replicate even half of that.

Reinhardt heard steel clanging up the hallway and refocused back on the doorway. One of his knights entered, breathing a little heavily.

"My lord... there's trouble," he said quickly. "Your wyvern. It's..."

The Margrave leaned forward, placing one hand on the table. "What?"

"In the skies," the knight finished.

Reinhardt's eyes danced for a few seconds, stunned. When he gathered himself, the Margrave stood quickly enough to cast his chair to the ground. He wiped his hands with a cloth, and then stepped around the table.

"Stay here with Rose," the Margrave directed, already half-running.

The Margrave wound through the complex keep of stone that was the Lionsun Castle. The dining hall was near the center of the massive fortress, and so it took a great deal of time to reach the outside. Eventually, the Margrave ran to a balcony overlooked the Lionsun Wall, glancing about the skies. Just as his knight had said, his wyvern was flying about the sky, controlled by a masterful rider. Reinhardt watched for half a second, teeth clenched tightly.

“The tribal,” he finally realized, sprinting away from the balcony.

The Margrave ran through his keep until he eventually set foot on the great Lionsun Wall. His men were not undisciplined, and a great many of them had gathered. Though many were mages, they were hesitant to attack the Margrave’s personal property.

Reinhardt spotted one of his commanders and strutted to him. “How did this happen?”

“The men were eating, sir,” the commander explained deferentially.

“How did the tribal get to where he was? I assigned guards to them at all times,” Reinhardt demanded.

“He entered the privy... and then he was there,” the commander shook his head, watching the sky.

“Some people think he climbed out of the window, along the mountainside.”

The Margrave glanced around at everyone. “Keep watch for Argrave and the others. Give them no opportunity. This is the only place they can be reasonably picked up—ensure it is watched,” he directed.

Just as the Margrave gave that order, the wyvern changed its course in the sky. It headed for the apartments in the central keep. Reinhardt stepped away and entered there, sprinting through the stone hallways while looking out of balconies to follow its movements.

Eventually, he burst into Rose’s room, which was empty... save Argrave and his companions. The wyvern landed and dug its claws into the wall, holding its neck inside the room.

“What in the gods’ name are you doing?!” the Margrave shouted. Behind, Margrave heard some knights pursuing him, ready to aid.

Galamon already stood opposite the Margrave, protecting them as they loaded their things atop the wyvern. Argrave helped Anneliese up and cast glances back to the Margrave.

“I told you I had to go! Told you it was urgent!” he shouted out.

“And this is your solution?!” Reinhardt stepped closer.

“I’ll get your lizard friend back to you by tomorrow! Probably,” Argrave shouted again.

Margrave Reinhardt stepped closer, but suddenly, mist in the room coalesced into lifelike elven warriors. Reinhardt darted backwards, surprised. It gave Argrave enough time to climb aback the wyvern himself, and then Galamon followed shortly after. Argrave’s four foxlike pets scampered across the room, then jumped up just after him.

Just like that, the wyvern pushed off, beating its great wings to gain altitude. The Margrave stepped to the balcony and whistled, but his beast ignored his command—it never had before, so the Margrave stared, shocked by the whole situation.

The Margrave stood there, staring, for a long while. Eventually, a voice broke his thoughts.

“...Margrave,” the voice came, finally breaking his focus. “Are you alright?”

“The third time..!” he began, fist clenched, but collected himself. “I’m fine,” he waved his hand, cradling his forehead.

“...we found this in Argrave’s room, sir. I don’t feel comfortable holding it. Too rich for my blood.”

The Margrave turned his head, where he received a letter alongside five rose gold magic coins.

The letter was hastily written, and read, *Payment for horse, wall, and travel fare. Wyvern back by tomorrow.*

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“I might choke you if you weren’t flying this damned thing,” Argrave shouted above the wind. “We’re headed that way,” he pointed, looking down at the old compass Titus had given him.

“Did you see his face?” Durran giggled, then erupted into laughter. “Gods, what a rush. I climbed out the privy’s window—it was about ten feet up—and then scaled along the damned mountain wall, glaive tied to my back. The wyvern was a bit fussy, but I used some of that newfound druidic magic to calm it and ride it into glory. Absolutely brilliant, I am.”

“You shouldn’t have done it at all!” Argrave yelled back.

“Good gods, don’t yell into my ear,” he brushed off Argrave’s comments easily. “It worked out, didn’t it? We’re free, we’re out and gone. No one died, not a one. I waited until dinnertime so the guard would be occupied. It was a perfect little theft.”

Argrave mulled that over and cast a glance back at Anneliese. “If you had brought it up, discussed it with us, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” he admonished. “Say we didn’t notice—what was your plan? Fly about until we were captured, then fly away into the distance?”

“I knew you’d notice,” he said as though it was obvious. “Anneliese would catch on to my lies, she’d send her little Starsparrow out to find out what I was doing, and then you’d speedily get our things,” Durran summarized. “Everything worked as I thought it might. Besides, I only decided to do it after I heard the Margrave pussyfooting about as he was. He clearly wasn’t budging.”

“And yet after you left, he did just that!” Argrave shouted in irritation, causing Durran to cup his ears once again. He scrambled to grab the reins.

“It’s done,” Durran concluded. “Too late to go back.”

“We shouldn’t have to go back,” Argrave shook his head. “And now, I’ll never hear whatever it was he was going to say. Fly, you fool.”

This can’t be without consequence, Argrave knew at once. I have to talk with Anneliese, work something out. And if that doesn’t work... cut your losses, Argrave.

The whole experience left a sour taste in his mouth, like the sour experience it was.

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Argrave watched the landmarks they passed by, leading Durran towards Jast. It wasn't long until the city, with its titanic towers of black stone, came into sight. Argrave did not dare become known as the rider of the wyvern, and so he directed Durran to a secluded portion far removed from civilization before they dismounted. Once it was released from the relatively light hold of Durran's druidic magic, it flew away back towards its home like a carrier pigeon.

Though it was a long walk to Jast—and made longer by Argrave's refusal to deviate from his ritual of watching the suns set with Anneliese—they made it at around midnight. The same as last time, Argrave didn't plan on using official channels. Argrave got in touch with the same men who had smuggled him in once before. Things went smoothly.

"You know smugglers?" Durran questioned as they sat there waiting.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "Some loose ends that need to be tied up here. Elaine of Vyrbell—I had some business dealings with her. I entrusted her with some enchanted relics, had her appraise them. Moreover, she's the primary point of contact between me and the Veidimen. Hopefully... I can replace Galamon's axe. That's wishful thinking, though."

"A lady runs a smuggling ring?" Durran raised a brow. "That's a lady I'd like to meet."

"Her brother runs this vast criminal enterprise in Jast, actually. Rivien."

Durran looked around. "Hell of a place, Vasquer. So many new things. So exciting," he said eagerly.

"Keep your tattoos hidden, if you would—it was pointless to wear them in the Burnt Desert because the three of us stuck out enough as was, but we'll need to don our Circlets of Disguise once again," Argrave shook his head, then explained to Durran, "They'll muddle the features with illusion magic, keep us away from the public... if not the magic... eye."

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Unlike the first time they'd entered Jast, they were given VIP smuggling treatment—whatever that's worth. The four of them were allowed to keep their things, and instead of being led to an abandoned mansion on the outskirts of Jast, they were led directly into the Vyrbell estate. Argrave felt like he was moving up in the world.

A gruff looking man looked suitably out of place as he opened a fancy door within the elaborate mansion of silver, dark wood, and marble. Argrave strutted inside first. Perhaps the guards were better directed, or perhaps Argrave was remembered, because his companions were not stopped at the door as they had been on his last visit to the Vyrbell estate.

Argrave had thought leaving the Lionsun Castle might give him some reprieve from red hair, but instead, he saw it once again—this time, in the form of siblings. They might be mistaken for Parbons were their eyes not bright green. Rivien of Vyrbell sat at the head of the table, as finely dressed and fierce eyed as ever. Elaine sat slightly ahead and beside him, one leg crossed over the other. She dressed finely, too; unusual, considering she usually wore the simple gray robes of the Order of the Gray Owl. Argrave didn't want to presume why she had done such a thing... but the dress was very flattering on her.

"I dislike being woken this late in the night very much, you—" Elaine paused when her eyes fell on Argrave's face.

"You don't look disheveled enough to have been woken up. And smuggling is a late-night business," Argrave greeted. "Elaine. Rivien. Been a while. I have a new addition—Durran," he gestured towards the former tribal, who stood there silently with a smile on his face.

"Argrave?" Elaine asked, genuinely questioning if it was him.

"Yes, it's me. Would this help?" he covered his eyes with his hand.

Rivien placed his arms on the table, ignoring Argrave's change. "It is nice to see you again. We took you for dead. Not a word of you for months."

Argrave clasped his hands together. "Yes, well, if I don't wish to be found, no one will find me, not even the Bat—you can tell the Bat that, both of you."

Elaine uncrossed her legs and shifted in her chair. Anneliese scrutinized her expression closely.

Rivien gave a smile. "I will tell him," he confirmed.

"I assume you're here to check in on our business?" Elaine questioned, leaning forward on the table.

"Among other things," Argrave nodded.

"What 'other things?'" Rivien inquired curiously.

Argrave shrugged. "Same reason as many, I suspect. You want some investment advice? People trying to combat disease with magic—that's about to go big, and soon," he snapped. "I might get into the biz myself, but I have other things in mind for my money. For starters... paying you. I'd like the same arrangement as last time... for a week, this time."

"Protection from my men for you, your companions, and your property, while you do business in Jast?" Rivien sought to confirm, leaning on his elbows resting atop the table.

Argrave spread his arms out. "Precisely. Saved me the words."

"We'll allow you to stay here," Rivien suggested.

"Saved me a walk, too," Argrave raised a brow. "Maybe I left a better impression than I thought."

Elaine placed her pale hands on the table. "It will be easier," she posited. "We have business, you and I."

"More than you might think," Argrave nodded. "I hope you still have the Veidimen's ear."

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Chapter 172: When Will You Learn?

"There's something you should know," Anneliese told Argrave.

Argrave set aside his duster, preparing to finally head to sleep. "Something wrong?"

"I believe Elaine is cooperating with the Bat, too. She felt guilty when you mentioned that name, as though she had informed on you and regretted it," she disclosed seriously. "Although... the last bit is only my personal conclusion. I cannot say with certainty."

Argrave frowned. "Not entirely unexpected... but good to know," Argrave nodded. "I'll be sure to watch my tongue."

"You always do," she noted, finally relaxing now that she'd conveyed what she had wanted to.

"Another thing," Argrave pointed at her. "I need your help with something."

Anneliese raised a brow. "Magic advice?"

"Durran advice," Argrave said bitterly, then moved to sit on the bed, removing his shoes.

"Oh," she took off her own duster, casting it atop his.

"The Margrave had no intent to release us," Argrave stated plainly. "From what I remember of the conversation... he had plans for me. He wanted to introduce me to his vassals. That meant we'd be forced to stay, and with the importance of ending the spread of the plague, that's simply not an option. This was a good outcome," he reflected.

"But I don't care if everything worked out—him going off on his own like that, it could cause problems in the future. It can't happen again. At the same time..." Argrave shook his head, leaving a question unspoken.

Anneliese slowly shook her head, then sat down beside Argrave. "I think that is reasonable," she reassured him.

"He needs to be reined in," Argrave nodded decisively now that Anneliese agreed with him. He trusted her opinion more than his own. "I have to nip this in the bud, especially when dealing with that holy fool Orion. He could get us all killed. I can't abide him continually doing things like this. If I can't predict him, he might not be welcome. Durran's a resourceful bastard—crazy, but smart. He's got brains, balls—if he'd fucking be straight with me, I could use all that," he said quickly, frustrated with the situation.

Anneliese shrugged. "Though I loathe to admit it... I do not know where to begin."

"I know 'where' to begin, just not how," Argrave turned to her. "He doesn't respect me. That's the issue. He thinks more of his own opinion than mine—maybe there's good reason for that."

Anneliese shook her head.

"But even if that is the case, that's not important." Argrave continued. "With his personality, we've got a recipe for disaster brewing on the horizon. I have to show him that there are consequences for doing things like that—have to show him what I say has weight. He won't respond to punishment. That might only exacerbate his disobedience."

Anneliese turned her head. "We just conversed with two people who might help you with that—Elaine and Rivien. Perhaps not entirely honest, staging consequences for his actions... but then, neither are you."

Argrave kept his gaze locked with hers, expression slowly brightening as he put together what she said. Then, as he pondered it more, his gaze grew distant. "I don't know... that seems like something Titus would do. I want him as an ally and confidant, not as some servant cowed by intimidation and subterfuge."

"Titus did win, no?" she pointed out quietly.

Argrave sighed. "I'll have to think on it more, but it's better than what I had before. This is why I ask you," he pointed out, wrapping one of his arms around her. She smiled lightly. "Another thing," Argrave continued. "I want you to stay inside until I get the things that'll help you resist disease better."

"What?" she looked at him. "We had this discussion. It serves no purpose."

"Please," he pleaded earnestly. "It won't take very long at all, maybe two days... and it would mean a great deal to me." He swallowed, then clarified, "It would ease a lot of the worries I have."

Anneliese stared for a long while, expression inscrutable. Finally, she sighed, then leaned forward and gave him a kiss. "Alright," she agreed with a whisper.

Argrave looked as if relieved of a big burden. "Thank you for this. I know you're pretty far from a fragile flower, but I don't want to take any chances." He sighed. "If it makes you feel any better, there's something I want you to do. Talk to Durran, find out what he's interested in doing. I'm sure if I forbid him from doing it, he'll do it anyway. That's what I want."

"I see you have already made a plan," Anneliese noted.

"Not necessarily," Argrave looked to the door. "I just want to keep the option in mind. Feels a bit dirty, frankly, and it might cost me... but having Durran be truly steadfast will be a big boon. And the alternative... I don't want to cut Durran loose."

"It may come to that," she informed him curtly.

Argrave bit his lip. He wanted things to work out. Durran had ever been his favorite character, largely for his reckless nature.

He wasn't sure someone like that could fit into the party he'd built thus far.

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Elias found that calming a crowd using a common enemy was not as immediate a task as he suspected it might be.

He spent five days and five nights on the battlements of Elbraille's castle, largely sleepless, shouting out to the people just outside the gates, urging them to settle things amicably. He ate only bread and soup before them. They threw things, made outlandish demands, and even threatened to kill Elias and those close to him. Despite this, he was unwaveringly kind.

Though it seemed he might never be able to get through their outrage, eventually, his endurance outlasted their own and they could shout no longer. Like that, he was able to engage in dialogue with the revolt. He spoke to many people of their misgivings with the Duke, patiently listened to the people and their grievances, and tried to relate to them—at the end of the day, they were all human beings.

All he did was talk, yet perhaps that was all the people needed. Eventually, he stepped down from the battlements, and moved to stand directly across from them, just beyond the gate. He befriended many and remembered countless names just as the people came to know him. The people loved House Parbon—his reputation aided him in this, just as Stain suggested it might.

He promised them things that he had already intended to give them. He promised to root out the corruption in the city and ensure that each and every man would be treated fairly under the law. He promised that the people who had been wronged would be given justice—promised that those people unfairly seized and executed by rogue knights of the Dukedom would have their family compensated and receive vengeance against their killers.

Yet beneath it all, he wove the narrative that the plague was the common enemy. He drilled that idea into their head ever so slowly and deliberately so that soon enough, the people themselves were suggesting it would be best to focus on the plague and abandon this revolt. Elias never would have been capable of doing such a subtle thing—it was Stain's idea, and he used Elias to implement it.

Soon enough, things had pacified enough that Elias dared to open the gates. He was the first to walk among the people. His dialoging had not been without merit—he'd made friends among the would-be rebels, and they all greeted him without hostility. He could not say it was warm—their tempers could not be calmed so quickly, he knew—but he finally lifted the siege.

After, the true work began. Though the Duke's wife pressured Duke Marauch into remaining within the castle, Elias used his own men to organize proper treatment for all of the plague-ridden within Elbraille. At times he got his hands dirty, setting up tents and overseeing the process of organization.

The disease was a virulent and highly contagious thing. Elias was not foolish enough to think that he could conquer it within the day—even still, by restoring order in the city, the rate at which it spread diminished greatly.

"Young lord, with so many infected, the industries within the city have faltered," an old man explained to Elias, who stood in a tent with the plagued. Helmuth stood just beside him, guarding him ever-diligently. His purple eyes swirled like vortexes, watching each and all before them.

"Meaning?" Elias pressed.

"The men that own the businesses—textile factories, my lord, or dyeing shops, or butcheries, or any number of enterprises—they refuse to allow people with the disease work in their buildings. 'No work for those with the waxpox,' they say. All of us are idle, my lord, and some people have even resorted to raiding the granaries of the wealthier citizens, for they cannot afford to pay. It is..." the man gripped his hands together. His fingers were waxy and distorted. "This work block is sensible, my lord, I know it. Yet even still, people begin to starve."

Elias considered this, nodding. "I will ensure that the merchants do not raise the prices on common food item, under severe penalty," he promised. "And... I will secure subsidies, even if I need to call upon my father. You may count on that."

The old man looked greatly relieved. Elias gave him a curt, if gentle nod, and then walked out of the tent.

“Things have largely stabilized,” Elias reflected to Helmuth quietly. “I think the plague might’ve ended the revolt regardless of what I’d done... but even still, it is good to know I have helped curb things, if only slightly.”

“You are your father’s son,” Helmuth reflected. “He enjoys helping people, too.”

Elias smiled when he was compared to his father. “Yet now that things have calmed... I should leave this to subordinates. I made promises. I must keep them. The root of most of the corruption in the city is the Duchess, based on what Stain has found me. I will be of better use in improving the city back in the Duke’s castle. Yet how to separate the Duke and the Duchess...?”

“I am glad to hear of it,” Helmuth said, relief on his tone. “I—young lord Elias!”

Elias darted his head about from his retainer’s panic. Helmuth’s hand pointed ahead urgently. He quickly placed the pieces and turned to where Helmuth pointed. A large, badly hunched man ran towards him with metal held in hand, body wrapped in a heavy burlap cloak. Elias was not foolish enough to go out without guards—his knights moved to intercept, yet two more men coordinated with the hunchbacked man, mindlessly tackling his guards.

This hunchbacked man broke past his distracted guards with skill—he was no common cutthroat, and that much was obvious at once. Elias pivoted away, yet this seemingly deformed man at once lunged forth with inhuman speed. Helmuth conjured a B-rank ward in front of Elias, but it shattered once it met with the man’s weapon.

Something hurled towards the air at Elias, and he raised his hand to block it. Something cold and wet covered his hand and spilled onto his face. He had no time for disgust because his assailant still approached. He saw a gleaming metal whiteness approach and remembered his father’s training well. He caught the man’s wrist and kicked his shin. The dagger only barely cut his hand, right where the bulk of the liquid had landed.

The man fell from the kick to his shin, and his heavy burlap robe fell off of him. He was badly stricken with the plague, his skin waxy and distorted. The man’s wrist twisted as he fell, and the dagger clattered to the ground. Elias recognized it very well. It was his father’s, once. The Margrave had lost it fighting Prince Induen at Diraccha.

“Young lord...” Helmuth paused. “The blood...”

The man Elias had subdued started to laugh. His skin was so badly morphed his eyes were practically sealed shut, and they seemed to gleam with malice. “A parting gift for the young lord.”

Elias looked at his hand finally, realizing what had been thrown at him. It was blackened, diseased blood.

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Chapter 173: Looping Road

Elaine watched Argrave as he ate his breakfast. It was more than a bit disconcerting, considering she deliberately chose him out of all his party members to stare at. Anneliese was feeding her Starsparrow, Durran was examining all of the food curiously, and Galamon sat in silence. Of the three, he certainly didn’t picture himself being the most interesting to look at.

Elaine had long ago finished her meal, but Argrave still had much and more to eat. Ever since becoming Black Blooded, he found his appetite much greater than it was before. Maybe that was just because he exerted himself more.

Argrave finally stared back at her, chewing through a soft slice of meat. He examined the black gaseous magic within her, considering it a good exercise to help him distinguish between the different ranks of magic by sight alone.

"I think you could become A-rank anytime you want, now," Argrave guessed, hoping to break some of the silence.

She shifted in her chair and crossed her arms. "And how would you know?"

Argrave tapped his temple, indicating his eyes. "You think I got these lamps because I like the way they look? No—I can see your magic. Very impressive." He lowered his hand and shook his head. He deliberately mentioned this ability, hoping vaguely she might report it to princess Elenore. "I got what I wanted from the Low Way... and from the Burnt Desert beyond it." One of his Brumesingers jumped up on his lap, gazing at the green-eyed woman across from him.

Some of the iciness was dispelled by his conversation, and Elaine looked down at the gray fox on his lap. "I hope those creatures of yours made no mess."

"They never do... unless I want that to happen," Argrave pointed his fork. "So—let's get to brass tacks. How is business?" he took another bite as he waited for her answer.

"Good. You mentioned that I could become an A-rank mage—the issue is, I'm too busy to head to the Tower of the Gray Owl to study the process," she nodded with the faintest of smiles. "The Veidimen are a bit stingy. They're only distributing the lowest-ranked druidic spells. Even still, they sell like nothing else, and I dare not cripple this business in infancy. Rowe is a hostile prick, but I very rarely have to see him. At this point, I very nearly make as much gold as my brother."

"Do they trade any Ebonice?" Argrave got to the matter he cared about most.

Elaine shook her head. "Don't know what that is. We've only traded spellbooks and books about enchantment."

"Do they carry black weaponry?" Galamon butted in. "Crystalline."

Elaine looked at him. "Maybe. I seldom go personally anymore."

Argrave tapped the table, thinking. "Alright. If you can make it happen, I'd like to see some of the Veidimen smugglers."

"What for?" she frowned.

"Come on. I set you up with this killer business and asked for nothing in return," Argrave held his hands out.

Elaine tapped her finger against her elbow as she sat there with arms crossed. "You're right," she agreed after a time. "I'll see what I can do, but if you're here a week and no longer... you'll just have to get lucky if you want to meet them. Voyages to Veiden take a while. Might be they stop by. Might be they don't."

Argrave nodded. It was the best he'd be able to get. "Alright. The enchanted jewelry that I left with you—I certainly hope they're all appraised by now."

Elaine nodded. "About two weeks ago, the last of them came back in. Very valuable stuff—I've got them in our vault. A lot of the appraisers made offers to buy them. I refused, naturally, per our arrangement."

"Very nice. After I finish up here, I'd like to see them," Argrave tapped his food with his fork. "I'll pick out what I plan on using. Everything else, I'd like to leave to you to sell. 75-25 split, my favor."

She bit her lip, then bartered, "60-40."

Argrave placed his hands on the table. "You're shaking me down."

"It'll be hard to sell them to anyone that doesn't know what they do. I'm in contact with the appraisers," Elaine pointed out.

"Forget that," Argrave placed his elbows against the table loudly and leaned in. "Who did you use as the appraiser—that old man Mucullen on the edge of town? Or maybe that tower master Quint in the southwestern center of Jast? I know who you might've brought this to. I can sell them fine—don't cheat me. 80-20. My favor," he raised it.

Elaine stared, biting her lip harder as she deliberated. "75-25," she brought that figure back.

"I don't *need* you for this, and I already paid my service fee for the appraisal a long time ago. Those items are mine. I'm trying to do you a favor, yet you keep slapping my hand away. 85-15," he raised his share once again, voice stern.

Elaine tensed up, staring down Argrave. Durran's gaze jumped between the two of them, waiting to see what would happen.

Eventually, her tension dissipated and Elaine shook her head. "Dealing with you the last time was definitely different. Fine... 85-15, gods be damned," she said defeatedly.

Argrave smiled as though his sternness never was, then resumed eating contentedly.

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Elaine led Argrave to the Vyrbell vault where the jewelry was supposedly kept. She insisted that they go alone due to her brother's rules, but Argrave only agreed once Anneliese confirmed she held no malicious intent. He thought things might be awkward between them—they had parted on a strange note. Elaine never brought her earlier courtship proposal up. Argrave definitely wouldn't, either.

The place was very well guarded by knights and by walls of enchanted steel. The main door was heavy enough to require two men to open it, and the vault itself was divided into cells, each with another heavy locked door. The ceiling was low, and Argrave needed to bend his neck to stand straight.

After a little run through the maze-like vault, they arrived at one of the cells, and Elaine retrieved a key. The jewels were kept in a simple box per piece, alongside a detailed dissertation on their effects. Argrave spent a fair while sorting through them, determining which ones were useful and which could be sold.

What was stopping someone from wearing ten or more enchanted rings, alongside pounds of enchanted necklaces and bracelets? Nothing... ostensibly. But there was an issue of resonance. For the ring that Anneliese and Argrave wore, it merely contained a spell—one could wear ten of them without much issue. They were portable spells, in essence. The exorbitant cost was the main barrier.

For other enchantments, though, the matter was different. Enchantments made in the distant past, as those Argrave had appraised, affect the body itself. As such, if the enchantments are incompatible, their efficacy would be reduced by an astonishing degree. If one wears a ring that helps its wearer resist fire and a ring that helps them resist ice, the two would combat each other and nullify their effects near completely. By contrast, complementary enchantments might supplement each other.

As such, Argrave needed to choose a good set for each of his three companions and himself.

Galamon stood to be the frontliner, always. He had amazing hardiness, and his survivability could hardly be improved more. Argrave chose a set of anklets that augmented speed. Speed and power were not different—they were one in the same. Galamon would always benefit from more speed. They were anklets... but considering how big the man was, he might need to wear them as bracelets. Additionally, Argrave found him a necklace to resist electricity, which Argrave considered the most potent form of elemental magic. The Giantkillers gave him lightning immunity, but only when held. Beyond that, no other compatible enchantment suited him.

Durran would likely fill the space between Galamon and the two mages—Anneliese and Argrave. He was capable with his glaive, but also capable with his magic. Versatility was his specialty. Something all-purpose suited him. Argrave chose out any enchantments that helped with his defense. Though his wyvern-scale armor was very good, it fell short of what Anneliese and Argrave wore. In the end, it amounted to a steel ring that hardened one's skin, coupled with a set of earrings that strengthened the bones.

Considering Argrave did not know if Durran would stick around... he didn't plan on giving them to him immediately.

As for Anneliese, Argrave couldn't deny he wanted to give her mostly defensive enchantments. In the end, he knew it wasn't the right call. He chose a few rings that affected focus and concentration. It would enable her to aim better in battle and ignore distractions easier. She was already a calm person by nature, and he hoped this would capitalize on that strength of hers further yet. On a more personal note, he hoped it might help with some of the more negative aspects of her empathic nature. She seldom complained, but Argrave still felt remorse when he recalled her suffering in the Low Way of the Rose and the Thorngorge Citadel.

Lastly, Argrave himself. He stood to be the heavy hitter of the squad, especially with the Blessing of Supersession. He had hoped for something to augment the strength of any electric spells. Unfortunately, he didn't get lucky. After that, he'd been hoping for something to aid with blood magic—once again, no such fortune. In the end, he settled on a ring that strengthened his wind magic. It might be useful for dealing with projectiles.

The real haul was to be the money he gained from selling all of these.

“There,” Argrave finished, standing up once again with a piece of paper in his hand. He’d recorded everything that was going to be pawned off. “Everything left, I leave to you to sell.”

“How do you know I won’t cheat you?” Elaine looked at the pieces scattered throughout the room.

“You asked me something similar last time, as I recall. I’ll know,” Argrave said plainly. “I know a lot of things. It might be that *I’m* the Bat.”

When Argrave knew to look for guilt, he saw it written on her features clearly.

“It might be I asked you to report about me, because I was curious what you might say,” Argrave hazarded a guess based on what Anneliese had told him. Elaine’s widening eyes indicated that he’d hit the nail on the head. Princess Elenore had received some information about his actions from Elaine. That meant the princess was aware of him. He supposed it was inevitable, given that he’d used her alias to enter this city a long time ago.

“Or maybe these prying eyes of mine can read the mind,” Argrave said suggestively, dismissing his own words with a smile. “Who can say?”

She was obviously stunned for a moment, but slowly she settled down. “I’ll get it done,” she promised.

Argrave clapped, the sound muffled by his gloves. “Excellent. Now I can stop playing the hardliner.”

Elaine looked up at him. “You have changed a lot, haven’t you?”

Argrave frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” she shook her head. “You just seem... harsher. Less...” she trailed off, leaving a word unspoken.

Argrave laughed and made for the door. “Sore over the split? Come on. I can’t be a doormat. I hope there’s no hard feelings. I still consider you and your brother friends, you know.”

“Never mind. Forget I said anything,” she changed the subject, walking ahead of Argrave to exit the cell.

Argrave stood in silence, neck bent to avoid bumping his head on the low ceiling. He contemplated her words for a few seconds. After, he stepped forward, mind refocused on getting all that he needed from Jast.

“By the way—I might need your help with something. It’s about this new companion of mine...” he called out.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 174: Even the Greatest Fall

The time spent at Jast passed in much the same way as their first visit... though without the feeling of tension from the last time. Jast was allied to House Parbon, now, and the sentiment was reflected in the streets. Flag-saluting patriots abounded, whereas last time had the atmosphere of a heated, tense debate. Parbon was well-loved and supported by the Count of Jast.

Yet the plague was an imminent issue. Count Delbraun was managing things in a stern way—any plagued refugees from the villages were kept outside of the city, and the gates were opened only during

specific hours of the day. Even during those hours all entries were heavily guarded, and all entering the city were strictly checked. Though this did not prevent the spread of the plague entirely, it did contain it a great deal.

Residents of the city were given medical treatment. Those that could not pay were given free, if limited, medical treatment, and cordoned off in abandoned buildings. Those that could pay could receive highly specialized medical treatment from spellcasters.

Entrepreneurial wizards in the Order of the Gray Owl were already developing things to combat the plague. Many of them were utter bogus. Argrave had the good fortune to know which were scams and which weren't. All of these elements working in tandem kept Jast quite stable.

Argrave bought twenty masks—their seller dubbed them 'Humorless Masks.' They were solemn looking plain white masks that shone with complex enchantments on the inside. When worn, the mask would constantly project clean air infused with healing magic into the airways. Its seller said it would 'keep out bad humors by ensuring only clean air entered,' but despite its dubious description, it was a tremendous boon to the constitution. It was like a constant minor healing agent pumping throughout the body, carried by the lungs and then the blood. He bought twenty for reserve—each lasted a week when actively used.

Though the Humorless Masks would be quite effective for most purposes, Argrave still bought an abundance of ingredients needed to make potions that would help combat disease. He would be sure to have Anneliese and Durran both drink them whenever they were in high-risk areas.

Galamon brewed these potions. Naturally.

While moving through the town, Argrave made it a point to practice using Garm's eyes to discern what rank spellcasters was at. As he practiced more and more, he grew confident in discerning who was what rank, and his own knowledge of certain people helped verify those results. He felt fairly adept at determining a spellcaster's rank now, but naturally, it would need some fine-tuning.

Beyond tending to the issue of disease, Argrave also focused on refueling, so to speak. He sold the jewelry and other valuables pillaged from Argent, the Tower of Silver. Between the war and the plague, he did not get as much as he'd liked—nevertheless, it was a handsome sum. He used that, plus the remainder of what he still had in his lockbox, to pay for everything he needed.

Anneliese and Argrave had used most of the B-rank wards available in their enchanted rings, so Argrave had them recharged—significantly less expensive than having them made initially, yet still quite costly. Argrave also had their enchanted gear examined and repaired. Between paying back the Margrave, the Humorless Masks, and the enchantment repairs and recharges... Argrave found himself completely out of rose gold magic coins.

When Argrave recognized that, he did quite a lot of introspection. He had received that money from the sale of the estate of Foamspire, which had come from a bribe by Induen. Anneliese and Argrave could still spot the tower every day when they did their daily ritual of sunset watching. Argrave checked Rivien's calendar—as he recalled, Foamspire vanished into the ocean 'overnight' on 1/13/873. He prayed he remembered that date.

"What are you grinning about?" Argrave questioned as he ate breakfast with Durran and Anneliese.

“What, the man with the magic eyes can’t catch on?” Durran tapped his fork against the plate, then leaned back in his chair. “It seems you and I are on the same level.”

Argrave double-took for a moment, then set down his fork, scrutinizing Durran a little more carefully. The man had always possessed a large supply of magic, well over many C-rank mages. Yet Durran yet to breach the barrier, lacking any C-rank spells to learn.

“You’re C-rank, now,” Argrave said, catching on.

Durran beamed. “Couple of weeks with Garm’s books, I finally break this little limit I’ve had for near a year. Wondrous thing, isn’t it? It seems we’re together now in being midway to the end of the road to mastery of magic.” He picked up his fork again.

Argrave wiped his face off with a napkin as he stared Durran down. He didn’t say anything.

“That thing I mentioned to you,” Argrave turned to look at Elaine. “You took care of it?”

Elaine nodded.

“Make sure they were all delivered,” Argrave insisted.

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Durran sat in his bedroom, sitting on his bed with his back to the wall. Argrave had extended their stay here, for reasons Durran couldn’t guess. One knee supported a spellbook which projected a three-dimensional spell matrix. He studied it, head tilted to one side. As he did so, a knock came at his door.

“It’s open,” he called out, only moving his head.

Argrave opened the door and entered, lowering his head beneath the doorframe to enter. He was a very physically imposing person, an effect that had only increased as they travelled—black blood was doing wonders for him, evidently. Durran had come to know as they travelled that he was not quite so fearsome. Despite everything, he was still as mortal and fallible as anyone—he just knew a lot of things that he shouldn’t.

“Leader man. What brings you here?” Durran greeted.

Argrave clasped his hands together. “Want to ride a horse?”

Durran frowned. “Why?”

“Want to show you something,” he shrugged, stepping closer. “And horse riding is fun.”

Durran closed the book. “Why not? I love a good mystery. You’ll have to teach me how to ride.”

“Of course,” Argrave nodded. “You know, I learned from Margrave Reinhardt. Quite a tale...”

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“...and all the horses went wild,” Argrave said, hands held over the fire. “The knights roamed about, trying to rein them in... meanwhile... I cut my ropes, snuck over to the Margrave’s horse... and took off into the night.”

Durrán broke into a loud, howling laughter that echoed across the plains. It rebounded off a distant white tower on a cliff overlooking the sea.

"After that, I rode through the whole night... then I sold the guy's horse to some horse merchant I knew. Could have bought a damn house with what I got." Argrave held up his hand in an 'ok' sign.

Durrán's laughter was stoked by Argrave's continuation, and he fell on his back, where the two horses they'd rode in on stood behind them, grazing.

"Gods above," Durrán sighed. "Thought I was so special, but I was just carrying out a tradition."

Argrave chuckled, then handed a skin with a lid on it over to Durrán. "You want?"

"What's this?" Durrán eyed it.

"Wine. Expensive, I'm told," Argrave moved it, and liquid sloshed within. "Might have stolen it from Elaine."

Durrán grabbed it. "You had wine this whole time? You greedy..." he trailed off as he threw the wineskin back, drinking heavily.

"I didn't touch it," Argrave protested. "I can't get drunk anymore. Now it's just terrible-tasting juice to me."

Durrán frowned. "Because you're Black Blooded?" When Argrave nodded, he shook his head. "What a blow."

"Better than getting sick every damned month. Abject misery," Argrave disagreed.

The word 'misery' seemed to remind Durrán of something, because he quieted down. He took another drink, staring at the moonlight reflect off the white tower ahead. It was a grandiose piece of architecture. It seemed sturdy—made for the ages.

"Do you still think about Garm?" Durrán questioned.

Argrave nodded, saying nothing.

Durrán laid on his back. "I've got nightmares of the blue-eyed prick."

"Blue-eyed?" Argrave turned.

"Saw what he really looked like when we... fought," Durrán explained.

"Oh. The fight between souls. That must have been wild," he said ponderously. "Necromancer like that surely has some imagination." Argrave nodded, turning back to look at the tower.

Durrán looked surprised Argrave knew about it, but he turned his head to the fire. "Always the same dream. We're on a field of black roses. He asks me a question. He says, 'when you think of freedom, do you think of flying?'" Durrán shook his head. "Then the roses become hands, they pull me apart... or they try, at least. I always struggle. Then, he asks me another question. Different, this time." Durrán looked at Argrave. "When you think of freedom, do you dream of dying?"

"It rhymes," Argrave noted quietly.

Durran drank deeply this time. "It's like the guy's still there, tearing me apart. Trying to take what he wants."

Argrave shook his head. "Not possible." He looked at Durran, but his assurances didn't seem comfort the man. He continued, "I've got nightmares, too. Sometimes Garm is in them, sure. Mostly it's... everything else." Argrave turned. "I told you I have a lot of good stories. Fact is, they're fun to talk about... but they were hell to experience. The Cavern of the Lily's Death, the Veidimen invasion, the Low Way of the Rose..."

Durran stared at Argrave's back, then took another drink from his wineskin.

"Gotten better with Anneliese. She wakes me up when I start muttering, stuff like that... and I do the same for her. I never thought she might be going through the same thing," he said wondrously.

"Ahhhhh," Durran exclaimed knowingly. "Nothing quite like a bedmate." He drank more of the wine. "That lady, Elaine... she was a pretty one. Smart, too, and fiery. Exactly the type I like. Wanted to have a chance to chat with her alone, but she was too damned busy."

Argrave whipped his head back. "Was that why you stayed inside like a good boy?"

Durran smiled.

"Now's hardly the time, anyway," Argrave shook his head disapprovingly.

"Yeah, you're one to talk," Durran said bitterly. "My father always told me the gods love me more than anyone... but no gods love a man like a woman can. And you—you're set."

Argrave said nothing more on the matter, and Durran took another drink out of the wineskin, turning to look at the tower.

"So—let's hear another story," Durran urged. "The Cavern of the Lily's Death—let's start there. You say you've got so many stories, after all."

Just then, the ground rumbled. The fire flickered ahead of them. Argrave shifted, and then rose to his feet. He stepped ahead, then turned around.

The rumbling began to intensify. Though Durran had been staring at Argrave, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to look at the white tower in the distance. Durran rose to his feet. He realized that the tower was lowering. He furrowed his brows, perplexed, and stepped forward.

Suddenly, great stretches of the land ahead began to distort. It was not so much a catastrophic shaking as it was a simple collapse—a landslide on a grand scale. The grass-strewn sea arch ahead started to depress in the center, great chunks of stone and dirt falling off into the sea. It gained momentum. As some fell, more joined it.

A colossal amount of land suddenly fell away, making the sturdy tower and its accompanying walls seem like nothing more than pretty stone as they fell. The tower bent inwards, crashing into the land, which triggered yet more activity. Durran stepped back, briefly afraid. Miles and miles of land ahead collapsed into the ocean.

All of the center of the sea arch fell into the water, creating a colossal mass of water and dust exploding upwards into the air. Once things began to settle, Durran calmed, stepping closer. Just then, the pillar of the sea arch began to turn, splitting at the center. It, too, fell, causing another massive splash of water and debris.

Durran watched, mouth agape and awed. Argrave had stared at him the entire time, and Durran's gaze slowly moved to him.

"Told you I had something to show you," Argrave said, stepping forward. He put his large, bony hand on Durran's shoulder and squeezed tightly. "Let me tell you a story. That bit of land up there—I used to own it. I sold it for an exorbitant sum, because I knew this would happen.

"I had Elaine send each of the servants living there a letter," Argrave looked to the rubble. "I told them this collapse was coming, gave them all the evidence. Some of them believed me... the others... well, I assume they're dead."

Argrave neglected to inform Durran that none had disbelieved the letters, and the tower was truly empty.

Argrave leaned in close to Durran's face. "They didn't listen to me, and they died. They thought they knew better. The things I say, Durran, they usually come true."

Durran stared Argrave in the eyes, more than a little unnerved.

"I have a lot of stories. We'll make a lot more, and they're only going to get more and more noteworthy." Argrave squeezed tighter. "So, if you want to have fun, and you want to do crazy stuff... just wait. It'll happen," he smiled genially. "But I don't need you doing things like what you did at the Lionsun Castle. It throws things off. If I tell you to wait because it's smart... well." Argrave turned back to the site of the collapse. "You should wait."

Durran slowly nodded.

"Structure, leadership—these things are very important for precise operations. Even if you see what you consider a 'better way,' going off alone only causes trouble for everyone else." Argrave released his grip, then pinched Durran's cheek. "I don't like dealing with uncertainty, imprecision. We're fighting a god. There is very little room for error." Argrave stepped away. "Can you handle that?"

Durran lowered his gaze, staying silent. Eventually, he lifted his head up. "Yes, Argrave."

"I need more than a yes," he pressed.

Durran blinked, then locked his golden eyes with Argrave. "I won't go off on my own, and I won't disobey you."

Argrave smiled. He gave Durran two light, friendly slaps on the cheek. "Let's ride back. Early day tomorrow."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 175: Into the Plagued Lands

Galamon stood on the docks of the seedy underground Smuggler's Cove with Argrave, watching the slightly turbulent waters. Elaine had told them that the Veidimen were going to be coming by today—Argrave hoped to pick up some Ebonice here. Considering Jast was a city of magic, it stood to reason the smugglers that come here would bring some for protection.

Argrave had taken some extra days to do that little display with Durran. He didn't like idling about for too long, but he felt this matter was important. It came with a bright side—they managed to catch one of the Veidimen smuggler's arrival times.

"I'm really glad I remembered the date of the collapse right," Argrave confided with Galamon. "The whole thing could have gone extremely sour. Could've taken the guy out drinking, wasted time telling stupid stories. I always thought I had a bad memory. I guess I was very wrong. I just hope it works..." Argrave kicked the tip of his boots against the ground.

"He'll be reliable," Galamon nodded.

Argrave turned his head. "You think?"

"Had soldiers like him once," Galamon crossed his arms. "Capable, but individualistic. Punishing turns them into troublemakers." His teeth showed in the faintest of smiles. "Develop a rapport, show your own capability. That's the path to respect."

Argrave looked to Galamon, feeling a bit more confident now that he'd weighed in. He appreciated Anneliese and Galamon much more now that he'd dealt with a third party member who was not so compliant. Someday, he'd like to do something to show his appreciation.

A thanks is a nice place to start, Argrave mused. As he opened his mouth, Galamon shifted.

"Boat," he said, tone low. "Big. Eight on it. A galley, probably, and rowed."

Argrave dismissed his thoughts and focused on the matter at hand. Though it was not even in vision, that soon changed—first, Argrave saw the disturbed water, and then a galley came into view, just as Galamon had said. It was painted for night travel, barely visible against the black sky marking the horizon.

Soon enough, it rowed into view of the lights within the smugglers cove. The giant paddles sticking out of its side were retracted, pulled into the boat, and it slowly drifted. A dockworker—one of Elaine's men—moved to receive the boat. Argrave and Galamon moved towards where it was slated to harbor.

The lookout of the boat spotted Galamon and Argrave, and her eyes stayed on them curiously. Soon enough, the boat was docked, tied by a thick, hearty rope. One of Elaine's men came on and explained the situation. Argrave could barely hear his name, but perhaps it was his imagination.

Once the situation was explained, the lookout of the Veidimen stepped off her boat onto the docks and moved towards Galamon and Argrave speedily. Galamon tensed, fearing what was about to happen. Argrave remained relaxed. The Veidimen soon stood before them.

"Galamon... 'the Great?'" the woman lookout asked, standing before him cautiously. She had a certain cheery intensity to her, the effect doubled by her bright blonde hair.

"Once," he confirmed tensely.

“By Veid...” she exclaimed, putting her hand to her mouth. “I cannot believe it. I never thought...” she shook her head wildly, like she was meeting a celebrity of some kind. “My brother was an officer beneath you. Taretin—do you remember him?”

Galamon put one hand on the pommel of the Giantkillers at his belt. “Gold of hair, missing a ring finger? I do remember. A good man,” he said cautiously.

“Aye, that’s him,” she smiled excitedly. “I cannot wait to tell him of this.”

Galamon spared a glance at Argrave, perplexed. He only returned with a smile, amused at his friend’s bewilderment. Argrave knew well that Galamon was still revered by the Veidimen, despite both his vampirism and his exile. He was not welcome in Veiden, true enough, but the people still loved him fiercely.

“Then this...” the lookout continued, turning her gaze to Argrave. “You must be the First Finger of the Hand Reaching from the Abyss!”

“First Finger? What?” Argrave asked loudly, taken aback.

“You were the first human to set foot on Veiden, spurred by the god of knowledge himself,” she explained.

“Well...” Argrave adjusted his collar. “That’s right, I am,” he took his credit, feeling a bit proud.

“They call you a mad fool, fighting alone against the calamity,” she continued, causing Argrave’s pride to stop where it started.

Argrave clicked his tongue. “Hardly alone. But yes, I have that great misfortune.” He shook his head. “Not why we’re here, though. We were curious if you would be willing to part with some Ebonice.”

“Ebonice?” she looked between the two of them.

“I hope you’re not asking me to explain what that is,” Argrave said drolly.

“No, it’s—” she paused, her cheeriness dulled none by his dry comment. “Rowe’s instructions...”

“Come now. Galamon had Ebonice— he’s been using it responsibly. An unfortunate happening made it lost to us. This is for Galamon, not for me. An axe, preferably, or whatever you have on hand,” Argrave held his hands out, assuring the woman.

She looked up at Galamon. “I’ll see what I can get from the ship,” she concluded.

Galamon watched as she walked away. Argrave watched him. A little shaken, he looked at Argrave.

“They should hate me,” he said quietly, almost weakly.

“Should they?” Argrave questioned.

“Yes,” he said resolutely. “I am an abomination before Veid’s eyes.”

“Didn’t you deliver gold to your wife for decades? You had to know you had friends.”

“I had one steadfast friend—a fellow heretic, in truth, though guilty of lesser crimes than me,” Galamon nodded. “But... everyone? They *must* hate me. It is only right. I betrayed Veid.”

Argrave shook his head. “Everyone knows your circumstances. Everyone knows your tragedy. Even your wife—everyone respects her, treats her well, because of you.”

Galamon closed his eyes and took a long breath.

“I told you that you’d see them again one day. I wasn’t just saying things. I *can* cure you, Galamon. No, that’s not all—I *will*,” he vowed. “Considering all the ridiculously crazy stuff you’ve done for me, it’s the least I can do. And then, you’ll go back to Veid. Everyone will welcome you with open arms. You’ll meet your wife again, you’ll meet your son. Maybe I’ll be there,” he shrugged. “Maybe we’ll have tea. Could be fun.”

Galamon adjusted his helmet. “Maybe,” he conceded. “Would she...” Galamon trailed off.

Argrave didn’t know what he was going to say, but he could tell there was some weight to it. Argrave patted him on the shoulder. In the distance, the lookout stepped out of the galley’s deck, holding a black axe in her hand. Argrave smiled.

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Their last day in Jast was quite fruitful. Argrave and Anneliese travelled together into the Order of the Gray Owl to deposit some of the spell books they had finished. She was allowed entry with her badge denoting her as an Honorary Wizard of the Gray Owl. Argrave could carry more than a few books this time. They made an eye-catching pair, Argrave suspected, but they were unbothered. Doubtless anyone interested would know Argrave had been in Jast, unfortunately. An unavoidable tragedy.

Argrave had broadened his mastery of C-rank spells—there were few spells of the rank left to learn that he considered vital. He felt that he would be ready to tackle B-rank after they dealt with the plague, and Anneliese agreed with that assessment. His magic pool grew every day with his diligent practice—though without the debt of the Blessing of Supersession, slower than he’d like. That would be remedied in time.

On Anneliese’s end, her talent made itself abundantly known. Argrave had counted—she’d learned seventeen B-rank spells thus far. It was a ridiculous rate of progression. For instance, she learned the druidic spell [Progenitor], binding the three spellcasters in the team in a magical network. Anneliese benefited the most, gaining a sort of awareness regarding the two of them and their druidic bonds, but Argrave and Durran would notice if anyone was disconnected from the spell. Considering that typically happened if someone died, Argrave never cared to experience it. Beyond that, she added potent B-rank elemental spells to her arsenal, coupled with helpful illusion magic and potent healing spells.

After lightening their load of many books, Argrave and his company left early in the morning. Their pocket was a hell of a lot heavier after the cash from Elaine’s sale came in—maybe his comment about being the Bat had gotten under her skin, because she was very deliberate in making it known that he had received the full amount. He doubted that claiming to be the Bat would have significant consequences.

The visit was still a net loss in terms of pure capital—that was fine, naturally. Argrave felt well-prepared for the plague, and money was no object compared to safety. The Humorless Masks would negate the worst of things, the potions would further eliminate risk... and should someone genuinely grow infected, Galamon was here. His vampiric blood was Argrave's last resort. The only person who knew that, though, was Anneliese.

With everything coming together, they finally began heading towards the northwest. Considering that tensions were high and roadblocks were in effect all over the south, they could not travel by carriage as they had before. They travelled by horseback and kept off the main roads—it had been ridiculously challenging to find good mounts. Forests were abundant in the southern territories, and those masked their movements well. Between the compass and the eye-catching landmarks in Vasquer, Argrave was confident he was leading his party in the right direction. Galamon, who'd been a mercenary in Vasquer for a little over a decade, contributed, too.

Their party grew ever closer to the heart of the ravaging plague... and Orion, the Holy Fool.