

The air grew colder as they moved further north. For Anneliese, Galamon, it was no issue—indeed, it may have been some respite. Argrave was largely unbothered. After the experience in becoming Black Blooded, it was easy to overlook minor annoyances. Durran, though, who'd spent his whole life in a desert, suffered all throughout the journey, and requested more blankets at night.

Argrave's Brumesingers, desert creatures that they were, sought refuge in Argrave's warmth during the night. At daytime, they scouted when they rode. Anneliese bound all of the spellcasters in the party with the druidic spell [Progenitor]. It decreased the maximum magic that she had, but it remained constantly active without expenditure. Anything Argrave's druidic bonds informed him of, she would know if it, too. Like this, she became the perfect advance scout, all while remaining in the safety of the party. They had to sidestep roaming horsemen many times. They might not be dangerous... but considering it was avoidable, they took no chances.

Despite these factors, they made steady progress. As they strayed further from the temperate south, they started to see snow. It was thin at first, but soon it blanketed the barren hibernating trees of the forests they traversed. They had chosen to travel on horseback to better conceal their movements, but it made the journey more than a little difficult. Without three spellcasters enabling a little recklessness, the journey would not have been as simple.

Though they struggled, after about a week and a half, they came into the Midwest portion of Vasquer—the County of Veden. Though not as grand as the mercantile city of Mateth, Veden was rich. The city had walls perhaps twenty-feet tall, painted white by snowfall. A fortress stood strong at the top of the hill, separate from but overlooking the city. It was the seat of Elgar, the Count of Veden.

Several rivers passed through the area, making farmland abundant. Veden's fields were empty during the winter and blanketed with thin sheets of snow. Or rather, the *unoccupied* fields were snow-covered. The plague brought with it refugees from the rural villages of the Midwest, seeking the aid of the Count of Veden.

Argrave had been preparing himself to see chaos... but things were better organized than he thought. Instead of being barred from the walls, the people had been divided into orderly camps in the harvested fields, watched over by the city's guards and knights. There seemed to be no efforts to aid, but the refugee crisis was certainly maintained. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' the chaos had disrupted many of Veden's vital operations—to see it halted here by efficient handling was a welcome, if perplexing, thing.

"We stopping here?" questioned Durran, rubbing the back of his horse's head. Even without druidic magic, the man had a natural affinity with animals. He wore the Humorless Mask just as Anneliese did.

Argrave watched the camps, gaze distant. "No reason to. We have food enough to make the rest of the journey, and Galamon is an able hunter even if we run out."

Durran cursed, but Argrave was too distracted to pay him any heed.

Argrave pulled on his horse's reins, then said to the rest of his party, "Wait here. I want to go check something out. No more than two minutes," he directed, then led his horse away without waiting for a response.

He rode near the camps for refugees, not entering them properly. The tents were filled with the disease-ridden and seemed to be given only simple mats of straw. People eyed him cautiously, and eventually, Argrave found what he was looking for—a household knight, bearing a white hare across his breastplate. That hare was the symbol of House Veden. He rode up to the man.

"Hail," Argrave called out, drawing his horse to a stop. "These are camps for the refugees?" he questioned.

"Aye, sir, they are," the man confirmed, voice echoey from beneath his helmet. "Best keep your distance. Dangerous, they are. The plague rots all. Rots away a man's everything. The waxpox, they call it."

Argrave shifted. The disease had been given its official name already—the waxpox. Argrave wasn't sure if it could be classified as such—the waxy skin seen in the diseased might not qualify as a pox—but the name matched with what it had been called in the game.

He focused back on the matter at hand, following up, "And the Count of Veden ordered this?"

"...aye, that would be the natural order of things. Sir," the knight finished respectfully. Argrave presumed it was the horse that lent the knight that polite attitude—not many could afford horses in this day and age.

Argrave looked around once again. "But I know Count Elgar. I don't think this is something he would do without counsel. Can you tell me anything else about these camps?" Argrave fished into his pocket and pulled free a gold coin, holding it up to the sun.

"Well..." the knight trailed off, the shine of the coin making him work his head. "People say it's because of one of his children's advice. This one, she returned from an academy of sorts, head brimming with ideas—she's the one to suggest it, sir, to the best of my knowledge."

"Does the name Mina of Veden jog your memory?" Argrave followed up.

"That's it, sir," the knight nodded, helmet clanging against his breastplate.

"Then that's all from me. Catch," Argrave flicked the coin and then rode away, lost in thought.

*She shouldn't be here. Mina should be at Mateth, with Nikoletta, Argrave reasoned. And even if she were, Mina was never the sort to order something like this built. What's changed?*

He was curious, and somewhat apprehensive, about the answers to that question. He rejoined his group of three. His companions had questions written on their face.

"It was nothing important," Argrave shook his head. It did nothing to think on this—thought it might be he'd ruined something, the plague still took his priority. "Two more days, I'm certain, till we make it to where I don't want to be. Let's ride. There are problems to be fixed."

#####

What sort of geography might one associate with disease? Tropical forests, surely; those places had strange parasites, infectious bacteria, all the works. The continent of Berendar had sprawling jungles, to be sure, but that wasn't the place they were heading to. No, the northwest of Vasquer was wetlands. Argrave wasn't sure if it was a bog, a swamp, or a marsh—frankly, he didn't know the difference—but it was wetlands; a little Florida hellscape, though half as hot and a hundredfold deadlier.

The whole of the northwest had a fittingly gloomy air. Cold fog blanketed the landscapes and obscured visibility, and rising waters submerged much of the road, especially during winter. Overnight, the water would freeze at the surface, barely thawing out by midday. It became difficult to travel by horseback—the horses would either have trouble with their hooves in the water or slip on the thin layers of ice frozen over the road. Still, it was better than being on foot.

After the two vulnerable people of the group drank a potion to enhance their constitution, they pressed into the heartlands of this desolate place. Anneliese scouted out ahead, spotting a vast camp formed around a ruined castle in the marsh. They headed for that—it matched with Argrave's memory of where Orion would be. He dreaded the meeting. The environment did little to abate his dread.

The dead lined the marsh. Argrave had seen many corpses in the months he'd been here; some of them he had made. These corpses were still unsettling, though, even though he knew what to expect. Wherever the plague touched never decayed. Some of them were half-rotten. The waxy, warped flesh marking one as plague-ridden persisted undecayed while the rest of their body rotted, succumbing to death. Though insects were plentiful, the plague-ridden corpses went untouched, like monuments to the disease laid throughout the road, blanketed in low-lying cold fog.

They passed by abandoned villages. Some of them had been left for so long the wetlands had already begun to reclaim them—houses were caved in, granaries were broken and raided by rats, and fields were left unharvested, claimed by the elements and winter. The trees, hibernating for winter, painted a very grim image. The entire northwest told a grave tale—it was even in the air, that constant smell of death. It was a meaty, savory smell, reminding Argrave of... uncooked veal, bizarrely enough.

As they headed ever-nearer towards the abandoned fortress, he got the distinct feeling that his Brumesingers had noticed something. He was used to this feeling—it warranted further investigation. Nearly in-sync, he and Anneliese said, "Wait."

Anneliese locked eyes with Argrave, and he gave her a nod. She closed her eyes, holding her hand near the Starsparrow at her shoulder. A spell matrix whirled about in her hand, dissipating into green light. The bird vanished from her shoulder, and Argrave watched her patiently, keeping his horse at heel.

"I see... footmen. They bear golden armor," she said. "Enchanted, and heavily."

Argrave took a deep breath. "Orion's royal guard."

"They traverse the wetlands ably," Anneliese continued. "They travel the road. Should we veer off course?"

Durran shook his head, silently expressing his displeasure at the idea of going off-road in this terrain.

"No," Argrave said, and Durran lifted his head with his golden eyes a bit brighter. "We have to deal with them sooner or later—best to talk to them now, be escorted to Orion by them, personally." Argrave

clenched the reins of his horse tighter. "Like servant, like master—I suspect these men will be as demented as Orion himself. These are armed men. Dangerous." He locked eyes with Durran.

"I got the message, Argrave," he held up his hands to profess innocence. "I'll live like the dead."

Argrave lifted his head. Durran had stopped using the term 'leader man' since that display at Foamspire, he found. He supposed it had been undermining the entire time.

"Let's go, then," Argrave spurred his horse onwards. He and Galamon led with Durran and Anneliese travelling just behind.

Argrave cast a druidic spell. After a couple minutes of travel, Argrave's Brumesingers returned to him, ready to aid in case he needed it. More minutes after, something golden sheened between the trees. As soon as Argrave saw it, he directed his party to stop, waiting passively in the center of the road.

Orion's knights walked into view. They bore the golden armor of the royal guard, undefaced by the harshness of the wetlands. Their armor gleamed like the sun even still. Their leader had removed his helmet. His face was wrapped in loose white dirty bandages, strands of which swayed in the light winds. The others, too, had bandages on them—some of it stuck out from the armor, waving like a flag in the wind.

What little flesh of theirs was exposed was waxy. They didn't seem sick, though—they were full of vigor and power, every step of theirs seeming to shake the earth. Galamon took a deep breath as they grew closer, uneasy.

Orion's Waxknights, the game had dubbed them. They were not merely royal guards. They were his own personal order of knights by this point, morphed by the plague and his blessings into something horrifyingly strong and possessed of a devoutness not a bit inferior to his own. He served the gods—and these Waxknights, they served him.

Argrave spurred his horse a bit forwards, ready to tackle his most important challenge yet.

"Hail, traveler," the leading knight said, stopping them. "If you've come here after ignoring the stacked corpses, writhing with waxpox even in death... you must have a purpose."

"I do," Argrave nodded. "I've come to see my brother. It's clear to me he needs help, despite his abundant capability. I'm told Prince Orion is ahead, tending to the plagued."

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 177: The Holy Fool**

"I've come to see my brother. It's clear to me he needs help, despite his abundant capability. I'm told Prince Orion is ahead, tending to the plagued," Argrave spoke to the Waxknight before him, staring at the man's dead eyes barely visible behind his bandages.

"Do you mean to say our Holiness is your brother?" the leading knight demanded, taking a step forward.

"Half-brother," Argrave removed his hands from his horse's reins, holding his palms out. "But a brother nonetheless."

The loose bandages wrapped around the leading Waxknight's face slacked, blocking his vision, and he corrected it while pulling it tight.

"Prince Induen?" one at the side questioned.

Argrave shook his head. "No prince at all, otherwise I might have an escort gleaming as you knights do."

"Argrave, then, the bastard," the leading knight said.

"All are equal before the gods' eyes. That's what Orion says, at least," he smiled warmly, defusing the situation.

The Waxknights sized Argrave up, then glanced back towards his companions, examining them in turn.

"For your own sake—the waxpox abounds here," their helmetless leader informed him. "We will take you to Orion if you wish it to be so, but even our Holiness struggles to combat the disease, and more refugees show up daily."

"I have an idea of how bad things really are," Argrave turned his head, looking through the trees from whence they'd come. "Things get worse beyond these wetlands every day. Not all refugees had the good fortune to be tended to by my brother. And that's precisely why I came here—to help him, and to help those that suffer," he said seriously.

"Then we will take you," the knight gestured. "Orion accepts all comers. Whether you are truly his brother—that will be for him to judge."

Argrave nodded. "My companions and I will follow you."

With this, Argrave rode back and rejoined his party. At once, he directed Anneliese and Durran, "Drink your super juice, you two. I know you drank it this morning, but this is the heartlands. Disease flows through this place like blood through the heart."

Anneliese obeyed without complaint, removing her backpack from her shoulders and fishing within to fetch the drink. She took off the white, solemn Humorless Mask covering her face, and imbibed the liquid, wincing from its bitterness. Durran cursed too quietly to be heard, and then drank as well, washing it down with some conjured water.

"Let's go," said Durran, voice tight from his grimace. Anneliese nodded, then put the mask back over her face.

The Waxknights led them through the northwest, though it was less leading and more so resuming the path they had already been taking. With three of these knights acting as ostensible escorts, Argrave was not worried about anything coming to kill them, so he kept his Brumesingers close. Argrave could not say with confidence that Galamon was these knight's superior in combat. They were some of the most dangerous warriors on the continent at this stage, exceeding the royal knights they branched from by a large margin.

Anneliese watched them curiously, eyeing the exposed parts of their flesh where one might glimpse the warped, waxy skin. Argrave had long ago described these knight's capabilities to his party. Their entire body was affected by the waxpox. This made them immune to pain, and their skin was near as hard as

stone. In addition, Orion had blessed them—they ignored all of the disease’s negative aspects barring the change in appearance.

Obviously, Anneliese’s curiosity was not satisfied, but with the knights so close in proximity she had tact enough to avoid asking shameless questions. Durran looked discomforted with the knights, transfixed with an expression of horror and disgust both. Galamon watched them as though they were dangerous.

It took no more than thirty minutes for the abandoned fortress, occupied by Orion and his gigantic camp of refugees, to come into sight. The wetlands of the northwest were tenacious and aggressive, and much of the fortress had been torn asunder by growth—trees, roots, fungi, and vines all consumed the gray stone. People lay in tents en masse. Despite the seclusion of this place, the vast majority of these people seemed better fed and better treated than those Argrave witnessed in Veden.

The knights led them past all of that, heading for a keep in the corner of the fortress. Once at the door, the knights directed them to a makeshift stable that they’d been using, and Argrave left his horse there without complaint. Durran seemed hesitant to leave his mount there, and his eyes glanced from side to side as though paranoid, watching each and all of the disease-ridden inhabitants like coiled rattlesnakes.

The Waxknights took measured and disciplined steps into the keep where more of their colleagues abounded, guarding the man that lay within. Orion received a vast host of the common people, standing a foot and a half above most.

Orion wore dark plate armor, nearly black, but it was covered by a loose-fitting white toga. His black hair was all bound into a thick braid that descended to his knees. His eyes were gray, with thick and bushy black brows giving him a fierce gaze that might remind most of a stern, if loving, father. He grew an unruly beard that was still sharp despite its wildness.

Argrave waited in the back while the Waxknights went ahead to speak to Orion. They spoke to him, and then pointed. Orion looked at him. He pushed past the crowd, coming to stand a fair distance away from Argrave.

Argrave was nervous, recalling every experience he’d had with this man in ‘Heroes of Berendar’ all at once. A great deal of them ended poorly. Even still, Argrave held his arms out and said, “I came to help.”

Orion took long, rapid strides towards him, each step seeming to shake the earth. His presence was intense—he outsized even Galamon—and he hurtled towards Argrave like a bull. Despite himself, he took a step back. Galamon looked ready to advance, but Argrave stopped him.

Prince Orion tackled Argrave, lifting him up into the air. His chest screamed out in protest as he squeezed Argrave tight, embracing him. Argrave felt that he’d grown a lot the past month, but now he was being treated like a small child. After a moment of rib-crunching embrace that very nearly triggered his armor’s protective enchantments, Orion put him back on his feet and stepped back, holding both hands to Argrave’s face.

“Brother! Look at you,” he said, laughing heartily. “Tan, strong, hardy!” he gripped Argrave’s shoulders as though feeling his muscles, and then laughed again. “And your eyes...” he paused, all of his mirth disappearing at once. Argrave tried not to show his fear in wake of the volatile shift. “Gold inside. Black without. Much like our house colors.”

He turned, pulling Argrave forward effortlessly. “Everyone!” he shouted. “This is my brother, come to help!”

Argrave was met by exultation he’d not been expecting to receive. Orion heralded him proudly before the crowd. Even despite their sickness, they mustered cheers. Orion’s Waxknights changed their disposition entirely.

“I never expected you to come here from that tower of old owls. You were mired in misery last I saw you. Now your back is straight, your gait is steady, and your will...” he whispered into Argrave’s ear, barely audible above the cheer of the crowd. “I see light in you, now. Gold amidst the dark, like Vasquer’s heraldry... and your eyes. Your strange eyes... that vex the voices.” He pulled away, wiping his face free of tears. “Family... we unite in despair. Three of us, all the stronger by bound blood,” he looked around.

Just then, someone else stepped out. They stood above the crowd, too, another dark-haired figure. It took Argrave not seconds to identify the man.

Prince Magnus was tall like all of the Vasquers, though he was the shortest of all save Elenore. Standing at six-and-a-half feet, he stood eye-to-eye with Anneliese. He dressed more like a prominent mercenary than a prince and had a lithe, tightly muscled build to match. His armor was light and scarce at the joints to enable free movement. None of it was especially grandiose—indeed, the only thing identifying him as a royal was a patch of silken cloth hanging from his belt bearing the Vasquer heraldry: twin golden snakes coiled around a sword on a black field. He had dark, small gray eyes that made him seem tired and angry. All his features were angular and sharp, lending him a suffocating, almost unapproachable atmosphere. His medium-length black hair was lighter color than most in the family and kept bound in a short ponytail.

Magnus of Vasquer walked forward, heading for Orion and Argrave.

#####

Prince Induen spared a glance back at the city of Elbraille from atop horseback, flanked by his royal knights. They wore unmarked gray steel, covered by heavy burlap robes.

“Not what I had intended. But it’s foolish to hold onto something once it’s rotted. Nothing more than fighting for fighting’s own sake, if we stayed there longer,” Induen gave commentary to his knights, though none of them answered. “At the very least, my parting gift was well-received. Such a shame to lose such a nice dagger,” he noted, hand gliding near where he had once kept it on his belt. “The south... it succumbs to the plague. Much more deadly than I—indeed, than perhaps anyone—anticipated.”

“Elenore thinks it was spread—”

“I don’t need to know what she thinks!” he shouted, causing his horse to shift uneasily. “Do you think I’m ignorant of the world around me, that I cannot come to my own conclusions? My father did this—he must’ve.”

Induen calmed himself, taking deep breaths. “I have little doubt Elenore will intend to use this as a wedge against my father. That he’s done something like this... it’ll be his downfall, I’m sure of it. So many things are moving against him.” He shook his head. “But Elenore, Felipe, everyone... everyone save

Orion, perhaps, that holy fool, barricading himself in the northwest... everyone underestimates the severity of this plague.”

The prince stared out across Elbraille, then ran one hand through his long black hair. “It’s time for us to move. Time for us to abandon this long venture, painful though it might be to return with nothing. Elias will rot. Even if he lives, he’ll be forever changed—a cripple, a mutant. The people think less of the deformed, no matter who they are. He won’t be as well loved.” Induen smiled. “And Margrave Reinhardt will have to look upon his son’s waxy body, dead or crippled. Another of his family, beaten and broken.”

Even the knights were taken aback by the severity of Induen’s words, but none dared to add a word of protest.

“We head north,” Induen concluded, pulling his horse away. “Perhaps northwest. Far away from the south, back into the safety of the northern lands. Safety—hah,” he laughed. “Scheming nobles at every turn, plague in every corner... and the plague is to be our priority. We must stop its spread. Isolate it in the south, keep the north separate. This was a huge blunder by my father, but it can still be turned into an advantage. I care not if we must butcher and burn refugees, cast their body to the earth... the north will stay strong.”

The prince was the first to move his horse, riding away into the winter-ridden plains ahead. His knights followed seconds later, ever removed from their fickle master’s whims and desperately struggling to keep pace.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 178: Herald of the Ninety Six**

There were a few reasons that Argrave had chosen to come into Orion’s hand and collaborate with him. The first was that the Prince did genuinely intend to combat the waxpox and nothing more. He had no ulterior motives, no sinister plots—nothing of the kind. He was dangerous, to be sure, but Argrave was sure he could avoid drawing any of Orion’s ire. The man was quite tolerant as long as one avoided the sore points. What’s more, Argrave wasn’t sure he could succeed without Orion’s help.

The last thing Argrave had been expecting was to deal with another Vasquer in the northwest.

Magnus’ sharp gray eyes scrutinized Argrave and those that had come with him as he drew closer.

“Magnus,” Argrave greeted. “Had no idea you were here.”

The prince looked at him. Argrave had grown used to people being taken aback or even flinching when gazing at his miscolored eyes, but he showed no such aversion. Argrave willed himself to see the magic around, and Magnus’ figure swirled with black gaseous magic. Argrave judged him at well into C-rank—it matched with his knowledge of Magnus within ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ fortunately.

The prince entirely ignored Argrave’s greeting, turning to Orion. “I think we family should take some time to speak in private,” he suggested. His voice was apathetic yet firm as ever, and he spoke quietly to avoid drawing the attention of the crowd behind him.



Argrave tensed at the suggestion. He did not wish to be isolated from his companions. Orion alone was no trouble—if he wanted Argrave dead, they probably wouldn't stand much of a chance—but Magnus was the wildcard.

Orion took his hand from Argrave's shoulder. "Indeed, perhaps it should be so."

"My companions are like my family," Argrave interrupted at once. "I trust it's no trouble if they come?"

"But they don't share your blood," Orion noted coldly. "Indeed, only one shares your species... it is good you are open-minded, as many of our ninety-six gods extoll that as a virtue, but blood is blood. Blood is sacred."

Argrave looked back at his party. A plan quickly formed in his mind, but he hesitated to go through with it. He locked gazes with Anneliese.

*It's prudent. And she'd be upset if I keep trying to shelter her.*

Argrave turned his head back, taking a deep breath. "You'll at least allow my fiancée to accompany me."

Magnus turned his head away, expression unchangingly cold, while Orion's whole face seemed to light up. He stepped up to Argrave and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him in. His whole party was uneasy by Orion's actions.

"Is that her? Wearing the mask?" Orion whispered into his ear, staring at Anneliese. He hunched down and stared over Argrave's shoulder.

"Yes. Her name is Anneliese," Argrave confirmed just as quietly.

"I am embarrassed to admit I do not know her," he continued.

"It would be more surprising if you knew her," Argrave pushed Orion away a little. "We met recently. I made this choice on my own, as is my right as a baseborn."

Orion stood straight once more. He strode over to Anneliese and placed one fist over his heart, bowing deeply. "Greetings, lady Anneliese. I am Argrave's brother, a faithful devoted of the gods... and Prince Orion of House Vasquer."

"...it is pleasant to meet you," she said after some time.

"I shall endeavor to maintain that pleasantness," he continued, straightening from his bow. "You are my brother's betrothed?"

She looked at Argrave. "Yes, Argrave and I are... engaged."

Orion nodded enthusiastically. "Then you are soon to join the family. Even if you may never bear the name of Vasquer... you will still be my sister-in-law. Such an exciting thing..."

Orion stepped back to Argrave. "Come," he commanded, voice cold, as though whatever warmth he'd displayed seconds ago was just a lie.

He and Magnus walked away, and Anneliese strode up to Argrave.

"Fiancée?" she questioned.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. "Does this bother you?"

"No, but..." she crossed her arms.

"It was necessary," he said. "And besides... like I told you, I won't compromise on you. I know this isn't a particularly romantic way of going about this, but this is what I want. Let me ask you seriously. Want to get engaged?" Argrave shifted, then added, "I'll understand if you say no—even if we get along extremely well, it has been a brief time since we met. The last thing I want is to pressure you into this."

Argrave barely spotted the edges of her cheek flushing from behind the Humorless Mask, but she quickly gathered herself. "Of course I want to. But now is not the time to be lost in these matters. I certainly wish to discuss this more, but for now... Magnus—he is an unexpected variable."

"Yeah, that's a fitting description for him altogether," Argrave nodded, refocusing himself away from the sweetness and light. "Galamon, Durran... you'll wait here, cause no problems."

Both nodded, and Durran gave him a little wink. "Good luck. Seems all you deal with is craz—"

Galamon silenced Durran with a flick of his finger before he could say something that might provoke the large crowd still around them. Argrave gave them both a nod, then departed with Anneliese just beside him.

"Quick rundown," Argrave said quietly, following where his two brothers had left. "Magnus is the wildcard of the family. He doesn't care for power, wealth, or his family. He just wants to do what he wants, whenever he wants. That's why he wanders the continent."

"...and you want me to try and discern why he is here," Anneliese followed his line of thought.

"If it never comes up, yeah," Argrave nodded.

"Orion is... almost nauseatingly intense. All of his emotions are so powerful, constantly in flux..." she shook her head. "And he wears them on his sleeve. As such, I will try and focus on Magnus."

Argrave nodded, agreeing fully. "Exactly what I was going to suggest. Read me like a book, as usual. You..." he felt a strange surge in his chest, an overpowering positivity that did away with all of his negative thoughts and spurred him to speak. "So easy to work with you."

He could not see Anneliese smile behind the solemn white mask she wore, but Argrave saw her cheeks move and knew she did. They entered into the room of the keep that Orion and Magnus had disappeared into. It was a bedroom, where most of the furniture had rotted away. A new table had been set up in the center to accommodate many different documents, splayed out haphazardly. Two Waxknights stood guard inside the room.

"Loyal knights—leave us be," Orion directed before Argrave had even fully entered. They obeyed quickly and unquestioningly, moving past their pair and shutting the partially rotten wooden door behind them.

Magnus stared at Anneliese, and Argrave walked to block his line of sight. He locked gazes with Argrave, and then pointed. "She wears a mask. Why?"

"To combat the disease," Argrave explained, then gestured for Anneliese to remove it. She did for a moment, then put it back on just as quickly.

"An elf," Magnus said without much inflection. "Queer choice for a queer man."

Orion's hand pounded Magnus' back like a sledgehammer—Argrave hadn't even seen him close the distance. Magnus staggered, coughing, but Orion held the back of his neck.

"Hurtful words," Orion said. "Imagine if you hurt either of them with those words." He clenched the back of Magnus' neck tightly, making the man squirm. "We don't hurt family. Though men forget, there are ninety-six gods in our pantheon, two of whom are patrons to elves. I will not tolerate intolerance, least of all from a member of the royal family. Be a better example to our youngest," he finished, leaning in. His grip released, and Magnus fell to one knee, giving Orion a glare as he rubbed the back of his neck.

*Definitely not here out of family camaraderie*, Argrave realized, gaining some sympathy for his brother.

Considering Magnus had ignored him the first time he asked this question, Argrave phrased it differently, directing it towards both Orion and Magnus.

"How long have you two been here together?" Argrave stepped closer.

"Magnus arrived two days ago," Orion said as he pulled the fallen prince back up. He bent down and personally brushed the dirt off Magnus' knee once he'd risen to his feet.

Argrave nodded, then continued, "Why?"

"That's for me to know," Magnus stubbornly refused, even still.

"If you insist..." Argrave shook his head. "Though I'm sure there's much that we... family... have to catch up on, we have other priorities. Orion. This plague is the biggest threat to Berendar right now," he got to the point, hoping to sidestep this conversation of family altogether.

Orion turned back, face solemn. "Indubitably," he concurred. "It is the way of the world that disease should ravage the world. Whether death by blade, death by age, or death by rot—all are part of the cycle that the heavens mandate. Yet even still, the gods have placed us on this earth to live!" he preached, placing his hand to his heart. "And so, it is our duty to prioritize abating this great loss of life, divinely ordained though it may be."

Argrave stepped closer to Orion. He felt like he was holding his hand out to a coiled snake, but his steps were steady nonetheless.

"Orion, this plague isn't something made by our gods."

The towering prince grew still at once. He turned his head ever so slowly towards Argrave, then reached his hand out to rest it on Argrave's shoulder. "Speak carefully, brother," he said coldly. "You verge on the forbidden."

Argrave kept his gaze even, staring slightly upwards towards the taller man. "You've been in the thick of things, so you know best. The people's blood—it's black. You might just accept that as a symptom of a disease, but it's a symptom of something larger. This disease, this waxpox—it doesn't spread like normal diseases. You've had mages in this refugee camp with the waxpox, yes?"

Orion nodded slowly. "High and low, great and ungrateful, all seeking the blessings of the one blessed by the gods."

“Then you’ll note it spreads fastest on mages,” Argrave raised his hand. “Not a coincidence. Though the disease fuels itself with ambient magic, it also fuels itself on its hosts’ magic. The blood turns black for this reason—no other.”

Orion took his hand off Argrave’s shoulder. “Nothing escapes my memory. I know you are right in this matter. But you prove none of your earlier words—the gods have done stranger things than conjure fell diseases.”

“I can prove this,” Argrave nodded. “Not ten years ago, this region, the northwest—there were eight noble houses in these wetlands, each with grand fortresses not unlike this one,” Argrave waved around. “This region was conquered from the swamp folk. Practically exterminated to the last. Now, the wetlands have claimed each and every noble house, each perishing under strange circumstances, their seats lost in myriad ways. Now, no one’s ventured into the deep wetlands since. No one’s returned from them, at least.”

“You come here to connect coincidence to this plague?” Magnus disparaged, but Orion raised his hand to silence his brother.

“You say you can prove this,” Orion continued. “With such certainty on your tongue, with those eyes of conviction... tell me your conclusion.”

Argrave shifted. The other reason he had come to Orion so readily was because he was sure the man could be convinced of things that seemed outlandish.

“One of the swamp people yet lives. And she harnesses the power of their gods to spread this plague. This is the knowledge I came to deliver to you.”

Magnus scoffed, but Orion reeled backwards. He staggered and put one hand against the table to support himself from falling. His wild actions made everyone obviously uneasy. Argrave’s gaze was drawn towards Orion’s hand. The black plate gauntlet he wore began to grow red. The enchantments on his armor started to shine, as though resisting being damaged.

“I knew I should have acted earlier,” he said as though haunted.

The wooden table started to blacken, and Argrave realized that this was Orion’s doing. He stepped forward and said, “Orion. Watch the hand,” the words flowing almost by instinct.

Orion lifted his hand up. Small embers persisted on the wooden table. The prince gazed at his red-hot gauntlets, watching as they slowly cooled.

“Argrave,” Orion turned his head, clenching his fist. “You are my brother. The gods teach us to treat our family well, to give them priority... especially we members of the royal family, ordained by the gods to rule over man. Just because you are baseborn does not strip us of sharing fathers. Even still... there are greater things at stake that prevent me from listening to your words without question,” he said, voice a low growl.

“I didn’t come here with an expectation of subverting your activities here,” Argrave nodded at once. “I’ll do what needs to be done to prove my words, set things in motion. All I need... is to be met halfway,” he spread his arms out.

## Jackal Among Snakes

### **Chapter 179: Purpose Established**

“Met halfway?” Orion repeated Argrave’s claims.

Argrave nodded. “I know your situation. Without you, this camp falls apart. Your blessings are the only thing keeping the vast majority of the people in this camp alive, and more come every day.” Argrave stepped closer. “But with this many people, things become more difficult with each new body. Even with spellcasters to create clean drinking water, food is a pressing concern in these wetlands. You have to dedicate your royal knights to hunting just to sustain this place... and even then, the creatures of the northwest aren’t the easiest to swallow.”

Argrave stepped just before Orion, staring up at his older brother. Orion pressed more, asking, “What will you do, then?”

“I’ll get what’s needed to justify action—to justify an expedition into the wetlands, where we can put an end to the swamp folks’ gods. I’ll set things in motion. All I need is help when the time comes.” Argrave held out his hand. “Focus on your duty. I will focus on mine.”

A normal person might question all of Argrave’s actions, his claims. Argrave had never before plainly stated the root cause of the land’s troubles to anyone besides his companions—not with the Veidimen, nor anywhere else. But Orion was far from normal.

Orion grasped Argrave’s hand. Argrave could still feel some intense heat from Orion’s earlier display. “The gods whisper true. The tallest trees grown sprout from the smallest seeds sewn. It seems you stand tall as testament to that.”

Argrave tried to parse his meaning, but Orion pulled him in and hugged him once more before he could ponder deeply. Argrave accepted it, knowing that refusal was not an option.

“A herd wanders if left alone for too long. I cannot let them go too astray. I must return to the people.” He patted Argrave’s shoulder, then released him. “Wait here. My knights will escort you to a room within the keep for you and my future sister-in-law, and a separate one for your companions. I will await your proof, Argrave. I hope for your sake you speak truly. Know that the gods do not like lies of such proportions... and I am the instrument to express their displeasure.”

After bowing to Anneliese respectfully, Orion left the room, closing the door behind him. Argrave watched the door, then glanced at Anneliese before finally turning to meet Magnus. The prince still stood there with arms crossed.

“So, l-l-little b-b-brother,” Magnus said, imitating a stutter. “What is this? Get a new set of eyes, a woman at your arms, and you think that the world will part for you?”

“Don’t act like you care. Go back to eating, drinking, and whoring yourself to an early grave,” Argrave waved his hand.

Magnus crossed his arms and grew silent. It seemed to finally be dawning on him that things had changed vastly from when Argrave had been ‘Argrave.’

"Can't picture why you're here. You're a hedonist. You do what you want," Argrave noted, stepping closer. "Someone like you has no place at the heart of a plague. Are you gathering information for the Bat, looking for a pretty penny? Heard rumors of something desirable, seeking to make it your own? Maybe you're trying to use Orion as a cudgel for some scheme?"

The questions were many and largely unfounded, but with Anneliese's presence, he hoped one of his wild guesses might bear fruit and draw a reaction from the taciturn prince.

Magnus stared up at Argrave. "And I should buy your ridiculous story of wanting to help Orion?"

"I don't expect you to buy my story. Good thing for me, I'm not selling it to you," Argrave shook his head. "It's a waste of time talking to you. Go back to wandering, be a happy man. And if you don't... well, don't step on my toes. Might be I have to show you why I'm so confident all of the sudden."

Prince Magnus scrutinized Argrave carefully. There was tension, and Argrave kept his focus on Magnus' hands in case the man tried something. Argrave knew that, despite their relative equality in terms of magic ranking, Magnus had many, many enchanted items vested unto him by his father.

Even still, he was sure he could win. He partly wished Magnus would try something.

Magnus walked past Argrave, sparing one last glance at Anneliese before opening the door and leaving. Argrave let out a sigh of relief once the door had closed.

"Anger should not spur you so easily," Anneliese said at once.

Argrave walked to the table and scanned the documents on it. They were mostly maps for the region, refusals of requests for supplies, and other such mundane things. Orion did nothing underhanded, so perhaps it was a waste of time.

After a time, Argrave lifted his head. "Magnus isn't pivotal for anything. He doesn't even travel with an escort of royal guards like most of the other princes. No danger, no use—why hold my tongue? It felt nice."

"These things are only certainties in the world you knew," she pointed out, walking closer. "Magnus may not be consigned to just that."

Argrave's next words caught. "You're right," he admitted. "There's deeper meaning for his being here—has to be. Speaking of, did you...?"

She shook her head. "I gleaned nothing of his motivations. He and Orion are like opposites—if one is an explosion of light, the other is a gray slate. Magnus felt little—not anger, not happiness, not anything."

Argrave nodded. "Yeah. The oldest and the youngest children of Felipe's second queen, polar opposites."

Anneliese stepped around Argrave to look at the documents herself. "Yet despite Magnus, everything went more or less as you expected. We will set the groundwork, and then Orion will..." she looked up at him. "What was it you said those weeks ago?"

"Putt the ball into the hole," Argrave finished, shaking his head. "Golf, hah. Living in Berendar really puts into perspective how lavish the—"

A knock came at the door, cutting Argrave off. Soon after, the door was opened, and some of Orion's Waxknights entered.

"Our Holiness has instructed us to assign you and your companions a room," the knight said.

#####

The northwestern wetlands were a late-game area in 'Heroes of Berendar,' always. Everything deep in this foggy wasteland was monstrously dangerous. Though putting an end to the plague took place relatively early in the main quest, that was only because the player had help. Orion and the Waxknights facilitated things. It was the reverse of an escort quest.

The issue still stood, though, of the proof that Argrave needed to get. It seemed a fundamentally unqualifiable claim—the only logical way to prove this conspiracy of his was to put an end to it. Considering the danger of the wetlands, that proved to be an impossible task. The last of the swamp folk occupied the fortress deepest within the vast wetlands. They couldn't go without help. Of course, ending the plague alone was possible, theoretically... but realistically? He didn't care to see any of his companions dead.

Even still, there was another way. The gods of the swamp folk were not united in this spread of the plague.

"You need no time to prepare?" Galamon questioned.

"You want to stick around and prepare? Really?" Argrave questioned. "The last thing I need is intense scrutiny from Orion. A tribal from the deep south, two snow elves, one of whom is suffering from a certain bloodborne condition, and me?" Argrave shook his head at once. "We establish our presence. We set out to handle our part before we get entangled, and we finish this as quick as we can. I've already delayed enough."

"Not even a day's rest," Durran adjusted his pack. "And you're sure we can leave our things there?"

"No one can get past the Waxknights, save perhaps B-rank or higher mages, and they'll be guarding the keep constantly. Orion is... unique, certainly, but he's not a petty thief. He's not even a grand thief," Argrave assured. "Do you think I'm fond of the idea of risking all our books, our horses? I wouldn't do this without certainty."

Durran nodded and shrugged. "Fine. I guess they might weigh us down when we're *sieging a god*."

"'God' is a loose term. It doesn't denote anything special about anyone. Cultists can worship a man, declare him a god—he becomes a god, ostensibly, but is he really that powerful?" Argrave explained, seeking to soften the impact of the word. "All we fight is a unique existence. And I assure you—we're capable of this much." Argrave clenched his hands tight.

Anneliese opened her eyes, and her Starsparrow landed on his shoulder. "I think I've routed out a good path. I marked the trees with my bird—I'll tell you what to look for."

Argrave nodded, then pulled his boots and gloves a little tighter.

With Argrave leading, their party of four pushed into the vast wetlands beyond Orion's makeshift camp. The only to see them leave were the few refugees up so early in the dawn. The place was still mostly

frozen, and all of the four of them could see their breath in the air. Even still, they moved onwards into the frozen-over wastes ahead.

#####

“You’re sure that his eyes were black and gold?” Mina of Veden questioned, sitting behind a desk. Her resplendent golden hair had grown a fair bit longer, descending past her shoulders. She had tired eyes, but it seemed to dim her focus none.

“Aye, milady,” a knight bearing Veden’s heraldry—a white hare—bowed. He held his helmet beneath the crook of his arm.

She tapped her finger on the desk. “And he mentioned me, specifically?” she sought to confirm, to which the knight nodded. She leaned back in the chair, thinking. After a time, she questioned, “His body—what did he look like? Was he skinny?”

The knight licked his lips, then adjusted the helmet beneath his arm nervously. “He was a great and imposing man—I am afraid he wore a thick gray duster, so it was difficult to perceive his exact stature. He had midnight black hair. Beyond that, I told milady—his eyes were black and gold. I place him as a mage, lady Mina.”

Mina looked dissatisfied. Eventually, she leaned in and questioned, “Did he travel with anyone?”

“He rode away from a group of three. The distance was great, and it was difficult to—”

“Did any among them have white hair?” Mina pressed, leaning further forth on her elbows.

“As I recall... yes, there was one. Though, it was... I question if it was not a shawl, or a cowl, milady, so long it was.”

Mina fell into a silence, once again falling back into the chair. She pushed her feet against the edge of the desk, balancing on two legs of the chair as she swayed back and forth. She gazed out the window where she could see the refugee camps. She didn’t look content with any of the knight’s answers, which very clearly made the knight uncomfortable.

She released her foot from the desk, and the chair balancing on two legs clashed to the ground with a loud noise. She fixed the knight with her golden-eyed glare, then commanded, “Fetch other knights that were on guard duty that day. Inquire about this party—get more details.”

The knight looked happy to simply be given orders. He placed his fist to his heart and bowed. “At once, milady.”

As he made to leave, Mina called out, “Wait.” The knight paused, turning. “If you run into any of the castle’s stable workers, have them prepare a horse for me to go out. Just in case.”

The knight stepped back into the room. “Go out, lady Mina? Your father, he—”

“I solved his trade crisis for him. He never showed any interest in his ninth child before—why should he protect me now? If I wish to go out, I will go out. Do as I say,” she finished, waving the knight away with her small hands. The knight left hastily. It was only once he was a great distance away did Mina sigh.



“Gods be damned...”

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 180: Marred Hallowed Grounds**

Having a preplanned route makes travel all the faster, especially when good terrain is chosen. When traversing uncharted wetlands, such a thing was largely impossible—with Anneliese’s Starsparrow, though, they picked out a relatively flat and dry route devoid of many obstacles. It facilitated quick travel through the northwest... and their destination was not so far, fortunately. The Starsparrow could only scout so far ahead, though, because a great power restricted passage further ahead.

As the day neared dusk, the cold, foggy wetlands bloomed into a scene more befitting a summer retreat, colors of all sort abounding from brilliant, wide-petaled flowers growing off vines and trees and all manner of exotic flora. The temperature of the air did not change, so it was a jarring transition, almost unnatural.

Yet as they proceeded deeper, the little microcosm of beauty was marred. Though it affected plants nowhere else, here, the waxpox morphed what was beautiful into golden brown pock-marked monstrosities that curled and twisted and writhed in unpleasant ways which, though motionless, gave Argrave the impression of bug legs and tentacles.

“Everything goes silent ahead,” Galamon stopped Argrave from proceeding onwards, hand placed before his chest.

Argrave pushed Galamon’s hand off of him. “We’re entering another realm. It’d be stranger if you could hear.”

As they proceeded, the sounds did indeed quiet. The entire wetlands around them had become grotesque—even the roads they had entered to come here were not so ugly. But as they pushed past, Argrave’s ears popped... and a sight of incomprehensible beauty spread out before him, like an illusion shattering.

Before them was a great crater of rushing water laid out in a perfect circle. Water flowed from every bit of this circle towards the center. Great wooden platforms rested atop the rushing water, but they were not built—instead, the bridges were formed of natural-grown trees, and hosted plant life uncountable. There were archways of vines hosting bulbous flowers, golden lily pads persisting atop the swift water, and towering trees with beautiful, myriad-color fruits dangling from their leaves.

There was one thing marring this beauty. A jagged path the same ugly brown rot as the land they’d emerged from cut across the verdant landscape, like a lightning bolt of decay striking at the center of the place. Even despite that, the beauty was incomprehensible, and Argrave took a moment to gather himself. Everyone did.

The game had called this place the Marred Hallowed Grounds. Argrave had been here time and time again.

“If any place could be called a land of the gods...” Durran stepped out, head turning to appreciate the sight.

Anneliese stepped forward, her curiosity consuming her, but Argrave stopped her by grabbing her waist. "Careful. This place is not friendly to us."

Anneliese nodded, and Argrave released his grip.

"Shame about the scar," Durran continued, eyes trailing the path of rot that led to the center.

"If it weren't for that little bolt of waxpox, we would never see this place," Argrave noted. "The plague was used for an attack, striking directly at this land—without it having already broken the barrier to this place, we'd never enter here. This place is hidden to the world."

Durran ground his foot against the ugly brown mess below his feet. "Suppose I should thank it."

Argrave sighed, and his Brumesingers finally jumped out of his clothing, shaking their graying fur out. Their fur darkened every day as they consumed the souls of the fallen, and their use to the party grew every day. "I want us to keep going. We have fights to get through."

Reminded of that, Durran's levity disappeared. He tapped his glaive against the ground, pulled his wyvern scale helmet off his pack and placed it over his head, and gave Argrave a nod.

"Alright. To reiterate—we move towards the center," Argrave said, stepping forth and turning around. "The Sentinels of the master of this land roam this place—they're dangerous. They take the shape of animals, though druidic magic does nothing against them... but they're weakened by the waxpox, and they're big and loud. Once the fighting starts, it won't stop. There's a place ideal for—"

Galamon grabbed Argrave and pulled him back, turning him in the same motion. Opposite their party of four, a gargantuan white wolf stepped up atop one of the wooden platforms, front paw on the edge. It lowered its head. Part of its face was consumed by the waxpox, leaving one side of its maw slack as it growled. Argrave shifted uneasily. As he did so, the wolf raised its head and howled. The noise echoed across the great crater, setting the beautiful place stirring.

"Good lord," Argrave clenched his fist, brain working quickly.

Someone else's brain worked faster, though. Anneliese shouted, "This is a terrible spot. We can be surrounded on three sides. Head for that bridge—we must narrow the avenues they can approach from," she advised Argrave.

Despite Anneliese's words, they waited for Argrave's command. "Let's go. Rightward bridge," Argrave confirmed her advice.

Galamon took point. The great wolf jumped down from the wooden platform, splashing into the shallow rushing water and hurtling towards them with a limp. The beast was threatening enough it was tempting to reach for the Blessing of Supersession... but he dared not use it this early.

Anneliese was the first to attack, sending forth the C-rank [Ice Spear]. The beast nimbly ducked, the spear grazing against its shoulder and hurtling past. The wolf lunged forth towards Galamon, the leading target. The elven vampire swung preemptively, and his enchanted greatsword summoned a blade of wind. It split open the wolf's snout, and it staggered back. Durran pressed forth, using the only C-rank spell he'd learned, [Tempest]. The spell, a great whirlwind meant for blocking projectiles, hovered before him harmlessly, but he swung his glaive through it. The spell clung to the wyvern bone blade, and

he carried the swing onwards towards the wolf, slicing it in the leg. The attack was devastating, and the beast staggered.

As the beast faltered, Argrave sprinted forth around Galamon and Durran while he conjured the D-rank [Gore Scalpel]. His wrist split open, and his black blood surged out from his glove, forming a dark maroon knife in his hand. He sunk it into the wolf's head and it passed through as easily as butter, dispatching it instantly.

The spell dissipated in his hand, and Argrave gathered his team with a simple, "Keep moving!"

The once-serene crater became a hive of activity and sound. The wolf's howl had summoned everything in the vast crater over, and until they dealt with the vast majority of the Sentinels, their progress would not continue. The four of them ran off the rotted lands and onto the first of the many wooden platforms forming bridges across the vast crater. Argrave took the rear to ensure that everyone made it safely, his Brumesingers clambering about at his feet.

They stepped across the wooden platform, doing their best to avoid stumbling over the myriad beautiful flowers in the landscape. As they made their way towards the bridge, a titanic alligator lunged up out of a deeper portion of the water, collapsing onto the wooden platform and shaking it terribly. Several man-sized beetles crawled down off its back.

Panicked, Argrave shouted, "Its tongue is a projectile!"

The words seemed nonsensical until the alligator's maw opened wide, tongue propelling forth like a chameleon's towards Anneliese. His warning prepared her, and she managed to conjure a ward with her enchanted ring in time to block the ridiculously fast tongue. The golden shield shook, but held firm, and the waxpox-infected tongue puffed out a cloud of diseased air from the impact.

"Stay back!" Anneliese shouted as Durran moved to punish the enemy's overextension. "I shall clear a path!"

She dispelled the ward and stepped forth. She held one hand out, feet braced tightly against the ground. Argrave used Garm's eyes to view the magic within, and he saw the great roiling black mass of magic within whirl as though a hurricane ran through it. A great bunch of it surged to her hands, forming the lines of the spell matrix—one dimension, two dimension, three dimension... and beyond, into the fourth dimension, whereupon the matrix spun rapidly, forming a B-rank spell.

Two great blades of ice appeared before her, each held by a set of frozen arms attached at the shoulder. They braced for a swing, then spun forth, cutting through whatever was ahead like a sawblade run amok. The swarming beetles were blasted away, some bisected entirely. It continued past the beetles, striking the alligator's tongue as it retracted before cutting into the giant beast itself. When the blades of ice struck its whole mass, they shattered. The wetland reptile reeled backwards, its mouth cut open unnaturally large with blood pouring from gaping wounds. It fell off the wooden platform, clearly on death's door.

The path to the bridge was clear. Anneliese staggered a little, breathing heavily, and her Starsparrow chirped noisily, flying about her head. Argrave stepped forward and supported her. B-rank magic was where things became truly destructive. She used a spell of her people—[Icebound Twinblades]. Veidimen ice magic was always potent, made doubly so by actual Veidimen casting it.

But destructive meant costly. Argrave could see her magic supply was greatly diminished. As she gained her bearings, he said evenly, "Conserve your energy in case it's needed. You've made a path to the bridge, now let the three of us take the lead."

She took a moment to catch her breath, and then confirmed, "I understand. I will support with wards from my ring."

Argrave shouted once more and they began moving again, headed for the bridge. Argrave led Anneliese along until she was fully recovered, whereupon the four of them sprinted to the vast bridge unmolested. Argrave realized it was indeed a good spot for a fight—it was elevated higher than the platform, so nothing could jump from the water, and they had only two directions enemies could approach from. The four took their place atop the highest point of the natural-grown bridge, where an archway shed rose-colored leaves in the air.

The Brumesingers spread their fog and song across the land as a great many beasts came out of the woodworks of this beautiful place. Their party worked in tandem beautifully to confront the tides of waxpox-infected predators. Anneliese played the role of the defender, warding off the heavier attacks, and all trusted her enough to let her play this role. Argrave's Brumesingers conjured warriors of mist to function as crowd control, while Argrave himself dealt strategic blows with lightning magic, disrupting to allow Galamon and Durran land decisive attacks.

At first, the myriad Sentinels like unnaturally fast snapping turtles and the swooping bats were manageable with simple spells... but soon enough, all of the great beasts within this vast place began to creep towards the bridge, slowly pushing their line back further and further. Argrave used Garm's eyes to cast spells—it was the first time he had utilized the ability in genuine battle because it obscured his vision, but it did save his life.

If not for the fact that many of their assailants were crippled by the waxpox, the battle would have been over in seconds with their party's total demise.

A snake with a body as thick as a tree wound around the bridge, then lunged forth at Durran. Anneliese blocked the attack, then dispelled the ward moments before Durran counterattacked with a fire spell supplanted by a thrust of his glaive. The blade cut through the snake's head, making its coil around the bridge go slack and fall into the rushing waters below.

Durran laughed. "Any big plays in mind? You see the writing on the wall, Argrave!"

Argrave's mind toyed with the trigger for the Blessing of Supersession as he laid eyes on a distant pack of gathering wolves, each as large as the first he'd confronted. They barreled past the other slower predators, heading towards the four of them.

*Can't use the Blessing of Supersession. You have a bigger fight ahead. You know what would work. It's just a little pain,* another voice said within Argrave, pushing past all his doubt.

Argrave pushed Durran aside, stepping forth with one hand held out. A spike of pain shot up his arm... but by now, he was used to pain. Once the C-rank spell matrix formed, blood shot out of his wrist like unspooled thread. The threads of blood danced before his hand, shining once the two ends connected to form a circle. He snapped, and a smidge of blood danced from his fingers towards the center of the

circle, morphing, before a crescent blade of black blood as thin as a leaf spun towards the pack leader of the approaching wolves.

The crescent blade cut the wolf without stopping, continuing beyond even once it had finished its cut. Though far more contained, it was no less devastating than Anneliese's spell. A redder shade of blood fountained from the wolf's body, and Argrave advanced forward. As he moved his hand, the circle of blood followed, and every time he snapped, the thin blades of his black blood felled another approaching enemy.

The tide of the battlefield shifted immediately as Argrave pressed forth, using a C-rank spell endowed by Garm: [Waning-Cycle Bloodmoon].

As his enemies fell before him, none resisting the power of his spell... Argrave was reminded there was a reason he'd sought out the Black Blood.