

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 186: Taming of the Prince

"I can handle it," Durran suggested, raising one hand up.

"What?" Argrave asked.

The four members of Argrave's party sat in one of their rooms, two of them with Humorless masks donned. A few empty bottles lay around—though it did look suspiciously like alcohol, they were the potions Argrave had demanded Galamon brew to give his party more disease resistance. Mina had yet to wake up, but Argrave intended to speak with her about something, too.

"You want your big brother Magnus to croak some info about the big bad evil—it so happens this is an interest of mine. If he really does have a god whispering in his ear, I'm sure I can figure it out," he suggested, entwining his gray wyvern scale gauntleted hands.

"And how exactly are you going to do that?" Argrave frowned, tilting his head in disbelief.

"Hey, if you don't want me to, say 'no.' I'll get in line. I don't want to be stepping on any toes with that damned maniac wandering about. You see the way he crushed that poor girl's head?"

Argrave nodded and looked to the ground.

"At least Drezki died the way she wanted," Galamon said, his arms crossed.

Argrave looked to him, frowning.

"No one can call her a coward, fighting against that man as boldly as she did," he concluded further, closing his eyes.

Argrave nodded in agreement, but he found himself thinking of the scene once again and shook his head.

He focused back on the matter at hand—Durran's suggestion. He mulled over the matter, biting his lip as he thought, then continued, "You have to keep in mind this is just a suspicion of mine, not a confirmed fact," Argrave held his hand out and pointed at Durran.

"Which is why you're asking me to confirm it," Durran nodded, looking at Argrave like he was slow.

"That's kind of how 'confirming' works, you realize. When you're uncertain, you—"

"Don't get all cute about it," Argrave held out his hands to stifle Durran, which made the golden-tattooed tribal laugh. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Durran shrugged as he shook his head.

"Very encouraging," Argrave furrowed his brows.

"I'm resourceful," Durran held both of his hands out. "Look, if you don't think I can, just say 'no,' and this matter's closed, Argrave. You don't need to collapse any more towering pieces of architecture to keep me in line."

Argrave lowered his head, rubbing his chin as he thought about the matter. Certainly, Durran was a main character in 'Heroes of Berendar.' The player always did all kinds of ridiculously obscure investigation quests without much issue, which said something about all of the characters and their resourcefulness.

Even excluding 'Heroes of Berendar,' Durran had proven himself. Despite Argrave's compunctions about the matter with the Margrave's wyvern, the fact remained it worked out well.

Argrave lifted his head and said decisively, "I'll allow it. But first—you'll have to hear everything I know about Magnus so that you can act easier, make no mistakes, that sort of thing."

Durran lounged back. "I'm sure you just want an excuse to talk more, but fine."

Argrave shook his head but smiled. "Alright. Once that's done, we'll check on Silvic, make sure she's settled in without issue, and then... I'll have a conversation with Mina." His smile grew bitter. "Have to make sure nothing else goes wrong."

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"How can you be so fine? The suns are barely above the trees, and I'm still half-asleep," Mina complained, rubbing at her eyes as she sat across from Argrave and Anneliese. They sat at a dining table in an abandoned part of the keep, largely alone. Anneliese's Starsparrow ate magic seeds off the table before them, and the elven woman played with the creature idly. Argrave's Brumesingers still slept, nestled in his gray duster. All of them sat within a ward of Anneliese's making, ensuring no sound would leak.

Galamon stood nearby, remaining standing. Durran was off doing his thing. Argrave couldn't deny that he was worried. It might be Durran decides that Magnus would be better off unalive.

The part that disquieted Argrave was that the idea didn't seem such a poor one, provided it never linked back to any of them. He was changing, it seemed.

"I can be so fine because I've been doing this for months now," Argrave explained. "Waking up when I don't want to, doing things I don't want to do, and then going to bed far later than I would like. I'm well accustomed to early mornings."

"You could call me a spoiled brat in fewer words," she finished rubbing her eyes.

Argrave smiled and laughed lightly. "By the way... try not to rub your eyes. And keep that mask on tight. They weren't cheap, and they're very effective at preventing the waxpox. Or any disease, I suppose."

Mina froze like she'd been caught doing something bad, and then said, "I just washed my hands."

Argrave simply smiled, saying nothing. As if cowed, Mina quickly put the Humorless Mask back over her face.

"Well, whatever," she quickly shook her head, voice now distorted from behind the white solemn mask. "Why don't you wear one? You got so sick so easily last time at Mateth."

Argrave placed his hands on the table. "We talked about this. I'm Black Blooded, now. Like dragons."

Mina tilted her head suspiciously.

Argrave sighed and took off his glove, then took a small splinter off the table to draw some blood. Mina cocked her head back, a little shocked. Blood started to drip out. It was very dark in color.

“Argrave...” Anneliese said exasperatedly, then healed his finger in an almost casual fashion.

Argrave held his finger out. “If you drank this, some of your magic would replenish, you know.”

“Normal people don’t do something like that to prove a point,” Mina said cautiously.

Argrave turned and very nearly offered his finger to Galamon as a jest, before he realized present company might take that poorly. Ultimately, he wiped the blood away and said, “Normal people don’t have magic in their bloodstream.”

“I was more talking about the fact people find it difficult to hurt themselves,” Mina shook her head.

Argrave smiled at that. “It’s been a long journey,” he said simply. He saw Galamon nod in agreement in his peripheries.

Mina stared at him for a time with complex emotions shining through even despite the mask, then shook her head to dismiss errant thoughts. “Well, enough. We can finally talk about why I came here. Induen—why in the world is he bursting into my father’s keep, wanting to speak to *me*, of all people?”

Argrave blinked slowly, a little taken aback. After sparing a glance at Anneliese as she put her hair back into a half-crown braid, he turned his gaze back to Mina and rested his elbows on the table.

“You see, that’s a funny question. It sort of tailors into what I wanted to talk to you about, you see.”

Mina’s eyes widened in anticipation. “So you know why he’s there? I knew talking to you would be the right idea.”

Argrave scratched his cheek, feeling the conversation had become all the more difficult. “Well... to put it in simple terms... no,” he said plainly.

Mina’s face darkened. “Oh,” she said quietly.

“Oh,” Argrave repeated.

“You’ve got no idea?” Mina placed her hands on the table, leaning in.

Argrave straightened his back. “What did he say?”

“Complete nonsense. He said he came here to stop the plague,” she spread her arms out in a disbelieving shrug.

Argrave furrowed his brows. “Come to think of it, you said that you were the one behind that change in Veden,” he noted.

Mina nodded. “Nicky’s smart. The more I stayed by her side, the more I learned. She conscripted me for some things, you see. She’ll be the greatest head of House Monticci there ever has been,” Mina said proudly. “She had to deal with refugees from the Veidimen invasion—I just applied some of those lessons on a lesser scale.”

Argrave noted she cast a glance at Anneliese as she spoke of the Veidimen invasion. He shelved that observation and focused on the important matter—Induen.

“You ever think Induen might be...” Argrave began, biting his lip. “I don’t know, honestly.”

“Perhaps he was being honest,” Anneliese suggested as she finished her half-crown braid.

Mina scoffed, then spoke to Anneliese, saying, “You might not know much about Induen being from that frozen land, but he’s a real monster. A butcher with a princely mantle, nothing more.”

Argrave held his finger out to stop her. “But he’s not stupid. Things have gotten bad in the south—I can attest to that as much as you can, probably. Between the warmer climate and King Felipe ostensibly hastening the disease, it’s tearing the south apart.”

“You think the King...?” Mina began, then took a deep breath as epiphany dawned on her. “It makes sense.”

Argrave nodded bitterly. “If Induen had seen how bad the south is, he might take it upon himself to keep it away from the north, as Anneliese suggests.”

Mina didn’t look quite satisfied with that answer, but she said nothing.

“That brings me to a favor I had to ask,” Argrave began gingerly. Mina looked at him. “I was hoping that you would be willing to make sure Induen doesn’t come here.”

Mina’s face shifted from behind the mask. “I can’t believe this,” she said in disbelief while shaking her head.

Argrave proceeded quickly, sensing her disapproval. “Induen coming here could set everything I’ve done up in smoke. I’m trying to stop the plague completely—stop its spread utterly—but if Induen gets his grubby little monster fingers in this beautiful plan I’ve got cooking, everything could fall apart.”

Mina stared at him coldly.

“I know it’s a hell of a lot to ask to get yourself involved with that guy, but this is very important—not just for the future of the continent, but the future of the world. Remember, there’s a world ending-calamity coming, will kill us all, et cetera,” Argrave rambled quickly. “Please. Mina. I know you probably don’t even like me that much, but I will definitely repay this favor.”

She blinked, and then turned her gaze away. “Alright,” Mina said quietly. “I’ll do it. But this debt—there’s going to be some heavy damned interest, you know,” she pointed fiercely.

Argrave clapped his hands together. “You have no idea how relieving that is. Thank you. Thank you, sincerely.”

Galamon shifted on his feet, stepping up beside Argrave. He placed his hand on his shoulder and said in his low tone, “Someone’s coming.”

Argrave shifted his head and turned on the dining table bench they sat on, looking to the sole entrance to this place.

“It’s him,” Galamon said, eyes closed. “Orion.”

Argrave's heart had a natural response of panic. He looked around, feeling as though there was something he should hide, but nothing came to mind. Anneliese dispelled her ward just as Prince Orion entered into the room.

"Brother," he called out. "Finally found you."

"Orion," Argrave greeted, about to stand.

"Sit, sit," Orion stopped him, walking up. "Well, perhaps it is poor form of me to say so, considering I wish to speak with you elsewhere."

Argrave stared up at him blankly from the bench. "About the expedition? Or Silvic, or what?"

"About you. Your future," he said, tone low. "Come. Let's walk," he patted Argrave's shoulder.

A growing nervousness swirled within, and Argrave touched Anneliese's elbow. "Anneliese," he called out, attempting to bring her with him.

"Eh—let us speak alone, brother. I have nothing against my beautiful sister-in-law to be, worry not, but I wish to speak with you alone. No one else will be there, not Magnus, not my guards," Orion amended.

Argrave swallowed, then cast a glance at Anneliese. Some nice time alone with his half-brother was the last thing he wanted.

Nonetheless, Argrave stood, and he and Orion walked out of the room.

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Chapter 187: Bonds of Blood

To see the ever-diligent Orion neglect his perceived duty to the people was already disquieting enough... but the prince led Argrave further and further away from the camp, heading into the swamps. His only comfort was the knowledge that Orion wouldn't need seclusion to kill him. Argrave stayed quiet—he felt the need to say something, anything, but he was so off-rhythm that he feared to bring up a topic that might cause an issue.

They came to a great depression in the wetlands. At the center, many similarly shaped stones had been stacked in an orderly heap that marked it as manmade. Argrave recognized this place—it had been made by the swamp folk. It was a graveyard of sorts. Each stones marked the passing of one of theirs. Now, much of it had been grown over by moss or carried away by rains.

Orion stepped ahead of Argrave and stopped. "Argrave. Do you have faith in the gods?"

Argrave digested Orion's question in an attempt to discern his purpose, yet he wasn't able to glean why Orion had brought him here with that question alone.

"I know that the gods are real, and that they affect this world," Argrave said truthfully.

Orion nodded. "Yet do our ninety-six have potential beyond Vasquer, in your eyes? And be honest. Sycophancy earns only my ire."

Argrave stared at Orion seriously. "Our gods can spread across all of Berendar if the right actions are taken," he said in all truthfulness.

That was how it was in 'Heroes of Berendar,' certainly. If the player sided with Orion in the civil war, that fate was inevitable.

Orion placed both of his hands behind his back and strode towards the stones in the depression ahead. "Indeed, an apt way to put it. 'If the right actions are taken,'" the prince repeated.

Argrave stepped a little closer after Orion, before the prince stopped and turned towards him. His eyes were closed as he spoke.

"Kreit, Achiel, Irae, Tuur, Pilth, Gael, Razan, Wellwin, Malac, Zellum, Moder..."

Orion carried on and on, listing what Argrave knew to be all of the gods in the Vasquer pantheon. Argrave could probably say what they governed if he had their names, but he certainly couldn't remember all of those names.

After finishing his list, Orion opened his eyes and clenched his fist before him. "Those I speak to, even though I bless them—heal them—as a proxy for the gods, the people... the people sing my praises."

Prince Orion started to cry. His tears were molten silver, and when they hit the ground, the wetlands steamed.

"The people are ignorant of the true agent of their welfare... it makes me weep," he continued, choked up. "I speak to the people... and though they name the common gods, though they pray to Gael for justice... few can name more than five," he lifted his head up the sky.

"Then, I wonder why I heal them," Orion said, voice colder than the grave. The tears he'd shed rose from where they fell, reentering his gray eyes as though erasing his sadness. "They place only an idol of Gael in their house and pray for righteous justice to carry them through life. They forget all else yet have the gall to call themselves the faithful of Vasquer. Such thoughts... such impious thoughts..." he shuddered terribly, and then knelt on the ground. "Do you share them?" he looked up at Argrave.

Argrave looked down to Orion where he knelt and suggested, "Can people be blamed when they aren't taught?"

Orion stood and walked towards Argrave, looming above him. "Precisely so," Orion agreed. "And this is the issue I brought you here to discuss."

The prince turned and walked back towards the cairn. Argrave called out after him, "You wanted to talk about educating the people?"

Orion didn't answer immediately. He stared at the pile of stones before him, kicking one away. He turned back slowly.

"One of my own royal knights called me a monster."

Argrave raised a brow. "Recently?"

"No," Orion shook his head. "When the plague first reared its head above the depths from whence it crawled, I expressed to my knights that they embrace the plague. That I would give them my blessing when the time came, and they would be all the stronger for it. Back then... they loathed me. Even the steadfast thought me distant, inhuman."

Argrave listened patiently.

"I did not understand it," Orion continued, confounded. "All royal knights swear an oath to live and die for the royal family, to shed blood for our sake, to obey our orders without question... and yet, when I expect they fulfill these vows, they deem me monster." Orion ground his foot into a large stone beneath, and it crumbled easily beneath his force. "Would they swear an oath they do not intend to follow? Why? Would they speak lies so easily? For what purpose? Though the founder of House Vasquer spoke lies freely, he never broke his vows! He never lied before the gods! So why?!" Orion cried out.

"Ask them," Argrave suggested.

Orion turned his head. "I have. They merely disavow their old selves, claiming they were fools and idiots to doubt me." He took a deep breath and exhaled, then shook his head. "It is only my actions that earned me their loyalty. The oath they swore, the promises I gave... they were ineffectual."

The prince placed his hand to his chest. "I have never told another this, Argrave... but I know men fear me, loathe me. The people that come to this camp, they come with eyes squinted tight in suspicion, bodies braced to run in fear. It is only when I deliver them the blessing imparted to me that they bare their hearts to me, that they accept me well and truly."

Argrave stepped a little closer. He didn't feel danger, but he did feel quite uncertain about where this was headed. "The people that do love you love you more than anyone, it seems."

"They do," Orion nodded. "No matter how much I tell them they should praise the gods before me. My own knights call me 'holiness,' when that is not what I am. I am a prince of Vasquer, blessed by the gods. The gods, their power wells within me... and they whisper truths in my ear. What has come to pass. What will come to pass."

Orion crouched down, then collapsed like a corpse onto the mud, staining the white robe he wore completely. "I wish to help the people with these blessings. But I do not understand them. Despite my promises, they trust me only after I help. It makes things... difficult."

"That might change... as things move along," Argrave said, standing over Orion as he sunk into the mud. "People will spread word of your good nature, your good deeds. That's what reputation is, you know."

The prince turned until he was on his side, then lightly bashed the side of his head into the mud, dirtying his long black braid of hair. "That is limited," he said sadly. He turned to his back, then stared up at Argrave with his gray eyes. "Tell me—what gods do you invoke most often, Argrave?"

Argrave took a deep breath, conjuring his old favorites from 'Heroes of Berendar.' "I like Zillum, the god of magic... Tireal, the goddess of wanderers..."

Orion smiled. "Of course. Tireal patronizes elves."

"And Re. Goddess of blood," Argrave finished. That name was easiest to remember. It was important for the future.

The prince amidst the mud stared at Argrave with blank expression, and for a few moments he worried he had misremembered something.

"Most I spoke to did not know those," Orion finally said. He started to cry again, and he wiped his face with muddy hands. Argrave stood around awkwardly as the giant man rolled about in the mud and wept.

Suddenly, Orion leaned up, staring up at Argrave. "You spoke to that crowd yesterday. All the faithful of Vasquer, ostensibly... and yet with your words, you eased their suspicion of that heretical thing... that wetland spirit. I cannot say its name," Orion waved his hand away in dismissal.

"...it was necessary," Argrave defended himself quietly.

"When I see something beyond our ninety-six, spite and rage boil within me. The gods, they whisper in frenzy in my ears..." Orion clenched his head as if remembering something. "I am drawn to action as iron to a magnet. But you," the prince lifted his head slowly. "You do not surrender to those impulses."

Argrave swallowed, worried.

"I envy you," Orion finally said, abating some of his nervousness. He rose to his feet again. "You possess that which I lack."

Impulse control? Argrave questioned internally.

"You understand man, woman... even elves," Orion prodded Argrave's chest. "Your words can sway them. Not action. Speech. Promises. Just as the founder of House Vasquer."

"You have a lot of things I envy," Argrave said, hoping to change the conversation away from himself.

Orion smiled. "Then it is good to know I am not alone in my feelings." Orion looked back towards the cairn. "It is clear to me that this kingdom needs reform. Faith in the gods dwindles. Faith in the royal family has sunk even lower," Orion said, shaking his head in distress. "I will not challenge Induen. By the grace of the gods, he is the divinely anointed heir." He looked to Argrave. "But it is clear a monarch alone cannot satisfy the needs of the people."

Argrave felt some goosebumps at Orion's words despite himself. He took a deep breath, then questioned, "What do you mean?"

It was a pointless question, in part. He knew the answer.

"As you said earlier... the people cannot be blamed if they are not taught. And that is just it," Orion placed his hand on Argrave's shoulder and hunched down until their faces were level. He could smell his half-brother's breath—it was as sweet as a perfume, which only heightened Argrave's discomfort.

"All we have now are priests of Gael, acting as judges in cities, or mages who pray to Zellum seeking wisdom in magic. A few orders train priests that pray to Craiche, seeking bountiful harvests, yet they are all scattered, disorganized, and few... no more than tiny droplets of coloring trying to change the hue of the ocean.

"There needs to be more. There needs to be structure, order, to our faith," Orion preached, squeezing Argrave's shoulder tighter. "The people need to be educated in *all* aspects of our pantheon, of *all* the gods. *That* is what I must build. A hierarchy of the faithful, the devout, to read the scriptures, to preach to the masses!"

Orion stepped away, standing straight once more. He attempted to clean his white robes of mud without much success.

“Our great ancestor, Felipe I, took the house name of ‘Vasquer’ after his great serpent companion,” Orion continued. “He established this kingdom, which now spans so much of the known world. He has built the monarchy. It has prevailed for centuries. Now, I must found the second institution to keep this great faith alive—no, to expand it yet further!”

This was no shocking revelation to Argrave, but he had not expected Orion to ever share this with him. The man was ever impulsive, and it seems Argrave had made a good impression. That, coupled with sharing his blood, probably made the Holy Fool confide in him.

“Felipe I was powerful, true... but his true strength rested in his companion, the great serpent Vasquer,” Orion stepped forth. “I thought myself the second coming of our founder, this entire time... I believe, now, I misinterpreted the whispers of the gods.”

Orion grasped Argrave with both hands. “You must be a part of this with me, Argrave. You must take the role of Felipe I, while I assume the place of Vasquer.”

“What are you talking about?” Argrave said in shock despite himself.

Orion shook him a little. “It is clear to me, and the gods whisper in my ear affirmation. You possess the elements closest to our founder—bravery, an iron will, and the pragmatism unique to humans... and best yet, the gift to bend them to your words alone. I envy that. I lack that. And as you say, you envy my qualities. Yet if we pool them... what are we, if not complete? We may form the foundation for our faith to tower above all others!”

“Isn’t it a bit too fast, to trust me with this big a task?” Argrave said quickly, panicking. “I’ve been here only a few days, now.”

Orion stepped away, biting his gauntleted finger. “Hmm... indeed. Perhaps I am being overeager.” He stepped back to Argrave. “But the changes you’ve displayed... you are so different from the skinny boy I once knew, bitter and angry and impious. And the gods that whisper to me—though I may misunderstand them, they never lie. I believe it has merit.”

“You ought to give something like this time,” Argrave said, trying to remain calm. “And more importantly—we have to tackle this plague.”

Orion smiled, and stepped forth. “That consideration of yours... it gives me hope my judgement in this is not wrong. But it is as you say.” Orion grabbed him and pulled him into an embrace. “I love you, brother.”

Argrave blanked when he heard those words. This was generally the part where you responded with the same phrase. He very slowly raised his arms up and returned the embrace, then said, “Me too, br—buddy,” he finished.

Orion didn’t seem to mind. He pulled away, and said brightly, “Come! We must begin things. First of which... is consorting with the heretical thing, once again,” he said, voice grim.

Argrave watched Prince Orion walk away, feeling like he’d just battled his most powerful opponent yet.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 188: Intrepid Preparations

"You come from Veiden?" Mina questioned Anneliese, trying to start a conversation.

Anneliese stared out at the doorway which Argrave and Orion had left, nervously braiding and unbraiding portions of her long white hair. She answered Mina idly, "It depends on how you define 'come from.'"

Mina placed her hands loudly on the dining table the two of them sat at. "You were born there."

"I was born on a coastal village in Berendar," Anneliese shook her head.

Mina frowned, then tapped her fingers against the table for a time, staring at the white-haired elf. She bit at her lips in quiet deliberation, then questioned, "Why did your people invade Mateth?"

Anneliese was drawn away from her idle braiding and turned to face Mina completely. Though silent for a moment, she eventually answered simply, "They thought it their duty."

"They?" Mina repeated.

"I do not envision myself returning," Anneliese replied.

Mina tapped her fingers on the table once again, then questioned, "Who gave them this duty?"

"Veid," Galamon answered. Mina looked at him blankly, and so he elaborated, "Our goddess."

Mina nodded, then placed her head on her arms on the table. "Of course. Naturally. There must be something higher than yourself giving you a reason to kill, otherwise people will have to confront their deeds."

"Better for some to die now to establish a thousand years of prosperity," Galamon disagreed at once.

Anneliese didn't seem to have any stake in the matter. She rose and exited, walking to where Argrave and his half-brother had left.

"I don't see how it is all that different from what someone like Orion does," Mina spoke to Galamon.

Galamon stared down at her coldly. He was easily twice her size. "This is a pointless conversation. I dislike that man more than anyone else here, I'm certain, but I put that aside."

"I just don't want Argrave to forget who he's helping," Mina said. "This place... these knights... it's safe, sure, so long as you don't step out of line. I just..." she paused, then shook her head. "No matter. It's not—"

Mina paused as two people walked through the door. Anneliese and Argrave walked side by side and strode up to the table.

"It seems it's time to get to work," Argrave clasped his hands together and rubbed them. "Orion wants to talk to Silvic, meaning we're soon to start planning the expedition. A week, maybe a bit longer, and we'll leave camp. Going to be a bloody journey."

Mina looked up at Argrave. "I'd best be going, then."

Argrave lowered his head in a slight bow. "Once again, nothing but thanks from me, Mina."

She stood up from the bench. "You'll pay me back in more than just words, I hope. Risking life and limb for you. Let's not forget who Induen is."

Argrave's face grew serious. "I know the gravity of this."

Mina kept her yellow eyes on his, then seemed to shudder from a chill. She walked away, preparing to head off.

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Despite Magnus' first interference with the introduction to Silvic to Orion, the promised proof offered to Orion was provided without issue. It was a simple thing for Silvic to recreate the magic used to destroy the fortress—it had already been inscribed into the stone long ago. Silvic activated her strange magic usable only by wetland spirits of her kind, and the stones began to emit a foul poison.

Though Orion was enraged by this, it was proof sufficient for the Holy Fool that there was a conspiracy brewing in the wetlands. With that...

Argrave, Orion, Anneliese, Galamon, and Silvic occupied the Holy Fool's private quarters. There were several Waxknights present as well, but they served merely as guards rather than participants in their meeting. Durran and Magnus were both absent. That was either a promising or an apocalyptic sign.

A grand map of the wetlands had been arrayed atop the central table. Argrave moved it about with his fingers and said, "It can't have been easy to acquire this."

"Indeed," Orion nodded. "The gods gave me a cartographer who once resided in this land in the form of a refugee—once I spread the word maps were needed, this was delivered readily." Orion took a deep breath with a smile on his face, then exhaled. "Another sign the gods look upon this endeavor kindly."

Argrave gazed at the map. It was far beyond what one might expect to see in a Medieval period—though Argrave couldn't begin to guess how, he was sure magic had something to do in the map-making process. The borders of the wetlands were unclear, and the primary focus was the eight fortresses that had once resided in this land. That was fine. That was all Argrave needed.

"Alright," Argrave hunched over. "The wetlands are very dangerous to traverse, especially with the waxpox writhing everywhere within. It's not just the environment—foul beasts who can tear a man apart with ease roam the swamps, and poisonous creatures abound." Argrave gestured towards the wetland spirit. "Silvic can aid us in travel, but this is still enemy territory. And I do mean 'enemy.' We'll be facing active opposition, hunted as intruders."

Orion scratched at his beard as Argrave spoke. When another talked, his gaze jumped to them.

"A small group of your best men would be ideal," Anneliese noted. "It would facilitate ease of travel, ensure that gathering food is no great ordeal, and keep our movements relatively obfuscated."

The Prince gave slow nods that seemed more contemplative than anything. He looked at Argrave and questioned, "The enemy—what foul manner of beasts must be conquered?"

“On the road? When we’re on dryland, it’ll be relatively safe. I don’t suspect we’ll be on dryland often. The greatest enemy will be the Sentinels of the old wetland spirits—they’re all manners of beasts, natural-born chimeras in part, but they’re only in the deeper portions. Beyond that, there are manticores, blacksnout alligators, rockhide hippopotamuses...” Argrave shook his head as he recalled the most obnoxious two of all. “There are leopards in the trees—they’re poisonous, too. And gibbons, armed with weapons like Drezki had.”

“Drezki?” Orion tilted his head.

“My child, whom you murdered in cold blood,” Silvic said.

“I see,” he nodded, unoffended by the accusation. “Yes, I recall. She broke my right gauntlet and my skin with one blow. Powerful weapons, indeed,” Orion noted.

Argrave saw Galamon give Orion a frigid glare, hand hovering near the two Giantkillers on his belt. Argrave fixed him with a stare of his own, calming his elven companion.

“The wetlands are not so large. How long you do believe this journey will take?” Orion questioned further. “Where is this so-called Plague Jester?”

Argrave tapped his gloved finger against the fortress furthest from the one they were at. “It’s here. But there’s another factor. There are only a few safe places to shelter here. The wetlands—you try and sleep out in the middle of them, they’ll swallow you whole,” Argrave said seriously. “The only places vaguely hospitable are the abandoned fortresses—and even then, they’re overrun by the nastiest of the Jester’s servants.” Argrave stepped away from the map. “As such, we’ll have to plan our route around them.”

Orion stepped forward and leaned over the table, planting his hands down. “Barring the one we reside in and the one this Jester resides in... six fortresses. Will this take six days, then?”

“No, that’s not practical,” Argrave shook his head. “We can cut across, skip some. With Silvic scouting, the plan is four days.”

In truth, Anneliese and Silvic would be working in tandem. With Silvic partly afflicted by the waxpox, her ability in the wetlands was greatly compromised. Anneliese and her Starsparrow would be doing the bulk of the work. It was paranoid, perhaps, but Argrave wanted to keep his cards close. Magic animals like the Brumesingers or the Starsparrow could shrug off most of the effects from the wetlands.

“Then... four days of travel, during which we will be accosted by enemies, followed by a return trip with the same time frame?” Orion questioned.

“Yeah. Frankly...” Argrave paused, swallowing. “Frankly speaking, you’re the only one who can handle a lot of the things in this place. You and your Waxkni—royal knights,” Argrave corrected himself quickly. “You’re the only one near a match for the Plague Jester.”

“Like the serpent Vasquer for King Felipe I, you would have me act as your sword?” Orion smiled broadly. “I can and will fill this role. It brings me great pleasure to put an end to those who refuse to accept the gods of Vasquer as their own.”

Argrave stayed silent, greatly disliking Orion’s reference to Vasquer and his pleasure at the death of heretics.

“So—you’ll get your men ready?” he finally broke his silence, staring at Orion with his golden eyes.

Orion nodded. “I must put things in order here, gather rations suitable for the journey, and decide who among my knights is worthy of the honor of slaying the foul demon who ruins our beautiful land with unholy and unnatural rot,” Orion stepped forth. “A week, by my estimates, the majority of which will be settling things at camp to sustain itself despite my absence. Please. Prepare you and your companions.”

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Argrave sat upright in the bed. Anneliese was already asleep, her head rested against his leg. He stroked her long white hair idly, being sure not to get his fingers tangled and disturb her. He stared down at her with a distant gaze as he lost himself in thought. Orion’s offer, Durran’s actions, and Mina’s task all occupied his mind, like a triumvirate of hellish problems solely designed to give him ulcers. He wondered if being Black Blooded could stop that.

Frustrated, he moved his head about searching for a distraction. There was only one in reach—a book with a white cover, denoting it as one of the books left behind by Garm. Argrave reached forward steadily, ensuring he was quiet and still, and took it in his hand. It was the B-rank spell, [Bloodfeud Bow]. He kept that book by his side, always. He did not dare lose it. In the future, it would be one of the most valuable spells he had.

Argrave opened it. The enchantments on each page lit up, all contributing to form a B-rank spell matrix in the air. It was only a whim at first—something, anything, to distract from the thoughts whirling through his head—but soon enough, Argrave found himself studying it in earnest.

A fourth dimension to magic... if Argrave were to analogize his situation with something, it was as though he had stepped through a door into an unfamiliar part of the world. Though he was there, it had taken him a long time of looking around to understand the land. Even then, that was only surface level. He had to walk through this new land, observe things from different angles, and use all of the five senses to observe it in great detail.

Argrave believed that he understood this analogous new land—that he understood C-rank magic—well enough. And now that he understood it, he had to learn how to make it move. Make it his. With the task viewed as a conquest, he felt that the moving matrix in the air had a whole different look to it.

As the night passed by, Argrave was so consumed by his observation that he did not even notice he’d forgotten the problems that plagued him. He listened to Anneliese’s steady breathing, stared at the light before him, and passed the night in peace.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 189: Prospecting

Though Durran had acted as though discovering Magnus’ intentions would be a simple thing, he treated the matter very seriously. That might suggest it was not, in fact, a simple thing. Durran would probably agree with that assessment by this point.

Durran had good reasons to do this. He hoped to earn trust in the group. Argrave never doubted Anneliese or Galamon, but he did think twice about anything Durran did or said. Beyond that, Durran

wanted to follow any traces of Gerechtigkeits beyond Argrave's mere insistence it was reality. And lastly... he did genuinely want to help.

His first order of business in dealing with the hedonist prince was simple observation. Durran had hoped to catch Magnus doing something incriminating. He might have talked to shady people, delivered something, or left the camp in the dead of night, whereupon Durran would follow him and discover what, exactly, the misfit prince was doing trying to fit in. Something convenient like that was his first hope, even if far-fetched.

Durran had some experience keeping watch on people in crowded places. He had done just that in Sethia alongside Boarmask in their plans for the retaking of the city. He made good use of the crowd. He could not deny it made him uncomfortable to weave so closely with the diseased, but he trusted Argrave enough to be content wearing his Humorless Mask and drinking the vile potions that boosted his immunity.

Yet, after three days, Durran had no luck hoping for a convenience. All he learned was that Argrave was completely right about Magnus' character. That lent him confidence for his second idea.

Magnus pushed open the flap and entered one of the tents for dining in the camp.

"You're Magnus, right? Argrave's brother." Durran called out, causing Magnus to pause and glance at him. The tattooed tribal sat on a table with a meal prepared. It was all meat—some of it seemed to be frog. The food was testament to the state of the camp: they relied on scavenged meat, mostly, with vegetables and all else being quite rare.

Magnus had stopped when he was called, but he continued his steady walk into the dining tent in not a moment. "Prince Magnus," he corrected.

"Right," Durran nodded slowly as the prince moved to the person handling the camp's food. With a slightly worn and stained wooden bowl in hand, he was served much the same of what Durran was eating. Magnus eyed the frog with some disdain.

Though they were all but alone save the server, Magnus moved to a table quite far from Durran. Before he sat, Durran called out, "Argrave said he was the son of a king... he didn't mention he wasn't a prince."

Magnus stopped, the disinterest on his face waning somewhat. He changed his plan to sit far from Durran and stepped up right across from him.

"And what are you?" Magnus asked him.

"A mercenary from the Burnt Desert, formal tribal chieftain," Durran introduced himself, inflating his credentials deliberately.

Magnus scrutinized him carefully. His eyes moved around his body, as though tracking something—Durran was well used to this gaze by now. Even the princes of these lands of wealth and green could not help but be intrigued by his golden tribal markings, it seemed.

Magnus placed his plate down and straddled the bench, sitting across from Durran. "Bastards are born liars. It's a stain that affects their whole lives." Magnus poked at the frog with his finger. "Why Felipe didn't kill him in the crib like the rest, I'll never know."

“Kill him in a crib? What’d our bastard do to escape that fate?” Durran raised a brow.

Magnus nodded, then continued emboldened after Durran mirrored his sentiments. “Plenty of other harlots had the good luck to catch my father’s eye. The majority... snuffed out. Levin handles that duty now, from what I hear. Usually kills the mothers before they give birth, even.” He grasped both of the frog’s legs and tore it apart. “Good thing, too. It’s like catching a fire just as its starting, before the whole forest can burn down.”

Durran chewed on a piece of meat. “You mean there are others like him roaming about?”

The prince nodded once again. “Some unknown. Some unacknowledged. Argrave was the only baseborn fostered at Dirracha.”

“Who was his mother? That might be reason enough to keep him around,” Durran questioned.

Magnus waved a frog leg. “I don’t know. Some dead whore. One of the few good things that Induen’s done, killing her.”

Durran chuckled but kept his hands beneath the table to hide his clenched fists.

The prince placed his elbows on the table. “Why do you follow him?” Magnus inquired.

“Why else? Money,” Durran emulated ribbing coins together between his fingers. “He was travelling here to Berendar—I wanted to see the sights, eat rich foods, behold and hold beautiful things... and people,” he said with a sly grin.

Magnus didn’t laugh, but Durran still thought his disposition changed positively. “And Argrave—how much does he pay you?”

“This week or last? Keeps getting bigger the more I learn about this place, the more he comes to rely on me,” Durran held his hands out, emulating a widening gap. “He’s well-off. Has those... those pink coins that glimmer, but he usually pays me in straight gold.”

Magnus’ face darkened. “Rose gold magic coins,” he concluded. “Probably from father.”

“Those are the ones,” Durran nodded quickly.

The prince gazed at the frog leg as if deliberating whether or not to eat it, then set it down with a grimace. He tapped his fingers against the plate as he stared at Durran. “So, you’ve come to me looking for someone to offer better future prospects?”

“What, you’ve got something for me?” Durran smiled, then shook his head. “Not such a good look to abandon a contract so early... unless things are different out here, and sellswords with poor reputation earn well.”

If Magnus was surprised, he didn’t show it. He stopped tapping his plate. “Not such a bad play. If I were to guess, Argrave is here to suck on Orion’s teat, help him with this plague, earn a reputation—he’s hoping for legitimization, I’m sure. My father might make such a thing happen.”

“Are you hoping for a boon from the king? Only reason I might picture you out in this hellish place.”

Magnus frowned. "You'd do better keeping more thoughts locked in your head and not spilling from your mouth," he cautioned Durran.

Durran laughed, and the pair ate with a steady conversation going on.

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A great many knights filtered into a building that did not seem to fit the splendor of what they wore. Some knights were already present—they bore cold gray steel with a blue swordfish emblazoned on the breastplate. The knights that entered wore white plate with gold trim. The last to enter was the towering Margrave Reinhardt.

There was a man sitting in the corner of the room. He seemed small amidst the crowd of brawny knights, but he was truly of average build. His wavy blue hair was kept well-groomed and short, though the first gray hairs were settling in. A sharp beard and cutting pink eyes made him quite handsome, even despite his age. He wore fancy clothes with a swordfish sewn onto the shoulder. Most would recognize Duke Enrico of Monticci easily.

Margrave Reinhardt stepped across the room, and Enrico rose to meet him. The two seemed at ease around each other, yet they were too serious to do anything more affectionate than a simple handshake.

"If you come wearing armor, most people might think something heinous is to occur," Duke Enrico said.

The Margrave said nothing, and after the handshake finished, sat at the table brusquely.

Duke Enrico frowned. "What's wrong?" he questioned, sitting opposite the Margrave.

Reinhardt's ruby eyes fixed on Enrico. "My son is ill. This... this accursed waxpox."

Enrico straightened and took a deep breath. "He's being treated?"

"As best he can be in Elbraille. The fool refuses to return home," Reinhardt said angrily. "Says that he's still yet to deal with the riots, that he's making tremendous progress. It's... abnormally aggressive, Helmuth tells me. Already, it has spread from hand to elbow."

"If you need anything—anything at all..."

Reinhardt stared off into the distance, gauntleted hand held up to his mouth. His gaze refocused and he shook his head. "No. Count Delbraun of Jast called in a favor and has sent an A-rank mage specializing in healing." He turned his gaze to Enrico. "It's good to speak with you again. You leave your city less than twice a year, it seems, and I expected that number would be less so considering the war."

Enrico smiled. "I only felt comfortable leaving because my daughter has been handling things competent—no, more than competently."

Reinhardt nodded. "You must be proud."

"I am," Enrico confirmed. "On the topic of our families... You have my condolences for your brother."

Reinhardt nodded. "Thank you. I'd prefer not to dwell on the subject."

“Of course,” Enrico nodded. “If we’re not dwelling, perhaps we should get right to the point. I trust you gathered from my letters who I was suggesting we put at the head of your—our cause?”

“Argrave,” Reinhardt nodded, planting his elbows on the table and wrapping one hand around a fist.

Enrico judged his friend’s reactions, then continued, “You may dislike him, but he’s changed.”

“He stole my mount, directly or indirectly, three times. Once, my prized warhorse. Second, when Elias pursued him. Third, when his tribal friend stole my wyvern not weeks ago,” Reinhardt growled.

Enrico frowned. “Argrave has your wyvern?”

“No, he—” Reinhardt paused, and then shook his head. “It’s not important.”

Enrico pursed his lips, then shrugged before continuing. “I won’t deny his deceitfulness. Nikoletta attests to his quick wit herself, and I’ve been subject to it once or twice. Considering his heritage, these might be considered good traits. The founder of House Vasquer, the masterful schemer and monarch with his legion of ten thousand snakes...” Enrico shook his head. “That isn’t important. What Argrave’s doing is.”

Reinhardt furrowed his brows, and Enrico gestured for his men to bring forth something. A knight stepped before the Margrave and unloaded a pile of books and scrolls tidily. Reinhardt kept his hands at his side, gaze jumping around uneasily.

“Argrave informed my daughter of a calamity known as ‘Gerechtigkeit.’” Enrico pointed with one hand. “Those books and scrolls are the best documents I have found on the subject. I have more, but they’re in the carriage, and many are foreign, desperately in need of translation.” Enrico tapped the top of the stack of books. “This book, here, contains my summary.”

Reinhardt reached for the books, then paused. “Just tell me,” he shook his head.

Enrico clicked his tongue. “My research leads me to believe... Gerechtigkeit is real. It’s been documented too much, too consistently, in other continents. The situations match extraordinarily well with what we’re experiencing now—mass discord, followed by a weakening of the barrier between planes, followed by a mobilization of harrowing forces, concluded by... Gerechtigkeit’s arrival, which threatens to tip the world itself into oblivion.”

Reinhardt frowned.

“Something larger than everything is coming, old friend,” Enrico said sternly. “And Argrave... well, he’s been burning himself at both ends trying to make sure the world is ready to handle it. I don’t know how or why he learned of this, but when you examine his actions through that scope... they start to make sense.”

With those words, Reinhardt’s hesitancy for the books vanished. He reached for them and began poring through each as Duke Enrico waited in silence. Seconds turned into minutes as Reinhardt read, parsing through all that had been provided.

Reinhardt closed shut Enrico’s summative journal, the hard-cover book letting out a clap. He set the book down, gaze complicated, and breathing uneven.

“You think this is real?” Reinhardt questioned.

"I do," Enrico answered.

"And Argrave seeks to prepare the world to fight it? This is why he roams, putting an end to conflict?" The Margrave pressed.

"Yes," came the answer.

"That... that fool..." Reinhardt leaned in. "He's..."

"The person who'd step forward to do something like this—this is a man that's sorely needed to fix things before they fall to hell," Enrico said insistently. "He's young, he's brash, and he's uneducated in all matters but magic, I'm sure. Felipe wouldn't waste tutors on him. He's a bastard—it will be difficult to gain support from the higher aristocrats, undoubtedly. Ideally, his betrothal with Nikoletta will abate much of that, coupled with his own positive reputation from his deeds. Nevertheless, *there are no better options, Reinhardt.*" Enrico leaned back. "Considering everything, he could be considered a blessing."

The Margrave stared at Enrico. "He's betrothed to Nikoletta?"

Enrico tilted his head, "There's been no ceremony. But he's expressed willingness to marry Nikoletta."

Margrave Reinhardt put his hands together. "He passed through the Lionsun Castle. He seems to have..." Reinhardt trailed off. "He has a partner. An elven woman—snow elf. And all I've seen tells me this is no whimsical affair. Already, they share a room. And he expressed... he would surrender the betrothal for her."

Enrico leaned back, pink eyes shaking. He opened his mouth, then shut it. Enrico rose to his feet, then stepped about the room.

"Gods be damned," the Duke cursed. "Gods be..." Enrico shook his head, running his fingers through his hair. "Foolish boy. Foolish, foolish, foolish..."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 190: Lone Mourner

Argrave awoke strangely early in the morning. He was used to waking early, but never so early that the sunlight was not yet through the windows. He considered it might be because the expedition began tomorrow—some psychological nervousness causing him to sleep worse. As his brain gained clarity, he heard shouts. He lifted his head groggily, paying more attention, and the shouts continued.

With that, he roused fully, turning his body and standing. Anneliese stirred due to his actions, and as he pulled on his boots and put on his duster to go see what was happening, she also moved into action without a word. Before a minute could pass, they were ready to go.

Trailed by his Brumesingers, they left their room in Orion's keep, moving to see what was happening. Light was dim, and the suns still had perhaps two hours to appear over the horizon. It was sufficient to see without casting a spell, though.

A large crowd of refugees murmured as two Waxknights dragged someone to the keep. It took Argrave only a second to distinguish that it was Magnus. It took him seconds longer to distinguish that he was not resisting. Then, he placed it—the dead don't offer much resistance.

The Waxknights set down Magnus' body in the center of the square before Orion's keep, and then one went off to fetch Orion. Argrave glanced around furiously, looking for Durran. He knew that the tribal had spent some time getting close to the man—everyone in the camp did, in fact. If Durran had killed him, this was truly a disastrous thing.

Having no luck in finding Durran, he stepped closer to the body. Argrave knelt down, examining it despite the stare of the crowd around. The cause of death was readily apparent. A knife of wood jutted out of the prince's neck. The handle was ebony, smooth and polished wood. It sprouted roots in the prince's neck, which seemed to be absorbing his blood.

As his mind whirled, what little tiredness still remained vanished. Anneliese put her hand on Argrave's shoulder and pulled him away. He tightened his jaw.

"Find Durran. I'll keep you safe while you look," he told her quietly.

Anneliese nodded, and the Starsparrow on her shoulder darted up and away into the air faster than the eye could track. He held onto her elbow, keeping her steady. As time passed, the whispers of the crowd continued, and Argrave's gaze stayed locked on the wooden dagger imbedded in Magnus' throat. He wasn't torn up seeing the man dead—it just didn't feel real.

A big hand on his shoulder drew him from his thoughts. Galamon looked upon the scene, brows furrowed.

"Where's Silvic?" Argrave questioned at once.

"In her spot. Safe," he said, not sparing a glance at Argrave.

"Get her," Argrave commanded. "Be careful."

Galamon nodded, then stepped away to where Silvic was staying, far from the camp.

After Galamon had left, Argrave focused back on the scene before him. The Starsparrow disturbed the air as it landed back on Anneliese's shoulder. She opened her eyes, inhaling deeply, then disclosed, "He was sleeping. I woke him, and he's on his way."

Argrave furrowed his brows, then nodded. He briefly considered if it would be better if Durran was found sleeping, but Magnus seemed to have been dead for some time, so finding the tribal sleeping was not evidence he had nothing to do with this.

"This is very bad," Argrave whispered to her.

"Perhaps that was—no, never mind," she shook her head. Argrave looked to her, about to ask what she intended to say, but she continued, "We would be best off focusing on how to solve this problem."

Argrave agreed, turning his head away. Midturn, he spotted someone towering above the crowd, and his head whipped back. Orion stepped out of the keep, passing right by Argrave. He came to stand before Magnus' corpse. He stood there for a long, long while, as still as a pillar of stone.

Then, slowly, Orion reached for the robe wrapped around his armor. He pulled apart a bit of the silken cloth, and it came free. He knelt down in the dirt, ever-so-carefully wrapping the silk around Magnus'

body until he was but a bundle of white. Then, he scooped his arms underneath him and stood, holding Magnus in his arms as though he weighed nothing at all.

Prince Orion looked more intimidating by tenfold standing there in his dark gray plate armor. His face was expressionless, and he held his dead brother with a delicacy far unlike his usual brutish displays of force.

He stepped up to two of his Waxknights, and commanded quietly, "Take him to my chambers and place him on the bed, that he might rest in peace," Orion held him out. "Send a rider out to Dirracha, informing my father of what has happened here." His voice grew cold as he finished, "And ensure not a single soul leaves these wetlands."

The two Waxknights move diligently to fulfill their master's command, one of them taking Prince Magnus' body in their arms and moving off to the keep. Orion stepped forward and shouted, "Who brought his body here?"

"I did, your Holiness," one of the Waxknights stepped forward and kneeled.

Orion grabbed his neck and pulled him up like he was a bag of cloth and not flesh and blood. "You drag him before a crowd of onlookers, humiliating the family?! You take him from the site where it occurred, that any and all evidence is yet more obfuscated? Why? What were you thinking? Were you thinking?! Are you responsible?!"

The knight sputtered for air as Orion's gauntleted hands dug into his flesh, drawing blood. Argrave shouted, "Orion, you'll kill him!"

Orion threw the Waxknight, and the man flew ten feet before collapsing like a doll. He grasped at his throat, yet the breath still did not come. Durran had appeared just in time to witness this scene, and he took a cautious step back. Argrave glared at him, a thousand questions running through his head. He saw only shock and surprise on the tribal's face.

"His windpipe is probably collapsed," Argrave shouted as he moved towards the enraged Orion. "Any mage, tend to him," he commanded, and some people moved to obey.

As he neared Orion, the giant of a man staggered towards him, making Argrave's heart skip a beat. Orion latched onto him, weeping into his shoulder. Argrave was sorely pressed to support the weight of him, back arching.

"Our brother..." he cried. "Our brother is gone."

Argrave said nothing, feeling a headache sprout in his head as fast as it ever had. His brain was scrambling to figure out how to deal with this situation.

"Your Holiness, I would not embrace that one so readily."

Just as quickly as it had fallen upon him, Argrave was relieved of the burden. Orion strode up to the person who had spoken—another Waxknight—and grasped his gorget, shaking the man.

"What do you speak of? That man is my brother!" Orion shouted down at his subordinate.

“The company he keeps,” the knight continued, undaunted. “That tribal began hovering near Magnus at all times not days before this occurs.”

Orion’s hostility ceased, and he released the knight’s gorget. His head turned to Durran, who stood just behind Anneliese. He took steady, heavy steps towards him, and Anneliese stepped aside in fear. Argrave moved, holding his hands out to stay Orion ineffectually. The prince pushed past him, coming to stand before Durran.

Galamon returned, bringing along Silvic. The Waxknight stepped up behind Orion, continuing, “The weapon used to slay Magnus was made of wood, just as that foul and unholy wetland spirit,” he pointed.

“Some of your knights and I were both guarding Silvic. Nothing occurred last night,” Galamon contributed at once, voice low and guttural so as to cow the crowd.

Orion stared down at Durran, gray eyes frigid and stony. Durran seemed the size of a child before the gargantuan prince, and though the man boldly held his gaze, his nervousness shone through.

“Your Holiness, all due respect, but who can say what that creature is capable of?” another Waxknight contributed. “It’s a foul and unholy being and demonstrated clearly it’s capable of casting fell magic. The weapon, Orion’s chambers—they’re a mess of evil magics that surely share this wetland spirit’s origins.”

“Orion, I can assure you that this is not something Silvic is responsible for,” Argrave placed his hand to Orion’s chest, attempting to place himself between Durran and the prince without success.

A refugee contributed, “The tribals don’t share our gods, your Holiness! What’s more, that man hovered near Magnus day in and day out before the attack, as sycophantic as they come!”

Orion stared down at Durran, his breathing deep and powerful. Durran fearlessly said, “I had nothing to do with this.”

“The spirit has motive,” the first Waxknight noted. “You killed its underling, that foul heretic that struck you, your Holiness.”

Orion’s gaze jumped to Silvic, and Argrave said in panic, “Don’t do anything hasty, Orion. Take time to think this through. Durran’s like family to me, and I’ll never forgive you if you do something to him,” he threatened. “We need Silvic to traverse the wetlands. Let’s calm down, think rationally.”

The prince stared at Silvic, wrath brewing in his eyes, before he turned his head back to Durran, who still stood boldly before him.

“Do you believe in the gods of Vasquer?” Orion questioned.

“Of course I do,” Durran answered at once.

Orion reached a hand up and placed it on Durran’s shoulder—the prince’s hand was bigger than his head. “We shall see,” he said, pulling Durran forward. “Men—keep watch on the heretical spirit.”

Prince Orion walked away, pulling Durran along. Though the tribal resisted, it meant little before Orion’s might, and the best he could do was avoid falling.

“Orion,” Argrave called out, stepping after him. “I meant what I said! What are you going to do?”

Orion said nothing, leading Durran into the keep.

“Orion,” Argrave continued to shout, trailing after him. “Orion!”

Yet no answer came, and Prince Orion led Durran into the keep, heading for a place Argrave could not begin to guess.