

## Jackal 201

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 201: Conflict in Paradise

Anneliese felt as though she had returned to the invasion of Berendar, where she stood at the helm of a Veiden longship leading men towards a great throng of foes defending their homeland. There was nervousness, anticipation, and a dim hum of fear beneath it all, larger and stronger and more consistent than any feeling. This was war, she felt. And the stakes went far beyond merely her life. She stayed calm despite these sensations, aided by her own nature and the enchanted items Argrave had given her.

The Waxknights marched ahead of Durran and her, armor clanging against the granite path beneath them. They fearlessly cut their way towards the legion of monstrosities ahead. Leopards with the heads of cobras shot out their fangs as poison projectiles, while badger-like creatures flapped their wings, ready to assail them from the sky. Laughter cut above all the sounds: Durran's, she knew. The man usually had a haze of cynical depression at most times, but in life-or-death battle, he came alive.

*The bard is the passive one, Argrave's voice rang in her head. If you attack him, he'll remain level-headed. He won't attack you immediately. He'll do nothing but hold you back, using his own men while he aids them passively and waits for reinforcements. Silvic will be interfering with his abilities, so it shouldn't be as deadly as it normally is.*

Anneliese could see the bard in the back. The Barefaced Bard, Argrave had dubbed him. He was a wetland spirit, the same as Silvic, though more massive than the other they'd seen, standing at perhaps ten feet. His head was like a spearhead, though unlike Silvic or the Intrepid Troubadour, it had a face of flesh. It was a child's face, pale and smooth, and jarringly placed amidst wood so unnaturally it seemed to be painted on. Its eyes were closed, as though it were dead.

The Waxknights charged into the horde of unnatural Sentinels with practiced deadliness. The reason that Orion had insisted on bringing those of his knights that were also mages became obvious—they became a storm of spell and sword that made their charge increase in devastation tenfold as fire, ice, lightning, and the earth tore through the battlefield.

Their charge cut through the Barefaced Bard's retinue with seeming ease for a time. The strange hybrid animals fell one after the other before effective attacks could be made. But the bard placed his hands against the ground, and his childlike face came to life, eyes opening to reveal empty sockets. He began to sing. The elaborate gardens of the palace became animate, the hedges and trees contorting in impossible manners to assail and obstruct their rush. Much of the granite pathway was turned over as roots bit at the Waxknights feet.

"Step back!" Anneliese shouted, using her commander's voice again after so long.

As had been agreed before the assault, the Waxknights obeyed her orders. They retreated slightly, tangling with the bard's assault of greenery. As if on cue, the Sentinels began a countercharge, the true heavy hitters of the opponent revealing themselves in earnest. A giant python twice as thick as a man's torso lunged out, seemingly seeking to swallow the knights whole. A squad of gibbons rushed out, swinging so quickly from hidden places it was shocking.

*Conserve your magic. Considering how many opponents you're dealing with, big B-rank spells are best, so whenever you feel it's prudent, use that B-rank spell you used in the Marred Hallowed Grounds. You know, with the twin iceblades, Argrave's voice echoed like a reminder.*

And she did. She advanced past the retreating Waxknights, towards the lunging python's gaping maw, and conjured the B-rank matrix for [Icebound Twinblades]. Two blades of ice appeared before her, each held by a set of frozen arms attached at the shoulder, and each taller than her. The python's jaw caught on one blade, but the two arms braced themselves undisturbed.

When the blades of ice began spinning and moving forth, the python was ripped free from the wall it clung to. It hung on for but a second before releasing its bite. It slammed against the outer wall of the palace, dislodging a gargantuan statue that toppled down, killing the giant python and several other creatures. All the while, the [Icebound Twinblades] cut through countless foes before her.

Anneliese staggered from the powerful spell, and when the icy mist settled, her gaze locked with the Barefaced Bard's empty eye sockets. A chill ran through her. Roots surged up out of the ground, grabbing at both of her legs. She was pulled into oncoming enemies, yet resisted stubbornly. Just then, Durran stepped past. He cast a simple flame spell then stabbed his glaive through it, and the unique properties of the wyvern bone carried the spell with the attack. Durran cleanly severed the attacking roots. She was freed.

"Conserve your magic, Anneliese," Durran reminded her. She could practically hear his grin through his gray wyvern scale helmet. "And good job."

Grateful to him, she stepped back, commanding the Waxknights to advance once more. As she retreated behind them, she looked into the far distance. There, she saw an overwhelming presence approaching them all too quickly.

*The jongleur is aggressive and foolhardy. I have no doubt he'll rush towards you blindly as soon as he figures out that the bard is under assault, Argrave's words came to her.*

The Jolly Jongleur, as Argrave had called him, did not match his description particularly well. It was an ape, kin to the gibbons that had assaulted them during their journey through the wetlands. It was giant, though, and white. It ran atop the triangular rooftops of the buildings within the palace as though balancing on a tightrope, its arms as thick and long as the titanic python she'd just slain. It held a true sword in its right hand, and though the blade was thick, black, and crude, the liquid light teeming on its surface told of its true power.

The jongleur tore a spike off the tip of one of the roofs and threw it towards Anneliese with astounding ferocity. She barely had the time to use her ring to conjure a B-rank ward, and even the ward barely stopped the projectile.

She dared a glance to where Argrave waited, but the way light fell made her unable to see beyond the window.

*It's up to him, then, Anneliese noted mentally.*

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Argrave watched the Jolly Jongleur prance about the rooftops erratically. His head was swimming in pain, and he felt such an intense power in his fingertips it felt as though he was holding back the ocean. Even now, blood danced from his fingers, his eyes, his nose, his ears, all fueling the spell in his hands. Behind, Galamon and his Brumesingers dealt with what few foes entered the buildings.

“Come on, you fucker... land,” Argrave muttered.

The [Bloodfeud Bow] had grown in volume and intensity so much it was astounding. The air around Argrave was filled with a dark red mist, so faint it was barely noticeable. Dust and air swirled about from the tip of the bloody arrow, which had grown larger than his arm.

As if answering his prayers, the ape vaulted over one of the rooftops and landed in the center of the pathway, rushing towards Anneliese and her party with an intense ferocity. Once it passed by the pink flower above the hedges, it was as though a trap had been sprung. Roots exploded upwards, and the jongleur howled in primal surprise as they curled around him, ensnaring him.

Triumph and nervousness filled Argrave so intensely his head grew light. He tried to aim as best he could, but the emotions made his head dance. He fell to one knee, his vision only whiteness. When the ringing settled and his vision cleared, the jongleur thrashed about, breaking free of its snare.

Argrave felt a complete dread as the monkey wrenched free its gargantuan crude sword out of the trap and rushed towards Anneliese. He followed it with the bow, shaking as he stood on one knee. He saw its legs brace, and his focus intensified to a ridiculous degree. He raised the bow upwards, howling in agony as his body protested.

The monkey jumped up into the air, sword held above its head. Argrave released the power he’d been holding in his right hand and finished casting [Bloodfeud Bow].

The dark red arrowhead tore through the bay window, the wall, and passed through the sky so quickly it was not all visible. It was a streak of crimson that spurred intense winds as it travelled, and the hedges close and distant both blew, shaken by the intense power. Argrave did not see the arrow hit the jongleur.

But the arrow did hit the jongleur. It had to have done so, otherwise the gaping hole in his chest and his missing head were quite the coincidence.

The jongleur’s body spun about wildly from the tremendous force, the sword still held in hand. It twisted through the air, falling atop the Waxknights and Sentinels both as they fought. The jongleur landed in the middle of the battle, like a statement to their foes.

Argrave gasped, half a laugh and half a groan of pain. He tried to rise to his feet, ready to shout, “Time for a Blessing!”

He quickly found rising to his feet was a mistake. His vision went white once again, his hearing vanished... and soon, the white was replaced by blackness. He felt his feet leave the ground, his head leaning forward.

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Anneliese gazed upon the corpse of the Jolly Jongleur. His hands were near as large as she was, and still clung to the sword it held. Much of its torso and all of its head had simply... vanished, transformed into naught but a fine red mist, still scattering across the battlefield even now. She felt a fool, but glanced back to where the shot had come from.

She found she was not a fool rather quickly, as Argrave tumbled off the gaping hole in the wall, body limp and unconscious.

Her mind very nearly shut down as she juggled variables—she was the commander of the battle, the Barefaced Bard was behind her, yet Argrave had planned to use the Blessing of Supersession, and he's unconscious and could be vulnerable—all these thoughts came so quickly.

When she saw Galamon jump down from the hole in the wall and coming to Argrave's side, she felt immeasurable relief. She spared a glance back towards the Waxknights and Durran, then said, "Step back!" once again. "Silvic! Full attention!"

With that last order given, she ran towards Argrave in a panic far unlike what she was used to experiencing. When she neared, she slid towards him recklessly. Galamon already attempted to rouse him, shaking him lightly but intently.

"Don't shake him," she scolded, yet felt a fool not moments after—she merely did not wish to see him hurt.

Galamon stood and said, "I will guard."

His eyes blinked open, unfocused, and she felt immeasurable relief. Trying her best to remain calm, she scanned his body for injuries. His armor had scuffs on it, likely preventing genuine harm from the fall.

"One shot," she heard him mutter. "Air shot. One shot." He giggled deliriously.

Anneliese used the B-rank healing spell [Bounteous Vitality], an all-purpose general heal that might solve some issues, even if it did nothing for the loss of blood. It seemed to have an immediate effect. His blinking lost its drowsy nature, and his black and gold eyes regained sharpness.

"You're okay. You're okay," she insisted, hoping to all she held dear it was true.

He looked at her, confused. When Galamon slew something behind them, he shouted, "Christ!" and sat up quickly.

Anneliese wished to tell him he should take it easy, ensure he was not harmed... yet she knew she could not say that. Instead, she stood and pulled him to his feet. Behind, Silvic stepped free from where she had been hiding, moving to aid the Waxknights and Durran, who fell back even still.

"We move," she grabbed his arm.

Argrave looked to the battle ahead, clutching his head in pain and trying to retain his balance. She supported him. He looked around. Though the Jolly Jongleur was dead, his servants began to catch up with him, and the battle with the Barefaced Bard was not yet won. "Still got... work to do, looks like," he concluded.

## [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

### Chapter 202: Done Enough

Argrave felt a fog within all of his body. His actions were stiff and vague as though he had just been thawed out after being frozen for years. He could barely focus on the task at hand, and even keeping his head held up was difficult. All he wanted to do was go to sleep. But he'd long ago set aside what he wanted. This was about what needed to be done.

*Kill the enemy, kill the enemy, kill the enemy*, he repeated again and again, half of the time saying it aloud, and the other half saying it in his head. It was the only way he could stay focused on the task before him. He felt as though he was fumbling for a light switch while drunk as he tried to recall how to use the Blessing of Supersession.

Yet once he felt the spring of limitless power vested in him by Erlebnis permeate his being... he felt like a dull knife that had finally found a whetstone, and everything fell into place.

His vision sharpened, and his ears felt as though earplugs had been removed from them. His golden-eyed gaze fell upon the scene before him, and he straightened, now aware Anneliese had been the only reason Argrave was standing up.

The Waxknights, alongside Durran, struggled against a tide of vicious Sentinels and supporting animals. More had joined since Argrave last saw them—the towering rockhide hippos, the gibbons in no small numbers... now, the Barefaced Bard fought directly against Silvic, their war a proxy battle of twisting roots and writhing plants. Silvic was losing, and badly.

Argrave straightened his back and held out both of his hands. Sword and shield, he remembered: sword and shield. His right hand conjured [Electric Eels], and the C-rank spells danced upwards into the sky, awaiting his command. His left became ablaze with wide, sweeping spells that carved a path before him.

He pressed deeper and deeper into the thick of things, adrenaline keeping his mind utterly focused despite his aching mind and body. He never wanted for foes—their rush at him was unending, and even though the animals feared him, they charged. He called upon every resource, using Garm's eyes to cast spells with abandon. He felt he could not stop walking forward, strangely.

"Guard the back! Reinforcements approach!" he heard Anneliese command. That meant she had confidence he alone was enough to handle all before him. That stuck in the back of his head, making his task seem all the more urgent.

Teeth, claw, fang, and nature itself sought to tear into Argrave's throat and end him. Drawing upon instinct, he met them with teeth and claw of his own. He conjured great maws of flame from [Wargfire], the icy claws of [Wraith's Grasp], thick [Windswept Blades] cutting through them all. The enemies were blasted away, some dying outright. Those that did not die met his sword—dozens of [Electric Eels] striking from the sky like lightning, dispatching any hardy foes.

Argrave felt like he could not stop—he felt as though he held on to a machine that was running wild, and that if he released it, it would spell his death. He felt ash beneath his boots, frozen corpses, and the faint shock of still-sparking electricity, yet still he pressed. At some point, his vision became a mix of so many lights, he questioned if he was still in the Archduke's palace.

Yet then, the Barefaced Bard came into his view. The former wetland spirit towered over him, and yet *it* was the one shying away from him, childlike but eyeless face looking as though it was going to cry. It regarded him like a hedgehog, a pufferfish, or a burning flame, backing away cautiously. Yet like a cat hunting a scorpion, it swung out its hands, giving testing blows.

Argrave moved to the side, and the Barefaced Bard moved opposite him, the two circling each other. In truth, Argrave merely wished to have his back to the wall so that no foes could circle around him. All the while, he warded his foes away, still using his tried-and-true strategy—a sword and shield. He was an indomitable giant of a knight, he told himself.

The Barefaced Bard climbed to the wall of the Archduke's palace, almost in a panic. It sought refuge behind a tower. As it fled, Argrave's [Electric Eels] grew all the more numerous in the sky, and the attacking force grew demoralized from their leader's retreat.

Silvic, who was badly beaten from doing battle with the Barefaced Bard, did not remain idle. She assaulted the bard even still, staying his retreat. As the number of sparking eels neared the hundreds... Argrave's blessing wore out.

His shield of wide, sweeping spells faltered as the limitless magic within dissipated... yet his sword persisted still. He spurred the electric eels, and the countless sparking constructs pursued the Barefaced Bard as was his will. The bolts of lightning rained down upon the childlike face embedded in the bard's wooden body. The attacks were relentless and seemingly unceasing, and the bard became a great glow of light before emerging changed, naught but a smoking pile of wreckage.

The bard still lived, yet barely. It tumbled over the wall, falling in the courtyard while scrabbling desperately to move. Silvic disentangled her roots from the ground and sprinted across the badly destroyed granite pathway. Her hand morphed into a spike... and she put an end to the Barefaced Bard, plunging her arm right into that childlike face.

Argrave leaned against a wall, all fight lost. His foes, unaware of their commander's death, rushed at him. All Argrave could do was curl up, relying on his enchanted duster to shield him while protecting his neck and his head.

Blows and bites and scratches rained upon him, and pain assailed every part of his body. It never overwhelmed him, though, as much as he waited for it to end. Gradually, the sensation faded. He was vaguely aware of people trying to move him, help him. They received blows in his stead. Nevertheless, he faded away.

*I've done enough. Everyone else can handle the rest,* he thought, happily embracing the grayness.

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Orion stepped upon a purple velvet carpet, walking down the center of it. In stark contrast to all that was around him in the palace, his steps left dirt and mud tracking, and he appeared to be the filthy thing in this palace amidst the wetlands.

The throne room was a vast place, held up by six thick pillars of black marble veined with gold. Black and gold filled the room with abundance, so much so it was difficult to refrain from calling it gaudy. Black

sconces held golden flames, the black walls were trimmed with gold, and even the stained glass windows had been stained gold. It was a decadent place, yet had a grim air to it nonetheless.

Banners hung from the walls just beside the windows. The field was black, and it depicted a golden snake. It was not the banner of the royal family, though—this golden snake curled around nothing, and stood before a shield. Orion recognized it as the personal sigil of his uncle, the Archduke Regene.

At the end of the velvet carpet where the stairs moved up to the throne room, there was a majestic golden stag, with shining antlers stretching up ten feet into the air. It lied on the floor, legs collapsed beneath it and snout against the ground, eyes dead and lifeless. Its antlers had perfect symmetry, forming a strange, webbed pattern.

A woman sat atop the stag's head, its snout seeming a perfect seat, its antlers a perfect throne. Her skin was the light green color of the swamp folk, and her eyes a rich and piercingly light yellow. She wore a motley outfit of a dark purple contrasted with a lighter purple. A large jester's hat rested above her brow, three points poking out the top like a half star. Golden rings hung at the end of these points, half a dozen bells on each ring. One leg was crossed over the other on her stag throne. She held a scepter with a miniature version of her face wrought of silver, hat and all, smiling brightly as it dangled from the loose grip of her left hand.

"If you've come seeking the lord," the Plague Jester began in a sneering act, "I am afraid he is rather busy. Considering everyone else is either dead or in a similar state, I happen to be the regent of this Archduchy. Funny thing, a fool being named regent. My favorite jest, and that's speaking as a jester. Nevertheless, I've kept the place well-maintained."

Just beyond the stag, where the stairs rose up, three thrones stood. One held the Archduke, his body so well-preserved he seemed alive. The other held his wife—Orion vaguely remembered the blonde woman but could not recall her name. The Archduke's son sat in the third throne. They all sat upright like they were alive, but were so unmoving they could not be.

Orion pointed his mace. "Will you repent, Plague Jester, and kill yourself?"

The jester laughed. She had a fast-paced, wry giggle that sounded fake. "Only a fool would do that—thought a different sort of fool than the one you people made me. Why do you point a mace? It is not a sword, and can—"

Orion threw his mace, and it travelled through the air incredibly quickly. The jester uncrossed her legs, kicking the bottom of the fast-moving projectile and sending it upwards into the air, whereupon it fell into her right hand.

"I'm glad you came, scion of Vasquer," the jester said, voice smooth and calm, her tittering jester's act dropped entirely. "Once I defeat you, I will put you beside your kin. They're alive, you know. Well, alive enough to understand things, at the very least. You, the Archduke... all of those outside... all of you will watch as your kingdom and its people rot away, turned as ugly outside as they are within. You will despair for decades, as I had."

"The gods will be the judge of that," Orion declared, entirely unaffected. "Yet your god lies beneath your feet, sapped and drained by your... antics. You are no faithful, and you have no righteous cause. You are an abomination, and the whole world wishes you dead."

“Just as I wish the world dead,” the jester rebutted, tossing aside Orion’s mace.

The Plague Jester rose to her feet, stepping off the stag’s head. Bells on her jester’s hat and her pointed shoes rang as she moved, chimes echoing against the empty marble walls. She was half the height of Orion, yet she did not seem smaller at all.

“They say the one who grows irate at the jester’s jests is the biggest fool of all,” she noted, holding her scepter out as she strutted forward, ringing and chiming.

Orion rushed forth, far too fast for one armored in metal, and the Plague Jester let out another fake laugh before preparing to fight.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 203: Fight of the Fools**

“Here he is,” said Durran, his breathing heavy. He handed Argrave off to Galamon, his body limp.

“Lighter than he looks.” They were in the small house Argrave had been holed up in. His Brumesingers stayed by his side, protecting him by shrouding the environment with their mist.

“Because he has little blood,” Galamon concluded. “You...” he looked down at Durran’s hands. His left hand was covered in blood and seemed misshapen.

“Just a few fingers gone,” Durran laughed, though his voice was tense and betrayed his pain. He gazed at his hand—the middle, ring, and pinky finger were all gone, torn off by a bite. “Someone had to save him. Couldn’t trust the Waxknights. A few fingers is a small price, in my eyes. He’s... quite the scary one, looks like. Conjured that magic show,” his gaze lingered on Argrave, who looked half a corpse. He had countless cuts, yet they did not bleed.

Galamon looked at Durran, judging. Eventually, he nodded. “Rejoin the fight,” he directed. “I will ensure Argrave is safe.”

Durran nodded. He ran outside, grabbing his glaive. He cast healing magic on his hand—though the fingers did not regrow, the wound did close. He awkwardly handled his glaive, possessing considerably less grace than he typically did.

Anneliese strode towards Durran. She looked a mess, hair wild and unruly, enchanted armor damaged in half a dozen places... yet her steps were strong and decisive. “How is he?”

“Galamon is keeping him safe,” Durran assured her at once.

She did not seem quite relieved, yet Anneliese contented herself with that. “That centaur has returned with reinforcements,” she informed him curtly. “You are needed.”

“Argrave gave you command,” he reminded her.

“I know this. And I have a plan,” Anneliese nodded. “The bulk of the forces within the palace are routed. Not dead, mind you—I suspect they will join up with the host approaching the palace alongside the centaur. They acted reasonably, meaning another one of the fortress commanders is with them, commanding them.”



“How many got away, do you think?” he questioned, looking around. The place was a mess of inhuman corpses, and even now the Waxknights stood diligently, waiting for more to come. Their numbers had thinned. Some were badly injured.

“Hard to say. I must assume over one hundred, for the sake of surety,” Anneliese looked around.

“Neither the gate nor the walls are enchanted. Even if they were... that centaur was large enough to bound over them.”

“And you said he brought one of the commanders from the fortresses,” Durran noted.

Anneliese put her hands on her hips. “This place was not made for defending. Only four of the Waxknights are still capable of fighting, even. I have little magic left, and the Waxknights are the same. We could not even heal Argrave.”

“Yet you have a plan?” Durran took off his helmet, wincing as sliced flesh stuck to it.

“First—destroy the host’s morale,” she stated plainly. “We must take the corpse of the jongleur and bard both, string them up above the gates. It will have little effect on the animalistic creatures... yet the leaders are the ones we target, here. We must instill caution in them. Considering their clumsy strategy on display in this palace... they are not capable of scouting.”

“What’s the bottom line?” Durran pressed.

“Stall desperately,” Anneliese admitted. “Orion can turn the tide, I believe. Failing that, I am considering retreating. Either will be immensely challenging, to be sure. I may... need to disobey Argrave.”

Durran looked to the distant main palace, taking a deep breath. “Good gods... I never thought I’d be hoping to see that man desperately.”

#####

Orion seldom fought foes that could keep up with him. His father had been one—though that had been ten years ago, and the king had never deigned to do it again.

This Jester, though... she could.

On their first exchange Orion bullheadedly rushed in, intending to contest strength with strength... yet the Plague Jester played a different game. She charged forth just as he did, yet when they neared confrontation, she darted down, sweeping his legs with the scepter in her hand. When he stepped over her blow, she planted a palm against his chest powerfully.

The metal shone, bursting into sludge, and Orion staggered from the power. The Plague Jester darted away. He made to pursue once more, yet that sludge took the shape of a plant and thrust towards his neck. Orion caught it with one hand, quickly shattering it. When he looked at what had broken off, he saw a wooden knife. It was familiar, and memories of Magnus surfaced.

“Did you kill my brother?” Orion demanded.

“The man Matesh saw with you? I cannot say. Why not go check?” the Jester straightened.

Orion shattered the knife in his grip, discarding shards of wood. He could not determine if she was feigning innocence. Though he had already been angry, he stepped forth with an icy cold and intense rage. His hand caught fire, and he thrust it out. The Plague Jester stepped back, yet Orion opened his palm and shards of fiery wood flew out, pelting the Plague Jester.

She staggered back, and Orion punched as he stepped. The Jester nimbly ducked, then swung her scepter towards Orion's knee. He caught the scepter with his free hand and liquid light danced out, cutting deep into his palm. He put power in his legs and kneed her in the face. She caught air for half a second before rolling gracefully and coming to a standing stop.

Orion's palm bled slightly, yet soon enough the blood flowed back into his hand, and the wound slowly closed. "The gods do not let me bleed," he declared, palm held forward.

The Plague Jester stared back. Her light green nose was broken, yet she did not bleed. She fixed it with one hand.

Orion pursued once again. Yet as he stepped... the room burst into color. Everywhere the Plague Jester had touched burst forth into plant life, like a spring decompressed—where her feet had stepped exploded into vines, where Orion's kneepad met her face writhed with thorny flowers, and even his own hand burst into grasping, carnivorous plants.

The room became chaos at once, everything attacking Orion fiercely. His struggle was an intense surprise at first, yet then became coordinated. All he touched became flame, and he twisted about like a mongoose wrestling a cobra. Then, with a tremendous rush, he pushed past all that.

The jester did not approach, this time. She danced about the room with grace. With every step that she took, the place became more and more alive. The flames grew just as quickly, Orion fanning them deliberately to free himself of his pursuit.

In not seconds, the once dead throne room became unrecognizable—a jungle of biting and tearing plants, burning and growing in equal measure. Yet when the jester stepped atop one of her own roots, she winced and spasmed, shocked by electricity from one of Orion's numerous blessings. Orion took that brief moment to close the distance.

A spear of ice simply formed in his hand from the moisture in the air, and he thrust it towards her with caution, giving her combat prowess ample respect. Though she attempted to deflect it, the spear broke off at the tip, creating only another spike. She pulled her head aside, yet it cut into her ear and pushed the jester hat off, revealing silken brown hair.

With Orion close, she reached for his face. The jester succeeded only in brushing his beard, which immediately turned to plants resembling fly traps. The plants bit at his face with teeth far too sharp. As he tore them free, the jester fled once more, her bells ringing and chiming like an unspoken taunt.

She ran alongside the wall, running her hand against it as she moved. Innumerable obstacles rose to meet Orion as he rushed, yet he barreled past them like an industrial machine. She wove in between the pillars holding up the ceiling, changing her direction with practiced grace as she dodged around Orion.

Orion could not say how much time passed. His determination never wavered, and he pursued the fool as intensely as he knew how. He brought all of his blessings to heel, seeking to catch up... yet he felt like a dog led about by the nose.

Eventually, the jester came to the center of the room. The pillars, which had been still, writhed to life. Four giant wooden hammers thrust out with tremendous speed, and though Orion dodged two, he could not dodge all. One struck him into another mallet that slammed him from above. He managed to stay standing, holding up a tremendous mass of wood. He threw it up, casting it aside with his tremendous strength, and moved to catch the jester.

Yet he did not foresee the ceiling collapsing. A great wave of stone and brick fell upon him. The main palace's roof had been heavily ornamented, and the great weight of all these ornaments fell upon him. The jester dodged the bulk of it, having predicted this, and closed the distance.

She jammed the sharp back of her jester scepter into his gut. It sunk deep, piercing out his back. He saw her smile.

Yet Orion smiled too. "Finally," he said, spitting blood.

He grabbed her arm so fiercely her smile faded in not half a second. He pulled, slamming his foot into her knee so hard it bent backwards. The movement made him cough yet more blood, and he deliberately spat it into her face.

Orion fell atop her, the jester's scepter still lodged in his gut. He grabbed her neck and slammed it against the stone. The granite cracked, but her head remained intact. Greenery assailed him from all sides, piercing his back, his shoulders, his arms, his neck and head...

Yet Orion did nothing but slam his fist against her face time and time again. The ground cracked and dust scattered everywhere with each blow. She tried to hit him and hurt him, yet no damage deterred Orion. As his own flesh writhed into plant life and ate at him, it became a struggle simply to see who could kill who first.

The Plague Jester's head gave into gore, and the struggle ceased. He kept slamming again and again, ensuring nothing remained. Only after a long while did he stop.

Orion rose to his feet, blood pouring from his mouth and staining his beard. Much of his flesh had been turned to plants from the jester's touch, now dead and wilting after her demise. Hundreds of gashes and gouges in his back tried to heal, each doing so very slowly. He fell to one knee and spat yet more blood on the Plague Jester's corpse.

As he knelt, he caught sight of the jester's scepter still embedded into his gut. The mock head atop it made of silver still smiled up at him. He grabbed it with bloody hands and pulled it free. He stared at the scepter, doing nothing but catching his breath.

Ahead, something stirred. Orion lifted his head and stood at once. He had a hole in his gut the size of a fist, and his armor was so terribly damaged it was astounding it did not fall from his body.

The golden stag rose up out of the collapsed ceiling. It struggled against rubble, rocks and debris falling from its body. Most of the flames had been suppressed by the collapse, and the greenery died with the Plague Jester.

Orion walked forward towards the stag, his steps steady. Even now, his blood tried to make its way back inside of his body, dancing through the air from various portions of the room. Ahead, the stag's golden fur turned to white ever so slowly, and its eyes regained its light. It watched Orion as he approached.

When Orion came to stand before it, expression inscrutable, its voice echoed out.

"Kill me," Rastzintin asked earnestly, voice old and pathetic.

Orion probably did not need to be asked. He jammed the jester's scepter between its eyes, and then its legs lost its power. It collapsed into the fallen palace, then turned all white. From its spot pierced into the stag's skull, the mock head atop the jester's scepter still smiled at him, half-covered in a bloody handprint. Orion's gaze fell to where his uncle the Archduke sat.

Orion fell to one knee. Without so much as a grunt of pain, he rose once more. His gaze turned back where he knew Argrave and the rest of the expedition was.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 204: Omniscient Commander**

Though Anneliese knew that Argrave had not explicitly given her permission to show her hand... she felt it was necessary, and she knew that he would agree. It was not so drastic a measure, of course. Indeed, exposing her druidic magic was quite a simple thing, and she had kept hidden only because Argrave was overcautious. Nonetheless, she was sure it'd be very effective. Though she had considered simply commanding everyone to hide in the buildings... that relied too much on chance. Instead, she'd be controlling things from beginning to end.

As Anneliese had commanded, she'd had the bodies of the jongleur and the bard displayed over the gate. The giant jongleur's ridiculously long ape arms were staked between two of the golden statues on the front gate, and it hung with its head and part of its chest missing. The Barefaced Bard's body was too badly charred to be displayed effectively, yet its face was still intact—they cut it free of the wood and hung it from a rope. It dangled like a necklace from the body of the jongleur.

Anneliese watched the approach of the disorganized horde with her Starsparrow, getting an accurate evaluation of the foe they faced. Argrave had not told her of all the entertainers in the Plague Jester's list, but she found it nonetheless—it stayed aback the centaur, taking the place of the troubadour. It was a grotesque mass of muddy roots that wound together like a ball of eels, and did not look mobile.

When the enemy arrived at the gates... four of the Waxknights stood in front of it, just below the massive marble archway. They confronted a host numbering probably half a thousand, yet the knights stood fearlessly. Anneliese watched from a distant place, using the last of her remaining magic to control her Starsparrow to oversee the situation.

Between the jongleur and bard hanging from the gate and the obviously exposed knights before them... anyone capable of reasoning, especially an inexperienced strategist, would suspect a trap. And that was what she wanted.

Even an inexperienced commander would know a little of how to deal with a trap when there was no option but to proceed. They would not proceed blindly. They would probe, sending less important detachments to suss out what might lie ahead.

When she saw the tangled mass of roots on the centaur's back call out with a strange, clicking howl, she feared what was going to happen. When the horde of enemies behind the centaur pushed back the two of them as they waited, Anneliese very nearly smiled. She directed her Starsparrow in front of the Waxknights, giving them their signal. There was no better utility at her disposal to command them from a safe distance.

The plan remained as simple as ever. Anneliese was going to stall.

The palace of the Archduke was a complicated complex, filled with pavilions, buildings serving many different purposes, and elaborate structures that stood as grandiose displays of wealth. Though there was a straightforward central path that led to the main building where the throne waited... the rest of the place was not so straightforward. There were winding paths that looped in on themselves, some of which looked near identical. Better yet, they were thin, hindering the coordination of large crowds.

The four Waxknights divided up and took different paths. With their gleaming golden armor, it was easy to keep an eye on each of the four from the sky, and Anneliese's Starsparrow could maneuver quickly enough that it did not often matter if she lost track of one or more of them at a time—she could find them if only a few seconds.

The creatures sent out as probes, largely dumb animals or Sentinels, pursued in a disorganized if ruthless manner. Nevertheless, they were divided. Though much faster than the Waxknights, Anneliese had them deliberately move into thin, tight spaces like alleyways between buildings.

Durran and Silvic had their role in this. She had them lying in wait in secluded places, picking off isolated pockets of enemies when she directed them to. Gibbons armed with divinely blessed weapons would wander into an overgrown pavilion, and Silvic would swarm up from hiding, ensnaring and ending foes with her wetland magic. Rockhide hippos would barrel through crowded alleyways, only to be stabbed repeatedly from above by Durran's glaive. Though a bit clumsy in light of his missing fingers, he managed the task ably enough.

Though they had a set path for a time, the Waxknights eventually reached the end of that road. Thus began Anneliese's second duty—she guided the four knights through places that had no enemies ahead of them, like an overseer directing mice through a maze. She used her bird's tremendous speed to its fullest extent, keeping each of the four winding through the place in perfect harmony. They never confronted friend nor foe.

Between guiding Durran and Silvic to hunt foes, herding the Waxknights away from danger, and keeping her eye on the mass of enemies so that none managed to get near where she hid, this task of Anneliese's was a massive mental strain. There were so many variables to keep an eye on, and the simplest mistake might make anyone perish.

Anneliese did not know if this was because of the enchanted items Argrave had given her to help with her concentration, or simply her own personality... but she found she was very good at this. Commanding people and predicting the response of the enemy was something she had a strange, almost unnatural confidence in, even despite the fact her foes were animals whose emotions she could not read. Despite the urgency, despite the threat to their lives... she enjoyed doing this.

Yet then, the wetland spirit and the centaur took slow, steady steps up to the gate, hoofs clattering against the stone walkway leading to the gate. The centaur's gaze lingered on the Barefaced Bard's head and the Jolly Jongleur's corpse... and then scanned the palace beyond.

At the same time, a great tremor rocked the whole palace complex. Anneliese took her Starsparrow to the sky to see the vast building that Orion and the Plague Jester fought within collapse completely. The dust was so intense she could see nothing beyond, even with the bird's fantastic eyesight. Yet when the dust fell...

She saw a vast jungle rapidly growing and writhing out of the dust, so many various types of plants coming into being that it was both beautiful and horrifying. This continued for near half a minute... then, all of the plants ceased, straining as though stretched to their limits. She could not place exactly what changed, but the vibrancy and intensity of the jungle waned before beginning to curl inwards, wilting half as quick as they had grown.

The centaur stepped back, staggering as though he could not believe the sight before him. He stuck his arm through his strung bow and wore it over his shoulder, then broke into an intense gallop towards the main square. He stopped in the center, while in the distance, someone pushed past the dust.

Orion emerged from the devastation... though seeing as how devastated his body and armor were, perhaps he merely brought the devastation with him. One hand dragged along a massive white stag's body, holding it by its elaborate antler crown. The other held a badly dismembered corpse by the foot, the body wearing a bloodstained motley outfit of two distinct shades of purple.

"I cannot be stopped," Orion declared, his voice loud and smooth. "I cannot be stopped by any heretics. I will carve through your numbers piece by piece until none of you remain. My body will never tire. My mind will never waver. I'll come for you step after step, day after day, night after night."

The centaur trotted backwards, removing his bow from his back. The wetland spirit on his back reformed part of its body into an arrow, yet Orion heaved his body and threw the great stag's body forth. It hurtled through the air with tremendous speed, and the centaur tried to rush aside. He was not quick enough—instead, he dropped his bow and caught its antlers, sliding back from the tremendous power from the throw, hooves cracking against the uneven granite pathway. The stag's massive crown of antlers poked at his armor and flesh, leaving cuts or scrapes in many places.

Anneliese was so awestruck by Orion's appearance and tremendous strength she nearly forgot her duties.

*Now that Orion is here... guide everyone to him, have him handle things.*

With that judgement, she made to do precisely that. Yet the wetland spirit on the back of the centaur let out its clicking howl once again, and all of their enemies halted. When another call came... they all frenziedly made for the walls, entirely ignoring their quarry.

The animals and wetland spirit Sentinels that had entered the palace complex flooded out into the wetlands with an intense desperation. The centaur retrieved his bow, and then bounded back towards the main gate. Orion stepped forth near casually, stepping atop the corpse of the great white stag he'd thrown as he watched them leave.

Anneliese brought her Starsparrow back to her person and broke the direct connection between her and the bird. It was strange to be viewing things from her own eyes again, and she took a moment to gather herself before she pushed out of the building she'd hid within to the palace, still cautious of any and all enemies.

When she strode to the central square where Orion had been, the remainder of their party had already gathered.

"What was that?" Durran questioned.

"They flee, like cowards," Orion said coldly. "But I will come to them."

"They don't flee. That call—I can interpret it," Silvic interjected. "They intend to marshal their forces yet more. A strategic retreat, to be returned with greater numbers."

Orion looked to the wetland spirit. "It matters not. I will defeat all challengers." He looked around. "Where is Argrave?" he demanded.

"Unconscious. He used blood magic to defeat one of the commanders, while personally dispatching the other with... tremendous magical aptitude," one of the Waxknights reported quickly.

"Unconscious?" Orion repeated, finally dropping the corpse of the jester. He stepped to his knight and grabbed his shoulders. "Where is he?"

"He is safe. His guardian, Galamon, protects him, alongside those small creatures he keeps as pets."

"I will go to him, take care of him," Anneliese decided aloud. "But Orion... all of us are drained and weary. You are needed most as a warrior and defender," she informed him curtly.

He stepped up to her. He was like a radiating ball of worry and concern, so she could not muster fear. All he did was take a deep breath and nod.

"Yes. Go to him," he said. "Focus only on him. He is my brother... but he is to be your husband. So go," he directed her.

The word 'husband' left a strange feeling within her, yet she could only nod to show her assent.

"I will deal with the enemy," Orion stepped away. "I will tear through them, as I was meant to. If they should charge me, I will flatten them. If they should flee, I will hunt them. And then..." his gaze turned to Silvic. "I will decide what happens next."

Silvic displayed no fear, even though the words might ostensibly be a threat. She merely walked up to the body of the white stag and ran her uncorrupted hand against its fur.

"The plague will stop spreading and growing all around the world. No—it already has," Silvic declared. "I have done all I wished—washed away a stain. So you may decide as you will."

Orion stared at her with his gray eyes for a few seconds. Then, he turned, battered but unbroken, and proceeded towards where the enemy had fled.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 205: Family**

"I did it as best I could, prince Levin," a man garbed in brown robes spoke. He was short, and his skin green. He was one of the swamp folk.

"No, I can see that," Levin soothed casually, staring down at the dead body of Magnus. Levin was dressed befitting a prince. He was thin and tall with a sinewy strength to him. He kept his hands politely behind his back.

A few days' travel had made Magnus' body somewhat worse for wear, but he deemed it would be good enough for the funeral. They would need ample perfumes, he judged. He stayed fixated on the hole in his neck.

"...but nothing came of it, my prince," the man said anxiously. "I mean, beyond the murder itself... he is your younger brother, so the murder was not necessary for succession..."

Levin turned his head back. His rich blue eyes seemed like ocean water, almost innocent. "You're trying to assume my reasoning for this," he noted. "Don't."

The man lowered his head obsequiously. "Of course, my prince."

Expression inscrutable, Levin turned back. "My father has commanded I make the funeral arrangements, alongside the investigation. He'll need to be dressed better. A... a high collar, to be sure, to hide the wound. And something sleeved. Traditional Vasquer colors." He turned to the man. "You'll get it done?"

The man looked back up. His expression was obvious—he was no funeral director, his face seemed to scream. But he nodded. "I will take care of it to the best of my abilities."

He made to leave and pulled the door inwards to step out. Four black-garbed men lunged in, stabbing him in the chest and neck quickly and efficiently. Levin watched them work. When they finished, the four knelt before him.

"Did you hear what I said?" Levin questioned.

The black-garbed men looked up, then looked between each other, confused.

Levin freed his hands from behind his back. "The clothes. Do you remember what I asked?"

"Yes, my prince," the quickest among them said.

"Take his measurements. See it done," he commanded naturally, then walked out of the open door.

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"Frankly, he's lost enough blood that a normal man would surely have died," Galamon said to Anneliese. As her heart dropped, he continued, "But... he's no normal man. He's black blooded. He still has a strong heartbeat, if a bit rapid, and none of his functions seem seriously impaired. Above all... he has vitality. I know this," he looked at her, leaving 'why' unspoken.

Anneliese gazed down at Argrave, a mess of worry and thought. Though his wounds had now been healed, he still refused to rouse after hours. "Healing magic cannot replace his blood," Anneliese said. "What should be done?"



“...all I know is first aid,” Galamon said cautiously. “But... well, we’ll have to tend to him constantly. You should use healing magic on a regular basis to combat organ failure, I believe. That’s what gets the men that bleed. As far as I know, healing magic combats that. All the while... he’ll need to be fed, hydrated, and his body allowed to work at self-rejuvenation.”

Anneliese held her hands out. “Fed? How?”

Galamon bit his lips. “Healers I knew... used honey on a cloth. I remember a few other things. I can show you how to administer it, but I’ve never done it personally. If we have no honey or anything like it, it’ll have to be something liquified. We might ask Silvic about the plants that are edible, or for something that resembles honey in the wetlands.”

Anneliese put her hand to her forehead, overwhelmed. Galamon said as tenderly as he knew how, “He’s strong and stubborn. I’ll give him a day to wake up, especially with magic in his blood. People tell tales of how resilient dragons are, and mages drink dragon blood for health and vitality. That’s because of the magic in their blood. Failing that... as much as I loathe him, Orion would not let his brother die. This I firmly believe.”

“How many times must this happen?” she asked quietly.

#####

Argrave grew aware of the sensation of something sweet in his mouth. It was like a patch of solace amidst nothing but an utter soreness. His eyelids stubbornly refused to obey his directive to open. He could not move his hands or arms. Even his tongue was weak, yet as he moved it, he realized there was a cloth barely in his mouth. He heard a voice, sweet and light, and then faded away.

His consciousness returned later, like the tide against the shores. He barely remembered looking at someone, saying something, and then going out once again. He had many of those memories—barely lapsing back into being, and then fading out just as quickly.

He didn’t know exactly how long this lasted, yet eventually, the world crystallized around him. He finally felt aware enough to make observations.

Argrave lied in a rather comfortable bed, but he was certainly not comfortable. He was well used to pain, and soreness, and weakness, and his present state brought back rather uncomfortable memories. He tried to move his arms and sit up... and succeeded, yet it was a tremendous strain. He fell back to the bed. The feeling was strange, and he laughed from the soreness.

Someone strode in, and he turned his head towards them.

“By...” Anneliese trailed off, then stepped towards him with a relieved sigh. “Thank the gods,” she said as she came to kneel by his bedside.

“I feel like... a bag of grain,” he confessed, his mouth far too dry.

She shook her head and chuckled, then stroked his hair with a gloved hand. “You don’t need to move. Everything’s been taken care of. The Jester, all of it—it’s dealt with.”

Argrave felt like a needle had been poked into his brain to wake him up. “Oh. I forgot about that.”

He tried to stir, but Anneliese needed only to put her hand atop his chest to utterly suppress him. "You will eat. And then you will sleep."

"I don't negotiate with terrorists," he pointed a finger at her.

She gazed at him tenderly. "Wait," she directed, before moving to get something.

Argrave found the command rather sensible, and so waited.

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After a hearty meal and a long rest, Argrave found his mind far clearer than it had been—clear enough to refrain from rambling nonsensically about negotiating with terrorists. Clarity brought with it a heightened awareness of his state. He could move, but walking would still be difficult. The black blood in his veins would make his recovery all the quicker, he hoped.

"You had half a dozen broken bones," Anneliese informed him. "So many cuts... some of them left scars, because they were not healed fast enough."

"Really?" Argrave asked with his hoarse voice. "That's not so bad. Scars are... well, forget it."

"Scars are a point of weakness in tissue," she disagreed, knowing well what he'd refrained from saying on the matter. "They are not decorations like tattoos or jewelry."

Argrave lowered his head, not having a response on-hand. "So... the Jester is dead."

Anneliese nodded.

"The plague won't end, but it's stopped. It won't spread at all anymore. Everyone who has it, has it. Everyone who doesn't... got lucky, I guess." Argrave turned his head to the side. "After this, both of us need to be registered as High Wizards in the Order of the... well, 'after' can come when we've left this swamp." He looked to Anneliese. "You said that a day and the night passed."

"Yes," she confirmed. "It's morning. And Orion has yet to return from his... hunt. He said he'd deliver judgement to Silvic then, or something to that effect."

He heard a door swing open, and footsteps sound out. Durran stepped in, saying, "Hey, I—" he paused. "You're up again," he noted.

"Hey," Argrave greeted hoarsely. Anneliese looked back to him.

Durran stepped in. "And not mumbling incoherently. Surprising, given how much of a knock you took. You put on quite the display, though. I thought Orion was the scary one."

"He is," Argrave nodded. "And—" he stopped, noticing something.

Durran knew what Argrave was looking at and hid his hand.

"You lost fingers," Argrave noticed before he hid them.

Durran sighed, and resignedly brought his hand out once more. "It happens."

Argrave stared, more than a bit horrified. "You only have your forefinger and thumb."

“Sharp,” Durran said sarcastically. “Enough to cast spells with, enough to make a grip—it’s enough.”

“Enough?” Argrave repeated incredulously. “I can... we’ll make a visit to Vysenn right after, fix this. I’ve been meaning to go there, and—”

“Were you planning on going there immediately?” Durran stopped him.

Mouth agape, Argrave rebutted, “That’s beside the point.”

“I can wait,” Durran disagreed. “Don’t stop in your tracks to help me.”

“You lost fingers,” Argrave repeated. “Your spearmanship, your grip—everything will be way different, way harder.”

“It’s my problem. I appreciate the thought, but really, we’ll take care of it when it’s best.” Durran smiled. “If you’re worried about my performance, don’t worry—I mostly cast spells with this hand, anyway, and that’s not impaired in the slightest.” He stepped back towards the door. “I’m going. Just wanted to check in.”

Argrave looked at Anneliese as the door shut behind Durran, stupefied.

“He does not wish to burden you,” she explained. “And... well, I can vouch he is not hindered by the loss. Not in combat.”

Argrave covered his eyes with his hand, rubbing his face to dispel a growing headache. “I mean...”

“We succeeded, Argrave. Do not lose track of that,” she reminded him.

“By a thin margin,” he pointed out. “And once again, because I failed to predict the influence I have on things.”

She leaned in a bit closer. “Yet you salvaged things.”

“It wasn’t good enough. Wasn’t clean,” Argrave insisted.

Anneliese lowered her head, and her dirty white hair fell over her amber eyes. “Clean,” she scoffed.

“This is not a place of numbers and variables, anymore, where the result is always success or failure.”

Argrave grabbed her wrist, shocking himself by his own speed. She lifted her head up, and they locked eyes.

“I’ve been thinking a lot, lately, after Orion took Durran away... and even before that, since Garm did that stupid thing he did,” Argrave told her quickly. “I don’t want to just ‘succeed.’ I want all of those close to me to make it to the end. I want to be happy. Whole and happy. That’s what I want,” he told her. “I can’t keep squeaking by. It maddens me. Any closer, ‘whole and happy’ is gone.”

“Never again,” she said. “You kept muttering that while you slept... and earlier, even. You think I do not know how you feel? You think I do not think the same way, about you, about Galamon, and even Durran, now?”

Argrave realized his foolishness and released her wrist, then placed his hand on her knee. "Sorry," he shook his head. Quiet settled over them. "We couldn't watch the suns set this whole week," he pointed out after a time.

She chuckled lightly. "That is fine. Breaking a tradition once does not mean it needs to remain broken forever."

"You know..." Argrave began, but his throat choked. These simple words were quite hard for him to say. "You know I love you, right?"

Anneliese looked at him with amber eyes as warm as sunlight. She didn't need to say anything to convey her message, he found. "As I love you," she said, even still.

"All of you. You're my real family. I wasn't just saying that for the sake of convenience back at the camp. I haven't exactly determined how we're related quite yet—Galamon's an uncle or a dad, I know this much—but I'm sure I'll figure it out."

"We *have* established one," she disagreed. "I am your fiancée."

Argrave laughed, then grew serious once again. "I mean it, though. Whole and happy. We will get through this. I have to make sure of that."

"We have to make sure of that," she corrected with a shake of her head.