

Argrave finally dared try his hand at walking once the prospect of lying in his bed began to bore him. With no books to study and only the company of his companions to keep his mind sharp, he eventually did wish to step outside and examine things.

Though he stood firm, Argrave still held onto Anneliese's arm in case his legs gave way. "Difficult to believe I did this," he noted, staring at the site of carnage. "Almost as difficult to believe you pulled off that plan of yours with only four knights at your command."

"It was rather skillful, on both of our ends," Anneliese nodded.

Argrave laughed at her unabashed confidence but did not contest the point. "I can't wait to get back to the camp, see if things are working. The disease has been stayed, but it still persists in those that had it. There are ways to ward away the symptoms, regress the disease, but they're few and far between. I'll have to..." he stopped.

"What?" Anneliese pressed.

"I was going to say, 'spread these methods in the southern territories.'" Argrave looked at the great stag's corpse, where Silvic still knelt. "The fact that she's still alive... I think Orion is malleable. I think that he... he might..."

"Be a better option than the rebels?" Anneliese finished.

Argrave sighed. "Didn't say that. It would definitely be an easier time. The south is poised to have a massive disadvantage once winter ends and the war begins in earnest. Ending things smoothly and quickly will save the most lives. Working with Elenore is essential for my plans, but if I can include Orion in that equation? Teach him mercy, leniency, good rule, and basic morality? Steamroll the opposition, unite the continent against Gerechtigkei?"

Anneliese rebutted neutrally, "But you would have to cooperate closely with his family. He loves Felipe, Induen, and all the others just as much as you. It is why he is as he is."

Argrave rubbed his fingers together. "I know. Not to mention the ties I'd be severing—Mina, Nikoletta, Elias, and more. All of that, thrown at the foot of the Holy Fool in a desperate gamble that I can make him a good ruler. Frankly... not too fond of religion, holiness, all that. I guess it's different, here. Gods are indisputably real. Some of them give genuine power—one of them does so right now," Argrave rubbed at his chest. The magic debt he'd accrued was the largest yet, but with the near exponential growth brought about by his black blood, he couldn't say it would take the longest amount of time to repay it.

"If you wish me to be honest..." Anneliese adjusted her arms, and Argrave, who'd been leaning on her, adjusted with the movement. "I view the gods like nobles or kings. They have their systems in place, and you might engage with them sometime to get what you want. Elsewise... let them be. Veid is no different—though do not speak a word of this to Galamon."

Argrave nodded with her words, feeling them resonate somewhat. “Didn’t take you for a cynic, given how calm and kind you are to most anyone.”

“I try to show kindness to those I can relate to,” Anneliese refuted. “It is difficult to relate to a god.” She turned her head. “Silvic, perhaps, is the only one I’ve come near that point.”

“What do I do?” he asked her.

“You think about it,” she told him. “You’ve told me what must be done, and that does not change based on the side you support—we gain a reputation as minor heroes after halting the plague, we gain status by becoming High Wizards in the Order of the Gray Owl, and then we work at winning Elenore to our side. You have all this time to think, to discuss, to plan.”

Argrave rubbed at his face. His skin was not so smooth and unblemished, anymore—he had a scar just above his lip. “I promised Orion I’d teach him things.”

“Well...” she trailed off. “That is something to deal with. Postpone it, perhaps. Maintain good relations, until—”

A loud whistle cut through the air. Galamon had been watching the walls, waiting for signs of Orion’s return or approaching enemies. After sharing a brief glance, Anneliese and Argrave slowly made to where the whistle had come from. Galamon stepped down out of a tower that led up to the top of the wall, and they walked to him.

“Orion,” Galamon told them as they approached.

They needed to hear nothing further. Argrave walked to the gate with slow movements, whereupon Durran and the Waxknights joined up with them. The mist enshrouding the wetlands had grown lighter and lighter in the time that passed, yet it was still sufficient to shroud the form that walked towards them.

Orion emerged from the mists looking like some sort of berserker knight. He was covered in dirt, mud, and blood, and his typically braided hair was now a bushy obsidian mane that made the giant prince seem all the larger. Most of his armor had worn away, leaving him with few patches of metal atop his underclothes. Despite all of this... he still retained a strange dignity. He seemed more a conqueror than a savage.

Orion walked straight to Argrave and put his hand on his shoulder. The prince had always towered over him, but now more than ever, Argrave felt like a child before him. “Look at you,” he said. “You look half a corpse.”

“I’ll recover quickly,” Argrave assured him, hoping to escape whatever Orion might suggest of him in way of treatment.

“I am proud to call you brother,” he declared. “And I hope you are proud of me. The enemy is vanquished. As many as could be, at the very least. The armored centaur escaped my grasp once again, and not because of some lapse of judgement on my part as it had been last time. I believe the jester named him...”

“Matesh,” Argrave finished.

Orion nodded. "Correct. I considered pursuing, yet... he is faster than me. I do not know where he is headed." Orion finally took his hand off Argrave's shoulder. "You and I must visit uncle... or what remains of him... in his throne room soon, discuss what must be done." Orion's gray eyes finally moved past Argrave's face, beyond into the palace. "But I still have yet to pass judgement."

Orion pushed past all of them, walking towards Silvic with a determined gait. Argrave tried to move quickly to walk side by side with him, yet his legs very nearly failed him. Anneliese supported him and stopped him from falling, and then wordlessly helped him along.

"Orion, I—"

The prince raised one hand up as he walked. "I have thought much about this, Argrave. You will watch. I do not forget your words or your actions."

Which ones? Argrave thought. *I hope it's not, 'no compromise,'* he considered as he hurried to catch up, looking for an opportunity to interject.

Orion walked across the palace grounds, moving towards where Silvic still leaned against the corpse of the wetland spirit Rastzintin. The Plague Jester's body rested off to the side, somehow spared from the ravages of decomposition as of now. The wooden wetland spirit, largely consumed by the waxpox, did not stir as Orion came to her.

The prince stood above her as she sat there, body leaned up against the dead white stag. The wooden spirit's light had faded so much it appeared dim in the light of day. Orion appeared like some fell god of war come to judge Silvic, strands of his jet-black hair whipping about from a light breeze.

"Silvic. A long while ago, I asked you to embrace the gods of Vasquer as your own. The one you called child refused, and so I ended her. Yet now... I change my offer. The people here in these wetlands—they were wronged by our conquest. False followers of the faith came here, seeking not to spread the reach of the gods, but to expand their domains of power."

Orion held his fist out and clenched it into a fist. "I will not ask the people here to worship Vasquer. You will take over as the shepherd of this land, leading it back into what it once was. You will teach the people of what once was here, and what was lost. Vasquer will cede this land to you, utterly... so long as you, alone, devote yourself to the pantheon. The swamp folk will be given this land, and they may worship you, follow your customs... so long as you worship my gods—our gods. The gods of Vasquer."

Argrave caught up fully with his slow pace yet did not interject both out of a sense of shock and a ponderance for what Orion said. This was a generous concession, to be sure, and one he never thought Orion would be capable of making.

Silvic lifted her head from where it rested beside the corpse of the white stag Rastzintin. She turned her face to Orion, and though most of it had been consumed by the waxpox, the liquid light in her eyes still persisted.

"Do you know why I fought against the Plague Jester? Because it stepped beyond the bounds of what we were as protectors of the wetlands," Silvic said. "She sought to wreak vengeance and misery upon all the lands of Vasquer in retaliation. I opposed this, and so I was stricken as you see now. And yet... I

fought alongside her and Rastzintin, before all of this folly. I fought to drive Vasquer out of the wetlands. I sought independence just as they had.”

Orion lowered his clenched fist. “That can be forgiven,” he told her, further surprising Argrave.

“This plague was not the natural order of things,” Silvic said. “But you of Vasquer—you never had any claim to these wetlands. We have always been the people of this land ever since the dawn of time. Thousands of other spirits before me have tended to this land, protected its people. Your ancestors stormed in driven by greed and slaughtered my friends, ruined my children, and made this place but a genocidal footnote in Vasquer’s history. Now, you seek to give it back to us? It was never yours to give,” she said, voice echoing throughout the palace.

Orion placed his hand against his hip, jaw clenched tight in restraint.

“You act the merciful saint, but I do not trust you. You speak of never resting until any and all heretics are wiped out. To that I say this—I fought against the plague, oh yes, I did! But just as you killed my comrades, my lover, my children... I am glad your uncle has become as he is. I am glad your brother, Magnus, had that knife driven through his neck. Nothing brought me greater joy than looking upon his corpse, and—”

Orion’s boot slammed down upon her face. He stomped again and again, yelling and screaming in rage. Argrave stepped back fearfully, yet soon enough the rage turned to sorrow, and Orion stood there shouting defiantly at a corpse, tears streaming down his face.

He fell to his knees, crying into the cold, shattered granite pathway beneath him. No one seemed able to move besides Orion. He cried there for minutes, body shuddering as he slowly subsided into mute sobs. After what felt like time eternal, he stopped shaking. He finally lifted his body up straight and stared up at the sky above.

“Argrave,” Orion said, voice dead. “We must go see our uncle.”

The idea paralyzed him with fear after that vicious display of emotion. Argrave stayed silent for a few moments, then said, “I’m still quite weak. I’ll need to trouble you.”

Orion stood and walked towards him. Anneliese handed him off hesitantly. Ever so slowly, he and Argrave walked towards the distant main palace, where a wilted jungle of browning greenery and stone awaited them.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 207: Departing Changed

Argrave walked to the site of the tremendous battle between Orion and the Plague Jester, the prince supporting him as he walked. Seeing the devastation wrought here was like a reminder of his powerlessness before Orion. Decay and destruction surrounded him on all sides. The smell of flowers fortunately masked the scent of gore emanating from Orion.

“He’s here,” Orion finally said, just before the wilting jungle opened up to reveal a staircase up to a throne room. They stepped over rubble and low-lying plants, and then came to stand at the foot of the staircase.

A man sat on the throne. He had all the hallmarks of Vasquer ancestry—obsidian black hair, stony eyes, and a formidable presence. His son sitting just behind him inherited some of that, while his blonde wife must've had no relation other than marriage. They were strangers to Argrave. Their deaths were inevitable in the game... and Argrave did not think he'd be able to reverse whatever magic had them in its hold. The magic at play was too powerful for Ebonice, and he did not have other means at hand. He could see the faint rise and fall of their chests as they breathed, but otherwise, they seemed totally dead.

"Uncle Regene was assumed dead. No expeditions sent into the wetlands returned, so that theory was never confirmed," Orion mused. "He used to... tell me stories about the war to take this place, I remember. I thought he was a model faithful."

"Thought?" Argrave noted.

Orion started to step up the stairs ever so slowly, leading Argrave along with more consideration than Argrave thought he'd receive. "After observing this place, observing the people that lived here... doing more than merely fixate on the act of spreading the faith, as I always have... I concluded that my uncle did not come here with the faith in mind." Orion looked up at the Archduke. "Even when I think back, I never once recall him mentioning the gods."

Orion and Argrave reached the top of the stairs. "Now that the Jester is dead... they are not sustained," he noted. "They've begun to die. Can you think of a way to save their lives?"

"No," Argrave said honestly. He took his arm off Orion's and came to stand on his own. His legs still felt weak, but he could manage for now.

Orion nodded. He stepped before the throne and knelt. "Uncle. I am unsure if you hear me, know me." The prince placed his hand to his chest. "The enemy is defeated. Those that wronged you are dead and gone."

Their uncle gave no response. He simply kept staring at nothing with his dry, dead gray eyes. Orion stared back for what must've been a full minute. Then, with a resigned sigh, he rose to his feet.

"I will not burden you by asking for your help. I will be the one to deliver uncle home," Orion said to Argrave. "Though it pains me... returning with all of their bodies at once will be difficult. I would not put that burden on you or your companions, nor would I carry them haphazardly and stain their bodies with poor handling. I will bring uncle. I will have to send men to retrieve them after we return. Perhaps they can be saved by those more learned than you or I."

Argrave doubted it, but he said nothing.

Orion stepped up to him. "Have you considered my offer further?"

"To help you build a religious institution for the country?" Argrave questioned.

"Yes," Orion nodded. "This expedition... affirmed my choice tenfold, one hundredfold!" Orion declared boldly, then paced away. "We need a true arm of the gods on this world. You and I—we are of the blood of the royal family. Who else should the role fall upon but the divinely anointed representatives of the gods?"

"I am baseborn," Argrave pointed out, stalling for time as he thought of his real answer.

"By law. But the king, our father, is law. Your status may change. You have the light of the gods within you, Argrave. Your feats here have shown me that no other of my brothers are as committed to righteousness and goodness as you are, as much as it chagrins me to say so," Orion put his hand on his hip and shook his head.

As Argrave stared at the man who was now his brother, covered in gore and seemingly unharmed after fighting against dreadful enemies for days on end, he confronted his feelings and thoughts objectively.

He scares me, Argrave noted. I can't ever be at ease around him. He's easily manipulated, and he might be taught how to be genuinely good... but he is so volatile and impulsive, I don't think I could ever be fully comfortable near him. I don't like Vasquer as a whole. Orion won't ever betray Vasquer, I don't think.

When Felipe dies... indeed, if things remain as they were in 'Heroes of Berendar,' and the king *does* actually die... Argrave might be able to put Orion on the throne. Induen was the main barrier to that—a barrier that would need to be broken regardless. He might try and negotiate with the Margrave, end this civil war with minimal bloodshed. Then, there would be a strong leader at the helm of Vasquer, more than able to confront Gerechtigkeits many trials surfacing in the coming years.

The task was ridiculously beyond what Argrave felt he was capable of. It sounded like a delusional fantasy even as he thought of it.

Argrave's role in the civil war would not be active. Elenore was the most important party in the whole thing—if he gained her support, the whole situation could be upended. She was a schemer and strategist beyond reproach. With her help, she might make such a thing happen... and yet Argrave was not sure she would be amenable to the idea.

And still, Argrave found he could not deny Orion outright. Even if he could not achieve this perfect solution to all of Vasquer's troubles, if he could create a force for good on the side of the royalists... if he could make Orion see the error of wanton bloodshed and mindless crusading... shouldn't he take that opportunity?

Wasn't it the right thing to do?

The question was enough to make his head explode, yet Argrave felt he had an answer.

"...this idea of yours is in its infancy," Argrave said slowly and deliberately, as though each word might cost him his life. "I promised you I'd teach you. Teach you about my ways, about my methods. About a way to deal with things that doesn't call for mindless violence, as we saw here in these wetlands." Argrave nodded. "I'd like to stick to that. And along the way... we can plan more. About the future. For us, and for Vasquer. For the faith."

Orion brightened and stepped forward. He looked like he wished to crush Argrave, but then held himself back. "I would embrace you, were you not so weak presently," he said eagerly.

"I have some things to take care of, first," Argrave held his hand up. "Anneliese and I will be registered as High Wizards of the Order." Pragmatism slipped back into his brain, and he questioned, "But... you mentioned better outfitting Galamon with enchanted gear."

“Indeed,” Orion nodded. “I must pay a visit to royal blacksmiths regardless, as you can plainly see,” he pointed to his tattered armor with a hearty laugh.

“Do you think... you might have the armoring done quickly, delivered to that town not too far from the tower? Kin’s End, I think it was called, where Acolytes officially abandon their noble name when studying at the tower. And... well, even for Durran, and his equipment...” Argrave dared push his limits.

“Absolutely. If I have my way, and you are named prince well and truly... I can think of no more fitting candidates for your first two royal knights.” Orion pounded his chest. “Once we arrive back at camp, I will see that it is done immediately. There will surely be some armorers among the refugees that might take their measurements, and then I will have that delivered to the royal armorers and enchanters.”

Argrave was somewhat surprised how easy that request had gone. “And weapons?”

“Naturally,” Orion nodded.

Suddenly, Argrave did not feel so weak anymore. He was vaguely tempted to ask his brother for all of his gold, but he was afraid the answer might be ‘yes.’ Which reminded him...

“Then everything is settled. We should leave soon,” Argrave said. “Tomorrow, perhaps?”

“Indeed,” Orion nodded once again.

Argrave turned his head away, almost feeling like he was in a dream. He’d have another task for his companions—robbing this luxurious palace of anything that might be worth anything during the night. It was a thankless task, but Argrave felt somewhat jealous of them. His task was all the more dangerous... his task would be distracting Orion while they did so.

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They left the next morning. Three of the Waxknights remained in Archduke Regene’s palace, mostly to ensure the Archduke’s family was not disturbed until they could be retrieved. The palace was a harrowing place as ever, and somehow made drearier by the Jester’s death. Orion severed Rastzintin’s stag head and carried it with him—a proof of conquest. It was somewhat brutal, but Argrave supposed it was better than returning empty-handed and claiming they’d saved the world.

The journey was slow-moving to accommodate Argrave—a fortunate thing, too, because it made the pounds of jewelry in his companion’s packs clink less as they travelled. They lacked Silvic’s protection, but with the Plague Jester’s death, it was no longer necessary. No powers held a grip over the region anymore—it was as harmless as any land they’d traversed in the past, barring some few nasty creatures. Once they left the parts that had been consumed by waxpox, it seemed almost ordinary.

Argrave had resolved to remain at the abandoned keep Orion had made his camp and rest, at least for a day. He felt, for the first time, there wasn’t some looming threat above that demanded he take things two steps at a time at all times. He could relax, eat some terrible swamp food, read some dull spellbooks, and enjoy the company of his companions. Then, he’d delve into the heart of things with a clear mind.

After four days of utterly exhausting travel, Argrave saw rows upon rows of tents. He let Orion take the lead, because he was sure that the people would shower him in praise and cheers. His part would be

remembered, to be sure... but he was not the one who had done the most. He did not deserve the accolades as much as Orion, nor did he especially want them.

Things went as expected when they returned. A few noticed Orion with the towering stag head on his back, and then the crowd snowballed from there. After explaining that the disease had not been cured, but would cease spreading, Orion gave a grandiose speech which Argrave was too tired to remember. This speech eventually culminated in a crowd cheering his name.

Yet then Argrave himself was dragged to the front, pale and exhausted. Orion raised his arm up in the air and spoke of his deeds. The prince spoke of how Argrave spilled his blood to kill the enemy, and nearly died to dispatch foul enemies and heretics.

And then... they cheered his name.

As he listened to the cheers of, "Argrave! Argrave! Argrave!" and "Bastard of Vasquer! Bastard of Vasquer!" his tired and exhausted mind had some difficulty processing it. He was mostly waved around like a puppet by Orion, accepting his praise half-heartedly.

For the longest time, he had always thought of crowds of people as an enemy. Certainly, the confrontation with Titus had exacerbated that—he'd used a crowd against them. And yet...

He'd done something good, and people had recognized that. He certainly hadn't done it for the recognition. Having a good reputation with people was something he wanted, not for the sake of accolades, but because it'd make his job easier in the future.

Overwhelmed, Argrave did his best to get away from the crowd as soon as possible. As he laid in bed, leaving the logistics of things to Anneliese because of his exhaustion...

People are fickle, Argrave thought. But I guess I like them.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 208: Rising Tension in Rest

"You said we would rest," noted Durran, though he did not complain as he put the white books written by Garm back into his backpack. He fumbled a little on account of his missing fingers, which made Argrave feel guilt once again.

"We will," Argrave confirmed, resting off to the side while Galamon packed his things for him, accommodating his weakened state. "We'll take a nice, long rest—believe me, my legs ache much worse than yours, and I want to rest. But half the damn continent knows or will know we're in this camp, and I don't care to be a sitting duck so that Induen or anybody else comes here and ruins my day. We'll go to a secluded place without any watching eyes." He turned his gaze to Anneliese. "Speaking of, there's something I want you to do."

"Alert Mina, have her get away from Induen," she guessed.

Argrave smiled. "If only everyone could guess my plans as well as you."

"That might be a problem, actually," Durran shook his head. "Might make future deceptions a bit more difficult."

Argrave chuckled but said nothing.

“Alerting Mina will not take long. Half an hour, perhaps,” she nodded, and her Starsparrow jumped to her finger.

“I’ve already told Orion we’re leaving. He’s to return to the capital, put affairs in order, get some stellar armor for the two of you to wear... and then rejoin us at Kin’s End. I don’t plan on travelling again until I’m fully prepared to defend myself—I’ve earned something of a reputation, and all of my brothers are a bit trigger happy. Moreover, I’ll need a B-rank spell to demonstrate to the Order of the Gray Owl that isn’t blood magic. Ancient, forgotten blood magic, at that. Part of the advancement process to a High Wizard, you see.”

Anneliese seemed the most pleased by this news. She was the one constantly encouraging him to take a rest, and stop using blood magic—now, he promised to do both.

Argrave stood. “I know a place. Small village, maybe six houses. Doesn’t receive travelers often, and the residents leave less often. We pay them a few gold, they’ll shine our shoes and feed us grains, I’m certain—but it’s a safe place to hole up, and that’s all I need.” He looked to Anneliese. “But first...”

“I will send the Starsparrow out,” she finished.

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“Another day without more deaths, nor registered refugees,” Induen noted, staring down at a document. Mina, standing across from him on the death, tried to read the document upside-down in vain. “It seems we’re doing well.”

It felt strange for Mina to hear the words ‘we’ coming from the crown prince of the Kingdom of Vasquer. She could not deny she had been dreadfully apprehensive about this task that Argrave had given her. Rumors of the crown prince’s temper and cruel tendencies persisted in every territory from the Parbon Margravate in the far south to the vast forests of the Archduchy of Corsare, furthest north in Vasquer.

Mina could not deny that Prince Induen was brilliant. She had spent near two weeks with him by this point, tending to the refugee and plague problem in Veden and beyond. He had a natural affinity for management and rulership. He was adept at predicting how people would act, and how to force people to act. He had an astonishing aptitude with numbers, and anything that entered his memory did not leave it. He could keep track of innumerable factors at once, always maintaining a full picture of any scenario and thereby generating a solution that matched.

But the prince was limited. Sorely limited.

Induen only knew fear and punishment. He would prefer to uproot a dying plant and put something new in its place instead of simply changing the way it was tended to. There were no half-measures with him. Though he could see the merit in other methods, and could apply them if pressed, he never went for bloodless solutions. Part of it was habit, Mina suspected.

The other part... she supposed he simply enjoyed ruthless methods more.

“The disease doesn’t subside,” Mina noted. “We have to keep working at it until people start to get better.”

Thus far, she had managed to avoid his temper by staying business-like. Despite the rumors of his temper, he did not lash out at her when she suggested other methods. She wondered if they were overexaggerated, or if she was simply doing something right.

“You’re right. The disease *doesn’t* subside,” Induen said. “Same phrase, different meaning. Those that catch it won’t lose it. It’s a permanent affliction, this waxpox.” Induen stood up straight until he towered over Mina. “That’s why they must be killed. It’s the only solution—surely you see that?”

“You have no evidence for that,” she pushed back. Something golden moved in the corner of her eye, but she didn’t dare glance away from Induen.

“There has been not one report of a single recovery,” Induen noted, half-mockingly. “But indeed, I have no evidence they will not recover. I suppose we must wait for everyone to fall sick and die before we take action? Surely one of them will recover...” he laughed.

As he reared back his head in laughter, Mina caught sight of another golden flash. She dared glance away, whereupon she spotted a beautiful golden bird by the window. She was prepared to dismiss it from her mind, too occupied with the temperamental prince to pay attention to a pretty sparrow. Then, she thought back.

That’s Anneliese’s bird, she noted. And as her eyes tracked it, she noticed its action were far too deliberate in drawing her attention to be those of a simple-minded creature.

“I must visit the privy,” Mina declared, standing up.

Induen stared down at her. “A very unladylike declaration,” he derided. “Why do you tell me? Just go.”

Mina did not need to be told more than once. She kept herself from sprinting only because of her company. She opened the door, passing by the royal guards Induen had stationed outside, and entered the courtyard of the castle. She made to a secluded place, whereupon she glanced up at the sky, waiting.

The bird appeared before her as though it had always been there, and Mina’s head jumped back involuntarily. Once the bird settled on her arm, staring up at her, she questioned in a low whisper, “Argrave succeeded?”

The bird nodded—it was a rather adorable action, Mina thought, but the topic was too serious for her to act upon it. The reason that the waxpox had not spread at all the past while was because Argrave had stopped it, she was certain.

“I can go?” she confirmed in paranoia, to which the bird nodded again.

At that, Mina took a deep breath and sighed. “Tell Argrave that his debt is tenfold what he imagined,” she told the bird. Maybe it was her imagination, but it looked amused before simply vanishing. It must’ve been some sort of magical bird, she suspected.

Where to go? Mina mused. *I’ll not stick around here once Induen learns the news. Argrave will surely be leaving.*

As the answer came to her, she took a deep breath. *South. The Margravate, perhaps. Safest place, I’m sure.*

With no further thought, she left.

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Orion gazed out at the refugee camp. Though the people afflicted with the waxpox still persisted... it caused no more deaths. The steady trickle of refugees seeking his blessing thinned every day. And though he was less busy because of it... he was glad to be less busy.

A convoy had already left, bearing many of his instructions and messages for people at the capital in Dirracha. Soon enough, he would be joining them. Though he had put it out of his mind while focusing on this task... there was much for him to learn of. He knew naught of this rebellion beyond the fact that it existed. Yet rebelling against the divine-anointed royal family... this matter must be resolved.

Yet followers of the faith were not meant to slaughter followers of the faith. He saw no way to proceed without bloodshed. And yet... Argrave might. He had some of Elenore's cleverness when she had been younger and more vibrant, not crippled as she was now. He still did not understand why she had to be harmed in such a way, yet it was his father's decree.

Orion would tend to the duties as a Prince of Vasquer and consult his brother Argrave for advice. His family was the most important thing to him. All of his many parents, his brothers, his sister... yet they were not without issue. They might be mended.

Someone stepped up to Orion as he was lost in thought and knelt before him. He wore heavy burlap robes, mud stained and battered by fast travel.

"My prince," the man sat, panting.

"What is it?" Orion questioned, not ungently.

The man held his hands up, not daring to look at his face. He held a parchment, some minor enchantments on its surface protecting it—standard practice of the royal family's messages. Orion took it.

"From Prince Induen, if it please you. I deliver this to you on his behalf."

Orion pulled free the binding with his big fingers, then read through the document. It took him a long time to read through it all, yet once he did, he lowered it and helped the man before him to stand.

"My brother sent you?" Orion questioned, his tone cold. He gripped the man by the shoulders so firmly he seemed liable to pop.

The man looked scared, but he answered, "Yes, my prince, yes he did."

"Why is he in Veden? Why does he wish to see me?" Orion demanded.

"As to that... I-I could not say, my prince," the man said hastily. "I am but a servant to the Count Elgar of Veden. One of Induen's royal knights pulled me aside, demanded I deliver this."

Orion narrowed his eyes. "Did you see my brother himself?"

"Y-yes, my prince. He has been in Veden for some time, now, dealing with the influx of refugees and preventing its spread. My prince," the man added once again, as a show of respect.

Orion finally released the man's shoulders. He patted him on the shoulders. "You were a good man to bring this to me," he commended loudly. "Here. Take this."

He shoved five gold coins into the man's hand, and then stepped around him without another word.

Orion had a bright smile on his face, white teeth barely showing past his black beard. *Induen, of all my brothers, helping to curb the plague? I knew I was not misguided. I knew the gods had a plan for all of us. I must tell him of Magnus, and of Argrave's triumph. It is not too late for our family.*

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 209: Softly

Argrave set down his backpack and sat in the guest bed that had been offered to them. Dust jumped up off it, but Argrave could hardly be bothered by dust anymore considering all that he'd endured. Anneliese sneezed—he thought it was a cute sound, and Argrave found himself staring at her.

She wiped away her nose, oblivious to him as she examined the room. "Unused for a time... yet it seems sturdy enough that I have no worries. The people here hate me. Me and Galamon, I suppose. They only allowed us to stay because of our generous payment... and our weapons."

Hearing that made Argrave frown. "There's perhaps twenty people in this town, and they go to a big city maybe once a year," he reasoned. "I suppose elves are as mythical and as feared as dragons to them. Nothing will bother us, here. We can rest and recuperate. Enjoy an idyllic life... for a couple weeks, maybe."

They were in the largest house in this small town. The only resident was an old widow, whose children had all left the village or built houses of their own elsewhere. Durran and Galamon had their own room just nearby. The widow was the only one who didn't seem to be highly suspicious of his elven companions.

Argrave's Brumesingers started to sneeze, too, and he laughed.

"Perhaps we should dust up," Anneliese suggested.

"Absolutely," Argrave rose to his feet.

Once Argrave began cleaning again, he remembered how much he enjoyed doing it. He was very methodical in his approach, and before long the place was noticeably brighter, freed from a blanket of gray lying atop it. Once that was done, the two of them sat there on the bed in silence.

"Only crickets, endless plains of winter grass in most directions... no noises, no distractions," Anneliese mused. "I like places like this."

Argrave thought about it, soaking in the quietude. "It does have its charms," he conceded. "But I still like big cities the best. Constant noise, always drowning things out, distracting." He paused, taking in the sounds... or lack thereof, he supposed. In time, his gaze found Anneliese again. "Of course, if you're with me... that's a constant distraction. Can't stop my eyes from wandering to you."

Anneliese scoffed half-heartedly and looked at him with affection. No—there was something a little bit more intense than just affection between them. He took off one glove and put a hand to her cheek. It

wandered across her cheeks, her lips, and then down her neck until her hand rose up to meet his. She held it close to her chest.

"It's nice and quiet," Argrave said. "And we have plenty of time." His fingers fiddled with a strap on her leather armor.

"Argrave..." she said quietly, yet there was some nervous excitement in her voice. Her amber eyes stayed fixed on his hand.

"I know we agreed it was a bad idea... but sometimes I'd like to have a bad idea. Or two," he said suggestively.

Her eyes finally lifted from his hand to his eyes. "You are unwell."

"I'm perfectly capable," Argrave stared back at her.

Anneliese held his gaze for a long time, as though deliberating on something. With a swallow, she said quietly, "I think... it should be fine, now. It is a safe time."

Argrave raised a brow. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Anneliese nodded, leaning closer to him. She took her hand off of his and moved it towards him.

"Music to my ears," he whispered, before leaning in to meet her. It was a gentle and soft kiss. They slowly fell back into the bed, growing more emboldened in every passing second. Their hands wandered naturally, completely in-tune with each other now as they always were.

Indeed, it was a quiet night. Galamon took Durran out of the house, ensuring they remained on the porch with the old widow. Argrave's Brumesingers curled in the corner of the room, the Starsparrow using them like a nest. And like that, it became a night without distractions.

#####

The morning came as it always did. There were no windows in the room they'd been given, but Argrave felt things were a little brighter nonetheless. His Brumesingers curled around the Starsparrow, shielding it from the elements. Their fur was a dark gray, now—the creatures had eaten many souls without an excessive expenditure. The bird nested in their fur as though it was natural.

Argrave stared down at Anneliese, half-covered in their blanket as she leaned up against him. The blanket could not fully cover either of them and the bed was a bit too small for Argrave... yet despite these annoyances he felt well-rested. Maybe she had already been awake, or maybe they were simply in-tune, but Anneliese lifted her head up to look at him. Despite the exhaustion in their eyes, it seemed like neither could stop themselves from smiling, both grinning like fools.

"Good morning," Anneliese greeted him.

"That's never been truer," Argrave agreed.

She chuckled and buried her face on his chest. Argrave stroked her long white hair, enjoying her warmth in the early morning chill. He was tired. It was a good exhaustion, though.

"We cannot make a habit of this," she said, voice muffled. "As much as I want to."

Argrave looked up at the ceiling, sighing with a knowing disappointment. “Are you sure about that? I’m good with my tongue, you know.”

“Of course I know,” Anneliese nodded, ignorant of his implication. “But your words will not persuade me, no matter how good you are at talking. A child would be... not now,” she sighed.

Argrave stared at the ceiling blankly. “Part of me is glad you misunderstood that.”

Anneliese raised her head, brows furrowed in confusion. As she thought more, her face grew tomato red, and Argrave started to laugh. It echoed off the walls of the wooden cabin they stayed in, and Anneliese poked him in the ribs, demanding he be quiet.

#####

Nikoletta of Monticci stopped before a door. She was garbed in the enchanted leather armor heirloom of her house, a blue swordfish emblazoned on the breastplate. Her obsidian black hair was neatly bound in a ponytail, and her bright pink eyes betrayed some nervousness. Her hand hovered near the ring to pull the door open, and she took a deep breath to compose herself before grabbing and pulling it open resolutely.

A few people she recognized turned to look at Nikoletta as she entered into the door. Two people bore red hair—one, the armored Margrave Reinhardt, and two, his son, Elias of Parbon. Parbon’s court mage, Helmuth, stood nearby, alongside several other vassals to the Margrave.

Nikoletta entered confidently, and her escort of knights entered just behind her. She strode up right before the Margrave.

“Margrave Reinhardt,” she greeted.

“Young lady Nikoletta,” Reinhardt nodded curtly, his ruby eyes steady.

She looked around, then said, “My father has decided to remain at Mateth and resume rule.”

Margrave Reinhardt nodded. “Enrico wants you to gain experience in diplomacy. A good man, your father.”

Though Reinhardt was fully correct in saying so, Nikoletta did not betray that. She looked at Elias... yet did not see what she was expecting to see.

One of his eyes had gone completely brown. It was glossy, resembling wax. A streak of the waxpox rose up from his neck, onto his cheek, and into his eye. The eye did not seem capable of moving any longer. His one good red eye caught her reaction and looked sad.

“Elias... what...” Nikoletta questioned guiltily.

“I caught the waxpox,” Elias informed her curtly. “Lost my sight in one eye.”

Reinhardt turned away, clearly frustrated by the whole situation. Helmuth, Parbon’s court mage, with whirling violet eyes that seemed unnatural, contributed, “The disease has stopped its spread. There was something mystical about it—something unnatural. Yet now it is gone, in Elias and in everyone. The disease does not spread to others anymore.”

Reinhardt turned quickly and said in frustration, "But too late to spare my son."

"Leave it, father," he directed. Reinhardt looked surprised at his son's tone, but he said nothing more on the matter.

Nikoletta's gaze jumped between the two of them, looking where to proceed.

Before she could say anything, the Margrave said, "Argrave... left... my castle, heading to the northwest of Vasquer to end the plague." Reinhardt put his hands on his hips. "Given what Helmuth described... he may have succeeded." He looked to Nikoletta. "Your father agreed Argrave must be secured before winter's end. But what of the other matter, this engagement?"

Nikoletta winced as she recalled confessing to her father after his revelation from the Margrave. She dared not confess the reason, but she had informed him that she'd done so to avoid getting married. And now...

"My father decided... to proceed with the engagement, at least until the war's conclusion," Nikoletta said, crossing her arms. "It will be surface-level alone and broken once the continent is at peace. Gaining support now is the most important."

"Can you persuade Argrave of that?" the Margrave questioned. "He said he would never compromise for this Anneliese."

Nikoletta considered that. She had known right away that Argrave was attracted to the snow elf from the distant continent of Veiden, yet she never imagined things would progress to this point. The words 'never compromise' made her feel strangely lesser and diminished her confidence.

Yet Nikoletta's temperance won through, and she said, "I think I am best suited for persuading him of everyone."

The Margrave nodded. "You have a history of protecting him, and you are cousins. He may trust you. I have a history of..." he shook his head, leaving the next part unspoken. "Elias, Nikoletta. You two will find Argrave, and you will tell him we wish to have him as our claimant against Vasquer. You will bring him back to the Margravate that we might discuss this in further detail."

"I still have unfinished business in Elbraille," Elias protested.

"I will handle the Duchess and her corruption. Now that I know of it, I will see it done, son," Reinhardt informed him simply. Elias looked discontented, but he did quiet down. "Will you visit your fiancée?" he asked.

Elias looked away at once. "Not until the metalsmiths forge the mask I asked for. I would not have her see me like this."

"She's to see it eventually, son," Reinhardt said frustratedly. "She's to be your wife."

Elias looked away, saying nothing. Both looked too pained to press the matter further.

"All we know is that Argrave is in the northwest, though only by what he said to me..." Reinhardt said, moving past the matter. "I sent Stain ahead with some trusted men to find out more details. He's proven rather adept at that. Elias has Stain's location—once you have his information, you will be on your own."

"If we can't find Argrave?" Nikoletta asked. "He's proven time and time again that if he doesn't wish to be found, he won't be."

The Margrave deliberated, stepping away in his heavy metal armor. "Just find him," he said, betraying that he had no plan beyond that. "Bring him back. With him... we can end things. If we have the savior that stopped the plague on our side, Vasquer's support will implode... doubly so if it's revealed Felipe spread the plague personally."

Nikoletta nodded without much confidence. With that, the Margrave left abruptly, armor clanging heavily as he moved. He left, leaving her alone with Elias and both of their knights.

"This might not end perfectly," Nikoletta said quietly.

"Or at all," Elias agreed. "Nonetheless... our fathers wish us to do this. Let's proceed carefully."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 210: Privilege of the Younger

"I'm sure that she'll turn up sooner or later, my prince. That child, Mina, she's..." Count Elgar of Veden shook his head.

Induen tapped his fingers against the dining table, staring Elgar down with his cold blue eyes. The Count had golden hair and eyes just as Mina did yet shared little with her beyond that. Induen did not like him. "Your daughter is missing, yet you don't seem to care."

Elgar placed his elbows on the table and clenched his hands together. "She's been doing that since she was very young, my prince. She'll disappear for days, sometimes weeks on end. Typically I need only send a message to Duke Enrico—she always heads there, the foolish girl. I apologize for her discourtesy."

Induen narrowed his eyes. Though anger was there, something else marred his features more—confusion, perhaps, or curiosity. "You've not sent her away?"

Elgar raised a brow. "Why would I do that, my prince?"

"Stupidity, maybe," Induen mused, leaning back in the chair and scratching his temple. Count Elgar clenched his jaw tightly at the insinuation yet did not rise to combat it. "Do you hate your daughter, I wonder?"

Elgar furrowed his brows. "Who would hate their child?"

"Well, my father, for one. He never liked me much. I killed his wife, you know. The whole childbirth incident," Induen pointed out. Both looked serious, but then Induen started to laugh. "Joking, joking. Of course. Of course," Induen smiled widely.

"Mina is missing, Prince Induen. I don't know what else to tell you," Elgar stated once again, leaving no room for argument.

Induen leaned back in and slammed his hand against the table. "Yet you send not a single knight to look for her?"

Elgar stared back. "I have explained my reasonings. That girl had wasted enough resources in frivolous searches throughout her whole life. The waxpox still abounds, and I'll not have my guards contract it in a fruitless quest to collect her."

Induen's gaze was cold and dead. Elgar swallowed as they stared at each other, alone in the dining hall. Just then, the great double doors burst open. Induen turned his head, surprised. The confidence in his posture veritably withered away as his eyes widened.

"Brother!" Orion shouted out cheerily, moving towards Induen with long strides. The prince wore thin casual clothes, rich and black, yet even still he made the formidable Induen look small.

Induen rose to his feet and stepped back, placing the chair between himself and his brother. "Orion. Why are you... here?"

Orion pushed the chair aside with his foot and embraced Induen. The elder prince's face visibly contorted in displeasure and anxiety, and his hands hovered a fair distance away as though he feared to touch his brother.

Prince Orion pushed away, holding Induen by the shoulders. "I've heard of what you've been doing here. Working with the sick, stopping the plague from spreading... I cannot describe the joy that welled within once I heard of it. It brought tears to my eyes. And seeing outside... you have done so well."

Induen swallowed. He never knew what to say when he talked with Orion. He always did his best to avoid his younger brother. He never felt older when they spoke. He always felt deeply uncomfortable, almost belittled, after any interaction with him. Induen tried to avoid his father, too, though never for the same reasons.

"How did you get in?" Count Elgar inquired. "I did not hear the guards open the gate."

Orion released Induen and turned, expression and tone cold. "I climbed the walls. I trust this is no problem, Count Elgar. The royal family is not barred from anywhere in the lands of Vasquer, and I wished to visit with my brother. On that note... give us some time," he directed the Count curtly.

The Count looked as disconcerted as Induen felt. He gave a stiff bow and made to leave. Orion's stern gaze followed his every step, making the Count hurry. He shut the doors behind him. As though his sternness was a façade, he turned to Induen happily.

"I wished to speak with you direly! Of course, I always enjoy speaking with my family, yet now it was especially so—there is so much to speak of, so much to do. It has been too long since we last spoke, brother. We must change that in the future."

"Why are you here?" Induen reiterated insistently.

Orion raised a brow. "You wished me to come, did you not? Ah, but—even if you did not, I wished to talk to you. Let us begin..." Orion pulled a chair back and sat, facing away from the table. "...with the more dire news. Our brother, Magnus, was murdered in cold blood."

Induen took a mental note of everything Orion said and stepped forth cautiously. "So close to you, I hear," he said, implying negligence.

"I know," Orion said, and at once broke into tears. He placed his elbow on his knee as his hand supported his face, tears of molten silver pouring between the cracks of his fingers. "I was foolish. My brother died not minutes away from me, and I was entirely ignorant. The thought will haunt me for time eternal."

Induen watched the molten silver tears smoke and burn the Count's carpet once they fell. His brother's strange tendencies and constant oddities were a large part of Induen's discomfort at his presence.

"But I am near sure we have caught his killers," Orion continued, voice now filled with an icy anger. "Foul things persisted in the wetlands. I have finally ventured deep within them, and I have discovered the truth of the fall of the Archduchy." Orion rose up. "Foul beings with vengeance in their hearts wreaked havoc across the wetlands... and then, the entire continent. Their magic killed Magnus, I am sure of it. But I killed them. Killed them all to the last. Extinguished them with my bare hands."

Induen stared at Orion's hands as he clenched them into fists.

"This plague... the heretics of the wetlands caused it," Orion growled. "Thousands of lives burnt, scarred or simply withered away entirely by their revolting rage. But I—no, that is not fair to say. Argrave recognized this! Argrave put a stop to the plague!"

Prince Induen's vision swirled. "What?" he asked, low and insistent.

"Perhaps you've noticed the spread has ceased," Orion ventured. "Argrave found out the root cause. He heralded a traitor, used her to put an end to this virulent vendetta! And now, the disease will never spread again!"

"What are you talking about?" Induen demanded, voice tense.

Orion held his hands out. "A non-believer and would-be slaughterer called the Plague Jester harnessed the power of the wetland gods to conjure and spread this plague all across the land. Argrave tore this information from the hands of an enemy, and then led a crusade forth by my side to vanquish the enemy.

"Vanquish the enemy?" Induen laughed twice. His vision was all white as myriad emotions assaulted him from the news. Before he realized it, he was stepping away from Orion, heading to where he and Mina had planned out their tackling of the plague.

As soon as it was brought up, Induen knew it had to be true. The fact that the waxpox had not spread at all in a week was such a bizarre thing. It had struck him as odd the first day he'd seen it. He thought it mere luck... yet this strange happening persisted. He remembered wondering if, perhaps, Mina had been right all along. He wondered if he could rule in this manner.

He made it to Mina's study and leaned out across the balcony, gazing out at all of the work he'd put in the past few weeks. Innumerable tents, messages, edicts, all to curb the plague... and all of it overshadowed by Argrave's grand achievement. All of his efforts entirely wasted. He would receive nothing in return for it. No recognition. No praise.

Mina, Induen reflected. She's Argrave's friend. And now she's gone. She was strangely insistent I stay here.

Induen gripped the stone railing tightly enough to hurt his hands. He turned back to the desk, over which he and Mina had drafted out plans for days on end. He stepped to the table, fists clenched, wishing to take his anger out on something.

It was all a lie, he thought, his breathing heavy. But then he paused. He looked at a half-finished piece of writing, and then reflected.

No... no, something is off, his mind noted. *She worked as hard as I did. She was desperately attempting to stop the plague in Veden and beyond. Those were not the actions of someone who knew it was to end.* Induen lifted his head, his breathing growing steady. *And her departure... it was soon before Orion arrived. None saw her leave, and even her father is ignorant.*

What's more... I was never informed of this victory. Elenore has eyes everywhere—if she wished to inform me urgently, she could. She wanted me to return to the capital not weeks ago, now she keeps me ignorant?

Induen turned his head back as Orion entered the room once more. Induen took slow, steady steps towards him.

"Induen... what's wrong? Why did you storm off so?"

"You said I wanted to see you earlier," Induen said, his voice surprisingly calm. "What gave you that impression?"

Orion raised his brows, then thought back. "You sent a messenger to the northwest, no?"

Induen smiled. "Me, personally, or someone under my command?"

"Someone under your command," Orion reflected, brows furrowed. "I believe... a royal knight, the man said."

Induen took a deep breath, his smile widening. He laughed in revelation. Everything seemed to fit together so well. "I see. I see. Yes, I see it now," he said, and then began laughing once more.

Orion looked confused. "Did you not?"

"Oh, I did," Induen lied heartily, for the first time feeling glad of his brother's presence. His sister had likely deliberately sent Orion here to rattle him, make him emotional... make him do something impulsive. "Tell me, do you know where Argrave is heading?"

Orion answered proudly, "After I head to Dirracha, I intend to petition my father for legitimization. Regardless of the result, we planned on meeting him at Kin's End. He has asked I deliver some armor and weaponry to his companions—I intend on outfitting them with equipment from the royal armory."

Induen pursed his lips at the mention of legitimization. "Petition father, hmm? Well, ending the plague is a meritorious achievement, well worthy of something like that."

"I am pleased you agree," Orion concurred happily. "He is a changed man. A B-rank mage, seeking to become a High Wizard of the order... him and his fiancée. A lovely woman, his companion. Incredibly smart, resourceful. True love blossoms between them."

Induen raised his brows, and then stepped up to Orion. He prodded his chest twice. "I'll tell you what. Father has been quite upset at your absence, you know—I suspect he will not be so pleased if you come back to the capital and then leave so quickly." Induen stepped away, retrieving a document. "I will give my magic signature to a document advising Argrave be legitimized. While you persuade father, comfort him with your presence... I will deliver the royal armory's equipment to Argrave."

Orion frowned. "Yet I promised I would meet Argrave there."

"You can," Induen held his finger out. "But I'd like to meet him first, let me tell him how proud I am. I think it would be best you spend a fair amount of time at Dirracha with father. Even if he doesn't say so, he sorely misses you."

"Certainly, if it's only a few days, I am sure Argrave would not mind if our meeting is delayed... doubly so if you explain things..." Orion took a deep breath.

"Oh—and tell no one. Absolutely no one," Induen coaxed quietly. "I wish to surprise our dear brother. A surprising reunion is all the more joyful, no? Like this reunion. Surprising, joyful, and very, very enlightening... about the true nature of my family members."

Orion looked pleased. "That sounds like a wonderful plan, Induen."

"Come here," Induen said, initiating a hug for the first time he could recall. As his head rested beside Orion's, he smiled.

He thought back to Mina's words.

A well-maintained tool performs a task all the better.