

Jackal 33

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Chapter 33: Stowaway Jackal

Argrave sat up, breath rapid and face drenched in sweat. His body was rocking. He looked around, seeing an unending tide of blue. Feeling a rising blackness in his stomach, he turned over, grabbing the side of something wooden and vomiting into the water. The putrid substance slowly faded away, falling into the ocean and drifting behind them.

He took a second to catch his breath, clearing his nose and spitting out what little remained of the vomit. His whole body was aflame with pain. As his senses came to, he heard a rhythmic chant, and saw oars moving back and forth, cutting through the water. He turned his head, finally making sense of his surroundings. His body rocked back and forth with the tides.

He was on a longship. Though he looked around, trying to spot the coast, they were far out into sea. He turned his gaze back to the ship. The Veidimen rowing the boat looked at him and spoke of him, muttering about 'the Hand Reaching from the Abyss.' It seems the lie of him being an agent of Erlebnis had spread.

Anneliese sat adjacent from him, staring with a book in her free hand. Her amber eyes were passive.

"We're taking you to Veiden, as was agreed. Fortunately, though you burned one ship and I crashed the other, one was left in sailing condition," Anneliese said in greeting. "You passed out. You should eat food, drink fluids."

Argrave touched his head. A fierce headache disturbed his thoughts. The memories of the battle soon replaced those uncomfortable images born of his dreams, and he looked around for Galamon.

"Where... how is Galamon?" Argrave asked.

"He dispatched those metal things admirably. His actions spared us much carnage. After, he said he would wait for your return to right his wrongs. His life would be forfeit in Veiden as an exile and a vampire."

Argrave nodded. He felt very shaken. He had mustered a courage he did not know he had during the battle, but whatever was propping up his mentality now was gone. War was cruel. It was a great song to all the misery in the world.

Anneliese walked to him, thrusting a piece of bread and a canteen of water in his face. "Here," she said.

Argrave looked up at her. He took the items. "I forgot. You have a big heart."

He chewed on the bread slowly, taking small sips of water. Content that he was eating, Anneliese walked away. With his free hand, Argrave cleaned the dirt off his body, conjuring his barely replenished magic to remove blood, mud, and other such filth. It felt like he was shedding his sins, somewhat.

After he had finished the bread, Anneliese handed him other things—mostly vegetables, but it was food. It had probably been taken from Barden in haste as they left. There were a lot fewer on the boat than he recalled being at Barden, and the thought that some deaths could have been avoided had he remained

conscious disquieted him. Argrave ate his food slowly, working on suppressing his meandering thoughts and emotions.

Anneliese read quietly despite the rocking of the ship. One hand tended to her long white hair, twisting it about in her fingers. She was braiding a section of it with one hand alone, fingers moving skillfully. She had already done near a foot, and considering it went down to her knees when she was standing, it would be a long process.

She stopped. Argrave looked up at her face to see she'd taken notice of him watching.

"What? Got stage fright?" Argrave asked, sitting a little straighter. "Keep going. It was entertaining."

She unwound the braid, and her hand dropped down to her knee. "Galamon bit you," she said matter-of-factly.

"He was hurt. It was necessary," Argrave responded after a brief pause.

"You are not worried about contracting vampirism?" she tilted her head.

"He would need to drain me completely, and then I'd need to drink his blood. Or ingest it some or other way. Eugh," Argrave shuddered thinking of it. "Contrary to popular belief, it isn't like a disease. It's more so a ritual. It's hard to be turned by accident. That's why Galamon's case is curious."

"You don't hate him, despite what happened?" Her amber eyes stayed locked on his face.

"Hate him?" Argrave repeated. "It was a donation."

"That's a lie. He was much too shaken, much too guilty, for that. Your body was bruised from being grabbed. You also fell unconscious."

Argrave furrowed his brows, but a smile came to his face. "You keep seeing through me, I'm going to start losing confidence in my grifting abilities. They've carried me a long way." Argrave sat up a little straighter as his feelings of weakness faded somewhat. His arms felt like pudding and his head still throbbed fiercely.

"Fine, so it wasn't exactly philanthropy for the thirsty, I'll admit that much. But..." Argrave pointed at Anneliese to emphasize his words. "I don't hate him. Hate, at least in terms of hating people, stems from a lack of understanding; an inability to view the other person's perspective. Ultimately, hating another merely weighs on yourself. It's a waste of brain power. Though... being pragmatic and being naïve are separate things entirely. Some people will always hate you, and it's best to learn to accept and adapt to that."

Argrave lowered his finger. "Recognizing that and following it are entirely different matters, though. Everyone inevitably succumbs to their emotions now and again."

Anneliese lowered her head, mulling over his words in silence. The waves of the ocean battered against the longship, and Argrave turned his head out to look out across the ocean. He considered falling in for a moment and his mind wandered. The ocean was a terrifying thing looking at it from above, but once inside, it offered an unparalleled freedom. Swimming in all directions—up, down, left, right—it must be mundane for a fish, but for a landlubber as he was, it sounded enticing. Amphibians got the best of both worlds.

"I think you're right."

Argrave turned his head back to Anneliese. She was smiling faintly. It was the first time Argrave had seen her smile, and he could not help but return it. They stared at each other for a long moment, but Argrave eventually turned away, blinking quickly.

"How do you intend to persuade the Patriarch?" Anneliese inquired, shutting her book and devoting her attention to conversation.

"With words, obviously," Argrave said drolly. "Well... let's see. You'll probably introduce me as the agent of Erlebnis and the killer of those druid scouts in order to get an audience with Dras to begin with. From there, I'll demonstrate the breadth of my knowledge. I remember a prophecy I can use, some vague... in fact, maybe you can help make sure I've got it right."

Argrave scratched his chin and then pointed, remembering something. "Oh, and if that curmudgeonly bastard Rowe the Righteous is there, he would be a great help in proving this matter. He's a very unreasonable person, but he's not inflexible. If I give him the signs, he'll accept the truth." Argrave nodded as his plan came together in his head.

Anneliese leaned back a little, evidently taken aback about what he disclosed. "How much do you know about the Patriarchate of Veiden?"

Argrave beamed. "I know most things in heaven and Earth, Horatio." His words fell flat, Anneliese watching him blankly. "Though I can't say I know every detail about every person, I know more about many important figures than even your patriarch."

She crossed her arms, then spent some time deliberating on whether or not to say something. "Knowing so much would probably make most people uncomfortable. Does that bother you?"

"You tell me, miss empath." Argrave put his elbows on his knees and crossed his arms. "You can read people very well. You can spot the emotions that most people try to hide. You see through my lies like they're glass, even when I weave silver with my tongue. I have little doubt that makes many people uncomfortable. Does that bother you?" he returned her words.

Anneliese's amber eyes shook for a moment. She took a deep breath and composed herself quickly. After some time, she asked, "Why are you telling me these things? Your knowledge of Veiden, your plans..."

Argrave was taken aback by the question. Why *was* he telling her this? 'Because she asked' would be the obvious answer, but then the further question would be why her, specifically. Was it merely because she was someone who would be prominent in the future? Argrave wasn't certain.

"Perhaps..." Argrave mused. "Perhaps it's merely therapeutic to finally share a little bit of what's going on inside my head. Who better to be honest with than someone who can see past this façade I try and put on?"

She nodded, her composure returned. The waves beat against the side of the longship as a silence stretched out.

“You said my empathy would make many people uncomfortable.” She let the words hang, and Argrave nodded. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Argrave chuckled, and then leaned back against the ship. “It might make me surprised, throw a wrench into the conversation that forces some semblance of honesty from me. Might make me mind my words a little bit. But uncomfortable? Not at all.”

Though Argrave had hoped for another smile, Anneliese contemplated his words in silence. He shuddered as he felt a cool wind travel along his hair.

“It’s pretty cold out here,” Argrave commented, rubbing his hands together. “Maybe it’s because I don’t have much blood. Or body fat. Or musculature.”

“Though that can’t help, the real reason is that we’re getting closer to Veiden.” Anneliese turned her head towards the bow of the ship. She pointed towards the horizon. “There. You can see the coast, even.”

Argrave looked out, following her finger. The steady movement of the Veidimen rowing the oars threatened to pull away his attention, but he still looked.

“I see... a lot of blue. Mostly water, some of it sky. There’s white there, too. Ocean foam. No coast, though.” Argrave blew on his hands to ward off the cold.

“You have never sailed to Veiden. We recognize the coast immediately. Some of that white you see is likely ice.”

“I see. Icy.” Argrave pursed his lips, wondering how to phrase his question. “You wouldn’t happen to have any spare clothes, perhaps? Fur coats for the bloodless?”

Anneliese stood up, walking to the mast. “No. You will need to wait until we are back in the patriarchate proper.”

Argrave let out a long sigh interspersed with shivers. He held his hands beneath his armpits. Slowly, he began to make out the coastline that Anneliese had spotted. It came into view—long, broken fragments of ice drifting out in the ocean, and behind it, a coast.

The navigator on the bow of the ship gave commands to the oar men, and the ship expertly avoided the fragments of ice while travelling along the coast. In the distance, Argrave spotted a great spire of gray stone with a roaring black flame atop it. As Argrave remembered, it was this color to be visible in snowstorms. At night, it would become white. So was written in books, at least.

“The Torch of Veid,” Argrave muttered.

The longship came around a bend, and a great harbor came into view. There were innumerable longships lined up. Argrave tried to count them and estimated them to be near three hundred. Many sailors tended to the ships, swarming around the docks.

As they pulled closer to the landing, Argrave felt some swirling nervousness. He didn’t have much reason to lack confidence in his plan, but that did not change the fact that he would be the sole human here, and he would need to go before the leader of this vast fleet and try to tell him to call off the invasion.

“Whew,” Argrave sighed, placing a hand on his chest. “Let’s not fumble at the goal line.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 34: Damned, Their Fate

Argrave walked out onto the docks with Anneliese supporting him. She was around half a foot shorter than Argrave and the perfect height to support beneath his shoulder. Though he disliked touching others, of everyone, he was the most comfortable with Anneliese as she had the decency to clean herself of blood. Even still, she smelled of sea salt, sweat, dirt, and blood, so it was a very unpleasant experience. He supposed it would be strange to expect her to smell like flowers, though.

Argrave took in his surroundings. The wooden buildings along the coastline were wide and spacious, with great doorways and tall ceilings to accommodate the snow elves’ larger frame. The architecture was plain and effective, yet it still had decorations. Trophies hung above doorways of homes—skulls of animals, tusks, and other vainglorious displays that showed to demonstrate what the house’s family was capable of hunting. The windows were covered with fur blankets to block the snow and cold air. Fangs, claws, and tusks hung from the overhangs by twine, bumping against each other like grim windchimes.

With his focus back on the docks, Argrave noticed that nearly all of the sailors had stopped what they were doing. They stood a fair distance away from Argrave, watching him move. They spoke amongst themselves. Perplexed, Argrave looked in the distance. He saw a great group of people crowded together, watching the docks, and behind them, atop a great wooden building...

He frowned. “Is that a dragon?”

Though Argrave asked, he was certain it was. It was a great snow-white creature with a vast wingspan and four legs. It crouched at the back of the host awaiting him, its deep blue eyes staring ahead like two sparkling sapphires. Unlike Berendar, where some nobles and other important people had wyverns purchased from the desert tribes to the south, this was a bona fide dragon. Argrave had killed it many times before in game. Indeed, Veiden had a dragon.

“I sent word ahead by bird so that the Patriarch would not be surprised by your coming,” Anneliese explained. “I know druidic magic too, after all.”

“Did you tell them I’m Erlebnis himself?” Argrave asked incredulously. “This welcome is a bit much...”

Anneliese did not say anything further as she escorted him onto the docks. The mass amount of people waiting ahead was soon shadowed by the Veidimen on the longship following them behind. If the cold in the air didn't pierce bone deep, Argrave might’ve felt the situation heating up.

Despite the great mass of people, the awkward shamble of Anneliese and Argrave echoed loudly in the prolonged silence. Argrave started to recognize people as he came closer. Though he had never been to Veiden before, many of the Veidimen came to Berendar. If the player chose to confront them militarily rather than diplomatically, one would have to go up against some of the game’s hardest fights.

Argrave had done that many times before, of course, if only for fun. He most often fought them while playing as Nikoletta. The Veidimen had killed her father. It made sense role-play wise.

They stepped off the docks into the large ceiling where the great bulk of prominent snow elves had gathered. Argrave took his arm off Anneliese and stood, back straight. The Veidimen that had come with

them walked around them, fading into the crowd. As Argrave scanned the crowd, seeing many faces he recognized, the people whispered among themselves. None addressed him, though. Argrave could vaguely see the Patriarch Dras sitting on a chair, flanked by many guards. Two men held the banner of Veiden behind him—a black wheel on a field of red.

Argrave took a few slow steps forward, his legs feeling weak and shaky. Despite his tremors, he didn't feel nervous at all as he spread his arms wide. "It seems I'm expected." He spoke towards the Patriarch.

Silence followed. From behind the crowd, Argrave could hear and see the breathing of the gigantic ice dragon, peering down at the scene like a great arbiter of his fate as icy air billowed from its nose.

An old elf pushed through the crowd, shoving people aside with his walking stick. He had long, sagging skin and a bald head marred with liver spots. He walked forward, disturbing the uniformity of the crowd, before he stood between Argrave and the Patriarch.

"Show respect for the Patriarch, human."

The Patriarch watched, casually leaning against his armrest, waiting for how Argrave would respond to Rowe.

Argrave smiled. "Hello, Rowe. Long time no see," he said with a grim undertone.

This bastard's already in front of me. How many times have I fought this guy? Fifty? Near a hundred, surely. I could probably recite every spell he knows. Annoying fight.

The old elf laughed, his lips curled in a snarl. "So, it knows my name. I was not aware the humans already knew of me."

"No one human on Berendar knows of you. I do, though. I know you, I know your dragon, Crystal Wind." Argrave pointed to the towering reptile. His finger moved onwards, pointing out people in the crowd. "I know the chief of Ryblud. I know the chief of Wryden. The chief of Balta, Lilan, Poroe, Durandae, Tithucal... a lot of the high-ranking members of the Patriarchate are here. It's humbling. I've never been welcomed as an agent of Erlebnis before."

"And you still haven't," Rowe stepped forward. The Patriarch craned his neck to better look at Argrave, watching like it was a play rather than an audience. "A little coaching from that girl born outside of Veiden does not mark you as an agent of the god of knowledge."

"Anneliese? She told me nothing." Argrave shook his head. "What more do you want as proof, hmm? I could tell you of how I knew of Galamon, the exiled general and right-hand man of Dras. I could show you that I knew of your scouting party and Tirros the Tempestuous. I might speak of the hidden tomb guardians I lured to get a parley with the attackers on Barden. I could share any number of truths."

"Delusions pass as truth, so long as the target believes in them."

Argrave laughed. "Fine, then. Let us speak of you. I know of the sword you keep hidden in that walking stick of yours," Argrave commented, kicking it with his foot. The old elf took a step back, bushy brows forming a deep frown. "You call that dragon a sacred guardian of the Veidimen to boost morale, but it's really just bonded to you with S-rank druidic magic."

That sent mutters through the crowd, and Rowe's expression turned to one of wrath. The snow elf stepped forward, but Argrave did not let him speak.

"I've been through a lot to come here. I learned about the fate of this world not two or three months ago, and since then, I've been dragging myself through hell and back to do my duty," Argrave spoke, voice laced with conviction as he freed the indignance that had been brewing within him. "Your foolish invasion might well be the largest contributor to this world's end, and so I came here personally to show you why you did wrong. Let me put it plainly, Rowe."

Argrave took a step forward. "Get out of my way or get under my boot."

The dragon growled, and its great serpentine tail rose into the air and crashed against the earth. A great burst of snow flew into the air, and Argrave felt the ground rumble beneath him. The beast was mirroring its master's anger. Rowe was the personification of pride, zeal, and righteousness. Argrave could not reason with him; he could only suppress him.

Of course, it took all Argrave's willpower to do this. He felt like a child scolding an adult that held a gun. Rowe could kill him without much thought.

"Rowe," a voice cut across the din. "Stand down."

Rowe twisted his head back, wide eyes confronting the Patriarch. "What?!" the aged elf spat. "The boy shows a fundamental lack of respect!"

"Just as Veid stands behind the Veidimen, Erlebnis stands behind that one. I think he has that right. Step aside."

Rowe trembled, but then eventually broke away, walking back into the crowd and disappearing.

Patriarch Dras sat on a throne atop a palisade. He wore snow-white armor, white fur on the shoulders and joints. His crown was absent, revealing his badly scarred bald head, but he had a matching helmet hanging from the back of the chair with a great mane of white fur standing up from the back. It looked ceremonial. It probably was. Patriarch Dras was an administrator and strategist, not a fighter. Galamon had always been his fist.

The Patriarch sat with one leg crossed over the other, lazily lounging against the armrest of his throne. "For someone who was practically carried here, you speak very big words." A faint grin marked the elf's face.

"You should know a lot about that, Patriarch Dras," Argrave returned.

The Patriarch uncrossed his legs and slouched to the opposite side of the throne. "This meeting has been a long time coming, you've said. Here we are—the precipice of your task. Tell me then; why exactly is this invasion, the purpose of my existence, the largest contributor to the world's end?" Dras' words betrayed a fierce anger.

Argrave wondered why Anneliese had not included his purpose in her report, but he did not turn his head back to look at her. He mulled on the words for a time, ensuring he remembered them properly. Though Rowe had to be suppressed, Dras was a fiercely intelligent man, and underneath his layers of

casual dismissiveness, he was someone who fiercely loved his people and his Goddess. Fortunately, Anneliese had helped him remember a certain prophecy word-for-word.

Argrave took a deep breath. The words he'd prepared were how Dras was convinced in the game, but it felt extremely nerve-wracking to do it in person.

"...and there he came, the foul breath of oblivion, leaving even gods dying beneath his feet. The black-blood, the outcast, the ghost-maker and ghost-breaker. He is hunger, he is thirst; where he bites rots 'til it dies. The yellow eyes across his body glisten like oil beads, and the cries of the damned vanish into maleficent darkness in the winds of its steps," Argrave recited dramatically. "When the moon blots out the suns, the Tenebrous Reaper rises; He Who Would Judge the Gods. Heed this warning, my descendants, and prepare for his coming."

Patriarch Dras slowly sat up in his throne. He leaned forward, staring at Argrave.

"Heed this warning, your ancestors said," Argrave repeated. "And have you? No. Evidently, no. You say this is the precipice of my task? Don't flatter yourself. Gerechtigkeits is coming. You are but one pustule on this diseased world that I must fix before everything is lost."

For the first time, the crowd broke out in chaos. The Patriarch stared ahead at Argrave as the people discussed what had been said amongst themselves. Argrave scratched at his throat.

"Quiet!" a voice yelled out, and the dragon's tail struck the ground again. Rowe waded back through the crowds.

"The Tenebrous Reaper?" he questioned, coming close to Argrave. "You are sure of this?"

"Yes," Argrave said with conviction. "Chart the path of the moon. Go to your holy sites, reach out to Veid. Divine with animal guts. Consult Erlebnis himself, if you can pay his price. The answer will all come out the same. In the coming years, Gerechtigkeits will begin to partially manifest in places. Do you think it's a coincidence a civil war broke out on the eve of your invasion? His dark tendrils are already deeply rooted in Berendar, and in Veiden."

Rowe did not know how to answer that. His head turned about and about, and his breathing grew more and more frantic. "I must..." he began but didn't finish the sentence. Rowe turned and ran away.

The Patriarch seemed to have gathered himself, and the crowd quieted after Crystal Wind's tail thump earlier. Dras stared at Argrave.

"This matter... you are Erlebnis' answer to it? You alone, against the tide?"

Argrave tilted his head. "I don't know. I think I am. I hope I'm not." Argrave rubbed the bronze hand mirror in his breast pocket, then lifted his head up. "Regardless, I will not stop until I am dead. Such is my duty."

The Patriarch fell back into his chair, letting out a huff of air. "I must... summon everyone. We will speak on what you discussed. This invasion was started by council; if it is to end, it must also be by council."

"Fine. I've done my job. The time has come to do yours. This invasion, your life's purpose, won't have much meaning if there is no world left."

Patriarch Dras visibly shook. He stood from his throne and stepped off the palanquin. "Anneliese. You brought this one here. Take him to the local chief's hall, and ensure he is safe while he is here."

Argrave felt all the energy he'd mustered drain, and he veritably fell on top of Anneliese when she walked up to him.

"You spoke well," she said. "They must listen."

"I want to be suffocated in blankets. I hate the cold. Please take me inside," Argrave said quietly.

Anneliese's face warped, and then she laughed lightly.