

## Jackal 371

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 371: Blood Test

Argrave rode back on the ivory whale for the island where the rest of his companions resided. He was ferrying back and forth often enough it felt like a waste of time, somewhat... but then, this would be the last time they'd step on its back, he supposed.

"Argrave... I want you to know that whatever happens in this place, this damnable forest... I'll always be your woman," Nikoletta said as they neared the island.

Argrave narrowed his eyes and turned his head slowly. "I thought we had this talk."

"No, not 'your woman' like..." she sighed and rubbed her face. "I want to be of use to you, to the crown. I live to serve."

"Commendable," Orion praised.

The whale set upon the shore, and once they crossed back to the island Argrave grabbed Nikoletta's shoulder and walked to the door that led to the exit of this realm. "If that's true..."

Nikoletta, led by Argrave, did not have time to be surprised as they passed through the door's threshold. In a very smooth fashion, they were once again back at the underground altar, their feet sinking deep into messy blood.

"I can think of something for you to do very soon," he finished telling her.

She looked greatly off balance by the sudden shift of scenery and the abrupt request, yet the words still made some eagerness light up on her face. Before she could voice a response, the others that had been waiting back on the mortal realm stirred in surprise.

"Nicky!" Mina said, rushing over to her.

Artur greeted, "You made it. Had a little doubt, I'll admit. I guess I need to learn to squash that."

"Hello, Artur. You're missing a nice tropical vacation," he greeted the Magister as the two girls reunited.

"Am I now?" he tilted his head, eyes gleaming. "So... did you succeed?"

In response, Argrave projected the hands of one of his blood echoes out, and Artur cocked his head back in surprise.

"It's... filled to the brim with magic," he said in wonder. "You seem... your movements are strange, almost floaty. And you seem... fuller."

"Yep," Argrave nodded. "But we can talk later. Things are still in motion. Nicky—let's talk."

Nikoletta glanced at him, then walked closer as Argrave finished casting a ward. "What do you need me to do?" she questioned while watching Mina who stared into the ward in suspicious annoyance like a cat might watch fish inside a fishtank.

"If I'm right, Chiteng is going to bring all of us to a certain place where he and his family gather. There, my tongue is going to be flapping enough to put a hummingbird to shame." Argrave pointed at her face. "I need you to steal something for me while that's happening."

Nikoletta's pink eyes went blank, and she blinked a few times in quiet ponderance. "That's why you stepped outside. Aren't we... I mean, you intend to make an alliance. Do you often steal from allies?"

Argrave thought about Margrave Reinhardt. "Well... it's not *stealing*, exactly... it won't be missed..." He sighed. "Look, I know that the prospect is intimidating," Argrave said slowly. "But I'm going to be attracting all of their attention, and this place lacks the omniscience that these gods have in their respective territories. I can understand why you might be intimidated after seeing that giant on his throne, seeing the teleportation, hearing the eerie damned whales, and—"

"I'll do it," Nikoletta nodded. "I trust you wouldn't do something to get me killed."

Argrave looked surprised. "Are you sure? I mean, if you feel it's unsafe, Orion can take—"

"I will do it," she repeated. "What did I say? I'm your woman."

Argrave frowned. "Well, I wish you'd stop saying it."

"Come on," she raised her hands up. "How many times have you heard someone say, 'I'm your man'? Don't make it weird."

Argrave laughed. "Yeah, fine." He spared a glance to Mina, who still peered into the ward ominously. "Let me take some time to tell you what you're stealing. I'll be talking quickly, but stop me if you have questions. I want to get back inside... and test things out," Argrave held his hand up, willing one of the many blood echoes blooming inside his body move past his skin. "Remember not to breathe a word of what I'm about to say inside that realm. Betray nothing."

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Argrave held his arm up in the air. Alongside him, three echoes of identical stature raised theirs up with his. He cast a spell, held it... and then released. In tandem, the blood echoes cast the same spell. Four spiral bolts of blood magic rocketed outwards, tearing through the trees on the small island. It carried on for dozens of yards, and trees fell down one after the other.

"You won't... get in trouble?" Mina asked cautiously.

Argrave looked down at her. She'd come to this side, too, after hearing what Nikoletta was asked to do. Only Artur remained behind, unwilling to pass through the door of the elven god's making. He supposed he couldn't fault him for that. Besides, it made Argrave comfortable having someone on the other side. Artur had proven himself reliable. Besides... who would even come down into that altar?

"I don't think so," Argrave shook his head. "Elsewise, it would have happened a long while ago."

Still, her cautious words did make Argrave change his method a bit for the next task. He projected out the blood echo over the roiling red ocean, where Chiteng's figure still sat with eyes closed. He made the echo cast [Bloodfeud Bow] while he himself did not. These echoes were easier to use when they were mimicking something that he did—if he cast a spell, it was easier to make them cast a spell. To make them act independently, however, was a trying thing. He pointed its arrow up to the sky.

As the arrow of the bow grew larger and larger, consuming the blood echo, Mina noted of Chiteng, “He’s just sitting there... watching.”

“And listening. So keep your lips sealed,” Argrave told her, and she flashed him an annoyed look before turning back to watch Chiteng, immobile yet with eyes open. Argrave felt the god was like a tired adult watching his child in the playground.

Chiteng and Argrave waited for the elven gods to rouse. Argrave had jumpstarted him with an offering of divinity, but the other members of his family were different. It would take some time to wake them up. Not too long, but enough they needed to wait. Argrave was extremely glad to have the opportunity to generate blood echoes. He kept that to himself, though, as all his companions hated this place.

As Argrave watched, the blood echo grew from solid to transparent in a matter of perhaps half a minute. When it finally vanished into nothingness, the arrow of [Bloodfeud Bow] released. It soared up into the sky like a rocket, and Argrave smiled as the gale it generated whipped against his cheeks.

*Not nearly as strong as the one I used at Margrave Ivan’s tower... and maybe a little weaker than the one I used on the Shadowlander. Still, that’s easily as powerful as an S-rank spell.*

Every ounce of that agony felt worth it just to see that. Argrave thought that coming to this realm would be a boon, but he severely underestimated *just* how important it was. If he hadn’t come here, practicing using these blood echoes would be impossible. They built up over time—very slowly, unless stimulated. If he’d gone into battle without proper practice, he’d have no idea how to make use of them efficiently. And now when he left this area, he’d have both experience and numbers. That was invaluable.

Vasilisa, Ganbaatar, and Orion watched Argrave like he was putting on a show. Vasilisa looked greatly uneasy by his displays of power. She had seen [Bloodfeud Bow] firsthand and knew well its power. Ganbaatar and Orion didn’t understand the magnitude, but they looked at Argrave differently nonetheless.

It was extremely powerful. Argrave was proud of that fact. But things were scaling up very quickly... and when thinking of what he’d fight in the next weeks alone, that power seemed like the bare minimum he needed. Even with these echoes on hand, there was no way in hell he could defeat even one Shadowlander unless he ambushed it or got lucky. He simply didn’t have the skill or finesse necessary to combat something so fast, durable, and powerful. It’d toss a rock or something at the speed of sound, and his head would turn into a fine red mist before he could react. He was a glass cannon even with warding magic or fancy armor included.

Reminding himself that the Shadowlander had been an endgame threat, Argrave refocused. He next tried casting normal spells—elemental spells. Fire, lightning, ice—it worked, all. It depleted the blackness of his blood, however, and once that was gone the spells failed to cast. Once the echoes were depleted of magic, he could only cast blood magic. And if they were depleted, they drew from his personal pool of magic to cast the actual spell. These spells were weakened.

It was a very intricate way of fighting, and Argrave questioned if he had the mental capacity to do all of this in battle. He supposed that all things would come with time.

As he looked at his Brumesingers sleeping on the rocks, an idea came to him. Using his blood echo, he conjured a C-rank weapon of blood magic, the common spell [Putrid Paramerion]. The curved blade

manifested in the blood echo's hand, and Argrave made it swing its arm... but the blade passed through, dropping onto the sandy shore harmlessly.

Argrave sighed and stared at the persisting blade in disappointment. The blood echoes were intangible—they could interact with nothing physical, conjured blood weaponry included. Then, he frowned.

"Orion... pick that up, will you?" he asked eagerly.

The prince came to attention then rose to his feet. He stepped to the blade cautiously, eyeing Argrave's floating echo, then bent down and grabbed it by the handle. He straightened his back and looked at Argrave.

"And now, Your Majesty?" Orion brandished the blade.

Argrave smiled broadly. "I'm feeling rather glad I didn't ask Elenore to make enchanted weaponry for the Veidimen. Would've been... redundant, maybe."

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Argrave tested things with his blood echoes until he was blue in the face—whether that was from exertion or blood loss, he wasn't certain. If only the mortal realm could be as forgiving as these realms of the elven gods... but alas, it couldn't be so.

There was one thing he couldn't test, and that was whether or not these echoes could cast spells higher than B-rank. What he had was already fantastic—it decreased his reliance on Erlebnis' blessing to a tremendous degree, which was something that had been weighing at him especially hard since their last interaction and doubly so since Chiteng thought him a puppet for the god of knowledge.

He was so immersed in his testing he failed to notice one of the ivory whales set its broad head up against the shore, one of the red-robed servants of the elven god of flesh and blood on its back.

"The lord believes it prudent to head to the mainland, that we might arrive just as the others do," the statuesque woman told them.

"Is there no safer ride?" Mina questioned nervously.

"Don't answer that," Argrave told Chiteng's servant, then moved towards the whale. Orion, Nikoletta, and Ganbaatar were quick followers. Mina looked trepidatious, but still swallowed her fear and stepped aboard. She clung to Nikoletta sheepishly and redoubled that reliance when the whale sailed away.

"...I may say that the lord's family reacted rather... poorly, to your suggestion," the servant disclosed. "The lord thought you should know."

*Good*, Argrave thought.

"Unfortunate," Argrave said.

He had to get them on his side. He needed both their might and the might of the elves that would heed their word. Failure was no option. and if they were unconvinced, all that meant was that there was more time for the duo of Mina and Nikoletta to carry out their mission impossible. Long-term, what they were

going to get might be more important than Argrave's A-rank ascension... not for him, but rather for the entire kingdom.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 372: Truth to Omnipower**

They walked through the verdant palace that marked the elven gods' meeting area, following just behind the red-robed woman. This place was clearly a collaborative effort—the stones were beige and pleasant, the place was overgrown with greenery likely furnished by the god of agriculture, and it was all kept temperate by the pyres of the elven god of flames and war. Servants of Chiteng's make wandered, tending to various things as they kept this place pristine. Elaborate fountains and streams of water fed the whole of this place, giving ambience and life to the tiered palace gardens.

Towering over all, the same great redwoods of the forest on Berendar shrouded this place in a dim yet pleasant canopy. Argrave felt like he strode through the Hanging Gardens of Babylon reborn in the heartlands of Californian redwoods. Though he followed after Chiteng's servant, his eyes wandered whenever he caught flashes of purple before adjusting back quickly so as not to draw attention toward what needed to be stolen.

Perhaps 'stolen' was the wrong word, Argrave reasoned. If one is led through an orchard and plucks some fruit from the tree, is that stealing? How about thirty fruits? As it so happened, thirty was the number he'd asked Nikoletta to get—an arbitrary yet satisfactory figure. Argrave needed the purple berries growing in the gardens of his would-be allies. And the beautiful part of the thing was that he was near certain they wouldn't be missed.

With Chiteng's servants wandering, it'd be difficult. He trusted Nikoletta's resourcefulness, doubly so when supported by Mina. They hadn't been explicitly told they couldn't pick berries, but they hadn't been invited to partake, either. Argrave hoped he never had cause to try that excuse in the event she was caught. Regardless, they were too important to simply pass by. If he asked to take some, these stingy elven gods and goddesses might say no. Refusal wasn't an option. Those humble purple berries slightly resembling strawberries were the key to supplying food for all of Blackgard, and perhaps all of Vasquer.

*How did the saying go? Argrave thought as he followed the elven recreation. Ask for forgiveness, not for permission.*

They came to the center of the elaborate tiered gardens where a giant metal portcullis rested above them, raised for passage. The servant stopped, turning on her heel. Beyond, what appeared to be a colosseum waited with a distant circle of chairs and people.

"My lord advises you enter alone. Not all welcome humankind, and numbers might draw ire," she said with a plastic politeness betraying that she was not mortal.

Argrave nodded. "Humankind, is it? Then... Ganbaatar?" He reasoned that the divinity might be positively predisposed if he entered with one of their children—a nice token companion to prove he didn't hate elves.

She turned her gaze towards the elven warrior who looked surprised to be asked to come along. "The lord did not..." she closed her eyes. "I've conveyed all the lord has. Unfortunately, He waits within. I

cannot ask more of Him. Another thing He intended to disclose... though the gods within will not know of the seed of Erlebnis vested in your being, He suggests it is in your best interest to introduce this fact subtly. Do not draw any attention to it, but do not exclude it."

Argrave was mighty pleased to hear that both Chiteng could not be reached, and that Erlebnis' Blessing of Supersession would remain undetected—that meant just as it had been in Heroes of Berendar, this place was free of an active effect called [Omniscience] common in most gods' realms. That effect prevented all stealth—anywhere one was, one could be found. Sensible people might hazard a guess as to why that would make stealing something difficult.

"Let's go, then," Argrave patted Ganbaatar's shoulder and moved past the raised portcullis. He looked back. "Don't get eaten by the plants, you three," he told Orion, Nikoletta, and Mina, though the message was truly meant for two. Orion waved as they walked away but didn't look happy about being left behind.

He was half-expecting the gate to fall down and some sort of battle to erupt, but nothing of the sort happened. No, they merely walked across the beige stone in even strides, heading for a meeting with the gods every bit as casually as one might a meeting with friends.

Argrave saw Chiteng standing there beside a chair, his arms behind his back and his red robe billowing in a slight breeze. This area was one of few where the sunlight poured past the giant redwood canopy unabated, and it illuminated a large disc in the center of the vast arena majestically. The light looked like beams of golden dew. Other elven figures stood beyond. Argrave counted them... and fell a fair bit short of the figure he had been expecting.

He walked up to Chiteng. "Are we waiting on more?" he asked quietly.

"Some did not feel they should dignify this meeting with their presence," Chiteng explained. "My younger brother and sisters being the four absent."

"And I question if they were right," an elven goddess garbed in gold noted calmly. Though her hair was blonde like all other wood elves, her eyes were blue and vast—she was Dairi, goddess of water. "Not only do you bring a human into our hallowed ground, but you force indignity upon us by having us converse as mortals do?"

"We did not need to meet here, talk here. Times have changed, Chiteng. We cannot do as we used to. We did not need to leave our territory to converse," an old elven man with long, long blonde hair reaching well past his feet and draping across the floor noted, his whole hair shaking as his head shook. He was Merata, god of agriculture. "Your sister is right. Meeting here is undignified, unsafe."

Argrave had a response but thought to let Chiteng speak so as not to incense all parties present immediately.

Unexpectedly, Ganbaatar stepped forth, saying, "Dignity? Will dignity kill our enemies? Can you armor yourself in it? No. It's only something to make the dignified feel better about themselves. Not only do you abandon us, but now you deem it undignified to converse with us?"

Argrave started at the passion in the elf's voice. The rogue warrior was usually very low-key, speaking only when spoken to... and Argrave couldn't quite tell where this outburst had come from.

“Woodschild, we speak to the one beside you. You are here before your time, but we know you and think well of you,” a lithe, tall elven man spoke from a cross-legged position on the colosseum floor, a bow on his lap with a light flame burning on its string. He was Gunlik, god of flames and war. “The situation conspired against us.”

“Woodschild?” Ganbaatar repeated. “You affirm something I know—my prayers were not heard. I disavowed all of you, cast aside my worship. And now here I am, following alongside the best hope for my people I have found... and yet you speak of indignity.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes. Ganbaatar had cast aside his worship? He had not known of this.

Even Chiteng warned, “You overstep.”

“Overstep?” Ganbaatar said, voice cold and hard.

“Ganbaatar...” Argrave lightly touched his shoulder.

“If you should slay me, curse me to eternal pain... then so be it,” Ganbaatar shrugged off his touch and stepped forward. “But I will not stand by and listen to this talk of dignity. The tales of old spoke of how each of you fought among us, bleeding just as we did in defense of what was to become our home. And war does not come—it has already taken root. Your dignity will turn to ash when my people burn, as they are even now.”

*Good lord, if I'd known...* Argrave lamented, but barring physical restraint didn't see any way to shut Ganbaatar up. He grabbed the man's arm and squeezed firmly, but this man was a hardened fighter used to pain and Argrave barely got his attention.

“And why should we listen to a lone dissenter's reprimand?” Dairi patiently indulged even as the others around her had their faces turn black.

“Lone?” Ganbaatar repeated. “The Tumen I served in... it is the last army still following the old ways of worship. And even though it is the last, perhaps half of those within it pray genuinely. The other half care not barring the fact they do their duty to protect and feed our people.”

Truth is a bitter drug. The gods here didn't seem exempt from that fact.

“Time passes inexorably, and I shan't spend mine here, being chided by the ignorant,” Merata said, waving his hands so as to bunch his hair together that he might walk. “Even now, the mortals do not know what they want until they have it. We shall deliver salvation to them on our own terms, not at the urging of mortals. Come, Dairi, Gunlik—let us leave.”

Argrave stepped forward in panic and swallowed, then said the first thing that came to mind—well, the first polite thing.

“I know what everyone here wants,” he claimed. “And I can get it.”

Dairi walked with Merata without paying his words mind, but the god of war Gunlik planted his bow upon the ground and leaned on it curiously.

“And what do I want, hmm?” he asked off-handedly, almost a joke.

“You? You want to settle the score with Sarikiz. It kills you that you barely scraped by on the last cycle, and now the Bloodwoods are polluted by centaurs, giants, the Amarok, Mishis... so you want things to be different, this time. You want total domination of this land.”

Gunlik laughed, but his tone seemed fake. “The god of war desires domination. A revolutionary deduction.”

“Dairi wants her people to sail the seas,” Argrave gestured even as she walked away. “She grows green with envy whenever she sees a seafaring vessel while her people remain trapped on the land.”

The elven goddess did stop and look back... but not at Argrave, but at Chiteng. “You told a human of my dreams?” She shook her head in disappointment and walked off quicker.

Argrave sat there, thinking as quickly as he could. Fearing for Nikoletta, he called out, “God damn it all, you want to go back to the days of the old elves, where your empire spanned the whole of Berendar! And don’t deny it, damn you,” he cursed at them, leaving no holds barred.

Merata, the god of agriculture, paused and turned back, his long golden hair dragging along the floor as he stepped back towards them.

“You dare presume?” he demanded, voice cold wrath.

Argrave caught his breath, realizing he might’ve misspoken badly in urgency. Despite the fact he was taller than Merata in this form of his, he felt small as he said, “I regret the words I spoke, but not the message behind them. You’ve just heard one of your Woodschildren voice his thoughts, and they’re not pleasant.”

Merata glared with his red eyes, then looked at Chiteng. The god of flesh and blood defended mildly, “I told him nothing. Not of Dairi, Gunlik, or anyone.”

Merata looked back. “Explain your words,” he ordered. “And know I suffer not tricksters.”

Argrave looked around. *Well, he mused, heart beating quickly. They’re definitely listening to me now. And it might be I can turn Ganbaatar’s outburst into my advantage.*

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 373: Conspiracy Against the Divine**

Artur sat in the dank and smelly altar, where the iron and rot of the blood pooling on the floor pervaded every inch of this place. He had refused to follow Argrave into the other realm not once, but twice. He didn’t think the king judged him for that fact, but it still weighed as his mind. He could not quite say why he followed the man into the portal leading to the vast steppes yet not the elven realm... and he hoped that would not make the king hold a grudge.

But waiting here was dreadfully boring. He was glad to have the chance to recover his magic, at the very least.

As he started to drift off, a voice cracked into Artur’s hearing, rousing him immediately.

“Artur Nibwyrn,” the woman said, and he jerked his head upwards to attention.



A white-haired woman with amber eyes stood before him. Upon seeing elven ears he briefly thought the queen had returned to him here, but her voice sounded nothing like the calm and even Anneliese's. This woman... she was a monstrous spellcaster. People like Castro and Rowe were overwhelming, but Artur had never seen an earthly parallel to the sheer quantity of magic this woman exuded. Immediately, he came to attention, fruitless though it felt to try and defend against her weakened as he was.

"...who are you?" he demanded cautiously when she did nothing.

The woman held up a piece of paper and tossed it. It glided like a jellyfish through water, floating down towards Artur with eerie, unearthly grace. He was alarmed, but he did catch it. And when his fingers met the page, the woman burst into black mist, vanishing like she never was. Artur's breath quickened, and though he looked around in alarm saw no sign of her anywhere.

Artur eventually swallowed and looked down at what she had handed him. It was a decadent thing as far as paper goes—gold trim, a wax seal. But what made Artur's heart pound quicker was the fact that it was enchanted. This was no cheap enchanted scroll one might buy in a corner shop for a party trick. This was an elaborate enchantment, deep and rich enough Artur thought its like could only fit onto metal. It was far beyond what he was capable of.

The Magister looked around once again for the elven woman, but seeing he was alone opened the page. he read through it, and as he neared the end, his hands began to tremble. And when he read the last page and closed his eyes, the thing degraded before his very eyes. He didn't seem alarmed at this—rather, it seemed he expected that. Artur's eyes gleamed with a thousand colors, and he trembled in uncertainty.

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"I told you I could get you what you wanted, didn't I?" Argrave said even as Merata seemed liable to mince him. "I can't rebuild the elven empire of old. But I can give it a second chance in the new generation."

"Are you fearless or ignorant? I cannot tell," Gunlik joked from behind, leaning on his bow.

"Ganbaatar said it himself. He thinks I'm the greatest hope for the future of the elves," Argrave pointed to his still-angry companion with his thumb. "With Kirel Qircassia coming, and his coalition surely nipping at his heels... do you think the way to restoration for your people is to kowtow before overwhelming force? Even now, I have little doubt those you call Woodschildren fight against the servants freed from Kirel's realm. If one side is winning handily, why would there be a need to sue for peace? This is no equal struggle—this is his first wave of conquest."

Merata's red eyes narrowed. "A mortal younger than my shortest hair knows nothing of the judgment."

Argrave nodded. "I've never been through one. But I've spoken to others who've been through it, and they imparted vast amounts of knowledge unto me." He looked back to Ganbaatar. "The reason why your gods lost contact with those in the Bloodwoods is simple: their position here was weak. Their primary focus was surviving the cycle, and so communication and presence in the mortal realm suffered. In the last hundred years or so, it's degraded over the years into no presence at all."

Argrave felt something against his throat. When he turned his head in surprise, he saw Merata holding a crook, its hook already wrapped around his neck. "Knowledge of our situation should inspire caution, not boldness. You are weak. I could kill you with a twist of my wrist alone, and this is despite weakening myself greatly manifesting in this... limited body. Why do you claim to be a help? Why does a human of no grand capability claim to be the spark that would ignite the roaring flame of a dead empire?"

"It's very simple. I know the mortal realm better than most everyone in it, and I have the freedom to do as I like," Argrave said, making no effort to free his neck from its precarious position. "Whether Erlebnis, Fellhorn, or a Gilderwatcher ancestor of mine... I've soaked up knowledge from all like no other. I know enough of this realm alone that reciting it all would take days."

Merata narrowed his eyes yet kept the crook firm beside his neck. Dairi, goddess of water, walked up behind and listened closely with her arms crossed.

"The cycle of judgement is the only time everyone is truly mortal," Argrave carried on unflinchingly. "And though you are very far removed from those already living on the mortal realm... there, you're not all-knowing. But if you know your opponents, if you know the land, if you know weaknesses and strengths, strategies, quantities, qualities... even a small force can best an overwhelming one."

"Knowledge," Merata said lightly, half a question and half a deriding statement.

"Knowledge," Argrave nodded, chin bumping against the crook. "You've seen some of it. I travelled through the Mother's Steppe of the centaurs to reach your altars. There, I used souls to open the gates. And I offered a medallion stolen from Fellhorn to rouse Chiteng," Argrave looked back to the still-standing god of flesh and blood. "Do you think that was something I stumbled into by accident? Of course not. I knew how to come here. And I know much and more besides, I promise you. Enough to do exactly as I claim and more."

Merata twisted his wrist, and the crook came free of Argrave's neck. He hid it back inside his long flowing hair adroitly as though it never was.

"I keep my promises," Argrave continued, though inwardly his heart stopped pounding as his safety felt more certain. "I promised Ganbaatar something. I promised him a land where his people would be the only ones within... a land where the centaurs and all other foul beasts making the Bloodwoods named thusly are absent, without exception. The centaurs betrayed you nearly a millennia ago, as I remember. It might sting to think of cooperating with another race."

"Sting?" Gunlik repeated, and the fire on his bowstring burned brighter. "No, it itches. It's a rash that needs to be burned away, utterly. A shame that needs to die."

"...be that as it may," Argrave continued, "The four I sent to rouse the rest of you—you saw them, surely. Elves, one and all, though of a different descentance than your Woodschildren. One is my wife. I don't care about heritage, dignity, or pride. I'm just trying to ensure me and mine survive this cycle of judgement. And I hope I can count all of you in that number."

Words of survival and togetherness seemed to resonate with the gods... though whether it made them angry or contemplative, Argrave couldn't tell.

As the silence hung, Argrave suggested, "My first act would only benefit you. Freedom to act on the mortal realm before others is a boon not even Kirel Qircassia might expect, and I can offer it to you without expecting anything in return. When your divine forms alight upon soil beyond this realm... perhaps, then, you will believe my claims of knowledge."

"I will get the others in line," Merata said before Argrave even finished speaking.

He blinked for a few moments, confused. "You agree?"

"You claim to know so much, but you know not when words spoken inspire agreement?" Merata raised a brow.

"No, it's just... generally these things aren't decided on so quickly and unilaterally," Argrave defended.

"Because you deal with mortal minds," Merata nodded. "But joining the Qircassian Coalition is no option at all. My family are survivors. We intend to be more. We were like you, once. Leaders of many. Now... the cycles pass us by." He turned. "Who will all of you speak to?"

"The sisters," Dairi said, then walked away.

"I suppose I'll speak to father," Gunlik said, hefting his bow up.

"That leaves me with our brothers," Merata finished, turning back. "Chiteng shall give you an item of our favor."

Argrave blinked. He had intended to ask for that. "Yes, I—"

"Then go, return," Merata pointed with his crook. "If things are as you say, and you intend to grant us freedom to act on the mortal realm before the arbiter thins the barrier enough for us to pass... then go. Tell Chiteng your plan. He has introduced you—he can serve as intermediary. All of us are in agreement."

Argrave was pleased things were moving so quickly until he remembered that Nikoletta might need more time. Still, his breath caught in his mouth as the whole of them turned and left, leaving Argrave with Chiteng alone. He turned to look at Ganbaatar, hoping he had yet more to say. The abrupt shift surprised them both, it seemed.

"Go," Chiteng said, then walked away too.

"Hold on," Argrave stopped Chiteng. "With Erlebnis... should I...? I mean, you told me to be subtle, but was that really alright to leave it like that?"

"Do not mention it again," Chiteng stopped. "Say nothing. Think nothing. Do nothing."

Argrave was taken aback, but he nodded. Chiteng straightened and added, "...it does no good to stir the waters. Put it out of your mind."

Argrave was surprised that the elven god had justified himself, but could ask nothing more before he walked away. With a heavy responsibility so one-sidedly dumped on him without proper communication, Argrave stood there nearly babbling. But he was reminded of the jeopardy his friend might be enduring, and so stepped back towards where he'd come with purpose.

"You're content with that?" Ganbaatar asked. "Those... vainglorious people threatening, then taking advantage of you?"

Argrave didn't speak, passing beneath the portcullis where only Orion and Chiteng's servant waited.

"Come. Let us return," the red-robed elven woman said, then turned and walked. Argrave looked to Orion, but his brother looked as clueless to their whereabouts as he was. As they followed down the road, Argrave's gaze wandered the tiered garden in desperation, fearing what he might find... or might not.

He walked mutely, thinking of some excuse he might have to go out searching in the gardens. Had he asked too much of them? The thought felt like a millstone about his neck, but he saw not a sign of the pair even as they proceeded further.

As they neared the docks where the whale waited, Argrave's footsteps slowed, and he looked back. Weak excuses bubbled from his mind, yet he feared to say any of them. But he had to go back, search. He could not leave them.

"What are you standing about for?" came a derisive woman's voice.

Argrave looked back and saw Mina step around the corner, emerging from an illusion. Shortly after, he saw Nikoletta's pink eyes gleaming out of the shadow.

"We waited near the docks. That place was uncomfortable," Nikoletta said, breaking past the illusion.

"You're supposed to be A-rank, but you didn't notice me," Mina chided him. "I think I'm in the lead, Grave."

He didn't respond as he stared at Nikoletta, wide-eyed and hopeful. She gave a small, knowing nod with a smile on her face as she tapped a satchel on her side, and unadulterated joy welled up in his chest. She'd succeeded. He stepped forth and ruffled her short hair.

"Had me worried there," he told her enthusiastically. "Didn't want to fish your skeleton out of some hungry plant."

As Nikoletta smiled, Mina said, "You would've. But I was there."

"Let's get the hell out of here," Argrave walked away, loosely guiding Nikoletta with his arm on her shoulder.

Despite the delicate situation, everything was going well. Perhaps this disastrous arrival of Kirel would be salvaged splendidly, and he'd earn steadfast allies in the Bloodwoods. The fact remained that, though he'd talked of expelling Kirel Qircassia... that was a monumental task, and bore heavy implications on the future of the whole battle against Gerechtigheit.

But surely that would be the worst challenge faced here.