

Argrave stared up at a sheer wall of ice, the two suns above raining light down. The light travelled through the wall, illuminating it and sending rainbow-colored rays in odd directions. Though the light made it seem magical, Argrave was searching for enchantments without success. It was a wonder such a thing could persist throughout the ages without help from magic; a hundred-foot-tall wall made of ice could not be a simple endeavor.

He reached a hand out and touched the blue ice. Even through his gloves, he could feel the cold. It emanated outwards, and he pulled away his fingers as though he'd just touched dry ice. Even with the sunlight above, it did not melt, it did not morph, and it did not fall, protecting against the snow for thousands of years. Perhaps there was some irony in that; the greatest bulwark against the cold *was* cold.

Argrave heard footsteps behind, and he turned to spot Anneliese. The capital of Veiden lay before him; unlike the previous city of Katla, the eponymously named capital Veiden was made of stone. It was ancient, too. The buildings were carved, each one depicting some sort of historical scene. It looked more a ruin than a city, yet snow elves abounded nonetheless, joyfully participating in the suffering of the world.

"I've found their home," Anneliese began, walking to him. "Galamon's family lives not so far from here, according to the locals. Do you truly intend to visit them?"

"I do," Argrave nodded, tapping his cane against the ground. He gestured for Anneliese to lead onwards, and they moved through the city slowly.

"I didn't expect this place to be so... developed," Argrave commented. "I hear the word 'tribe,' the mind thinks of backwards people. But this place is truly just a civilization separate from Berendar. I suppose a people capable of sailing and using steel have no reason to be simple." He gazed at some of the stone carvings as he passed.

"The city of Veiden was carved from a glacier formed atop a mountain," Anneliese spoke quickly.

"Thousands of years of history have been etched into the stone here. Even then, we Veidimen were using steel. We have never been a technologically stunted people; we have only been divided and lacking resources. Now, that has changed."

Argrave turned his head to Anneliese. He was very curious about her motivations, her goals, her likes, her dislikes. She liked to stay neutral and passive in conversation, but she seemed to genuinely care about Veiden. They shared a common interest; a fascination with the world of 'Heroes of Berendar.' Hers was more scholarly, granted. *I suppose I have plenty of time to learn about her*, Argrave thought.

"Here," Anneliese pointed, stopping them both. "That building."

Argrave turned towards where she was pointing. It seemed a fairly nice home—large enough for a family to live, certainly. It was square and stone like most other buildings in this city, so it was difficult to

judge if it was exactly well-off. Argrave stepped forward towards the stone door at the entrance, lifting his cane and tapping it thrice.

After a few moments, he heard faint footsteps on the other side of the door. A woman's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Hi. Is this the residence of Galamon's wife?" Argrave called out.

After a few moments, the door peeked open. A deep purple eye sized him up. "You... aren't a Veidimen."

"I'm a friend of your husband's." Argrave tapped his chest. "I wanted to meet his family, see how you're holding up."

She opened the door wide, some amount of confusion and shock on her face. She looked rather young, and her face had a kind innocence to it, as though retaining all its childlike naivete. Her hair was a bright gold color and kept short. "You mean... on the human continent? You spoke to him?"

"He's my retainer, though he's presently not here for reasons I'm sure you can surmise." Argrave nodded. "May we come in?"

Her eyes darted around, her mouth agape in surprise. "I never thought... Galamon, how is he? Did he look well? How has he been doing?" the questions poured out as her wariness immediately faded. "Oh, forgive me. Come in. My name is Muriem. My son is downstairs, I should..." her voice faded away as she ran into the house.

Argrave looked to Anneliese while laughing lightly through his nose, and then he entered, cane clicking against the stone. He tried to shut the door casually, but he found it unmoving. He had to push it shut with his whole body.

Muriem walked back into the room from the basement. Behind her, Argrave saw a familiar-looking dour face. He was rather taken aback by how similar the snow elf looked to his father, Galamon. Argrave reckoned If the boy were to get some age lines, some scars, and possible post-traumatic stress disorder from years of intense war, he'd be Galamon's double.

"Have a seat," Muriem beckoned. "Please. I'll prepare drinks."

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Nikoletta pulled Mina's arms off her, and said, "Come on," pulling her friend along with her as they rushed to the side of the bald old man that had just devastated the enemy mages. He was barely taller than Mina, but considering what he'd just done, Nikoletta approached with cautious deference. "Thank you for the assistance, but... who are you, sir?"

"The Tower Master," the short old man replied. "You are the young lady Monticci. I'd advise you to be careful. The warriors fell into the ocean, but many of those mages will surely not fall so easily."

"Master Castro?" Nikoletta said aloud. "Thank the gods you came..." she brought a still trembling hand to her mouth. "Thank the gods..." She knelt down, feeling queasy.

"As I said, young lady, the battle is not over," he advised kindly. "That one spell has expended my magic greatly. Now, we still have to deal with the rest. I have innumerable questions, but I will not hector you just yet."

"Right," she said, nodding as she looked at the ground. "Right. I'm the ducal heir of House Monticci. I can't be stopped by just this." She stood. "There are invaders outside the walls, attacking the garrison with throwing weapons. Should I—"

A crack echoed through the air, and in the time it took Nikoletta to blink, she saw a jagged cut of lightning through the air. It struck her armor and the enchantments shone brightly, allowing only some lightning through. That they persisted despite how much damage Nikoletta had taken was a testament to the armor's craftsmanship.

The Tower Master pointed his hand, and a thin needle of fire shot out of a quickly formed spell matrix followed by a scream of agony.

"Nicky," Mina spoke, her voice shaky. "We should get to safety. The forces are broken, and we'll just be baggage to the Tower Master."

"I can't just abandon things, run away. I have a duty as the ducal heir!" she shouted at Mina.

"What good can we do here?" Mina urged.

"I-I don't... damnit." Nikoletta's voice cracked.

"She is somewhat right. Here, only the titans walk still. You may be of some minor help, but I would feel more comfortable if the death of Duke Enrico's daughter was not a potential outcome of every spell tossed my way." The Tower Master did not take his eyes from the scene before him.

Nikoletta took deep breaths, considering things. Eventually, she nodded. Her eyes drifted to the building close to what remained of the docks. "But my father is in the customs office. I cannot leave him there."

"I felt a B-rank mage near him, and I am not incautious. He should be fine. Now go, young lady," Castro commanded.

"Come on, Nicky." Mina tugged at her arm.

"Fine," Nikoletta conceded, nodding. "But not to safety. Back to the wall. Those elves outside will need to be dealt with."

The Tower Master reached into his robes and pulled free a decadent black whistle. "If you're so committed to that idea, take this. With it, you can call my wyvern. Blow it twice and point at the invaders. My Gray Owl is smart; he will know from that alone." He tossed the gilded whistle towards Nikoletta, and she caught it.

She examined the whistle in her hand, and then clenched it tight. "Thank you, Master Castro. House Monticci owes you the greatest debt imaginable. Mina, let's go."

Mina hesitantly nodded, and then the two ran away from the docks, weaving into the city. Some of the people that had previously locked themselves in their homes were emerging, moving about in panic

from the tremendous impacts. Most ran away from the docks. Mina and Nikoletta had great difficulty moving unimpeded.

As they ran, the archers that Nikoletta had called for pushed their way past. Nikoletta opened her mouth to call out to them, but then decided they would still be best suited near the docks than at the walls. The wyvern would be a game-changer. She clenched it tighter in hand, her other hand holding Mina by the arm so they were not separated.

Soon enough, they broke free from the crowds and made their way to the walls once more. Nikoletta ran up the stairs, winded but persistent in her path to the top. When she made it to the top, she paused to catch for breath while surveying the scene. There were a lot more dead now than when she left—axes, javelins, and arrows sticking out from their cold corpses.

The red-haired mercenary, Melanie, turned her head back to look at Nikoletta. She'd taken up a bow, her sword resting at her feet.

"The pay piggy returns," Melanie shouted, releasing the bowstring. She ducked behind one of the parapets.

"Watch your words," Mina bristled, but Nikoletta stopped her.

"Mina," she huffed, far too out of breath for a long reprimand. "Later." She stepped forward, minding that she did not reveal her head above the parapets. "What's happened?"

"I'd like to ask you that," Melanie countered. "Explosions, giants—a damned boat landing on the wall. We had to deal with some mage who landed up here. Well, I did," Melanie amended. "Mages always have terrible reaction time."

"The docks are ruined. I think things are under control, but..." Nikoletta shook her head. "I think now is the time to wrap things up here."

"Hoh?" Melanie made an incredulous noise. "The prissy young lady's got a trick up her sleeve, does she?"

Mina kicked her shin, but it hit Melanie's plate boot. The mercenary shot a cocky grin in return. Nikoletta ignored the mercenary's conduct, looking up to the sky at the gray wyvern. She took the whistle in her hand, holding it tightly. She could feel the sweat beneath her leather gauntlets. Nikoletta watched the line of invaders arrayed outside, thinking things through in her head.

"Protect me for a little bit," she directed, rising to her feet. She brought the whistle to her lips and blew it twice. The sound was rather ordinary, and at once, it was superseded by a great roar from the sky. Nikoletta kept her eyes fixed on the mages grouped together near the center and pointed her finger right at them.

Nikoletta did not tear her gaze from the invaders. They stayed huddled near each other at a fair distance, waiting for their opportunity to move in. Then, like a ripple passed through them, their heads turned to the left. Their unity started to shatter as many moved away, shouting. Then, they all ran in panic.

A gray blur passed by, sliding against the ground and leaving a great cloud of grass, wheat, and dirt in its wake. It cruised by countless of the snow elves, crushing and ripping them apart with ease. When its momentum finally slowed, it took off running and jumped to the skies, great wings bringing it ever upwards.

“Hot damn,” Melanie said, watching the scene. She stood up, nocking another arrow. “No time like the present, boys!” she shouted, rallying the troops. “Let those marble bastards know what you’ve been through!” she pulled back the arrow and fired.

Nikoletta watched the wyvern until it was far, far in the air, and then blew the whistle twice again, her finger pointing near the bulk of them. The wyvern brought its wings together till it resembled a dart in the sky and dropped towards the earth with terrifying speed. Once more, it crashed into the earth, sliding and tearing. It caught a mage in its jaws.

But the snow elves did not remain idle. A few stepped forward, grabbing the wyvern's wings to hold it down. One of the mages shot up into the sky and fired a spear of ice, impaling the creature's wings. With all the efficiency of a butcher, the warriors climbed atop the reptile's wings and cut its webbing. The beast roared out in pain, tearing its wing free from the ice spike. It thrashed about, trying to keep the tide of slowly approaching warriors at bay.

“Keep firing!” Melanie shouted once more.

Arrows soared at the Veidimen in droves, piercing their backs as they dealt with the wyvern. The elves encircled the wyvern, holding javelins in front of them. Even when the beast swung its wings to batter its foes, their spears would stab the creature. The snow elves leapt in with all the ruthlessness of a wolf pack, slowly wearing away at the creature with a mechanical efficiency. Mages attacked from the back, opening great wounds with potent ice magic. It seemed a practiced tactic.

Another volley of arrows thinned the snow elves' numbers considerably. The wyvern broke free from the encirclement, killing many. It tried to break into a run and fly, but it only jumped and crashed miserably. More of the Veidimen came to finish it off, and it swatted them away with its tail, roaring.

Finally, an ice spike hurtled through the air, catching the creature in the eye. The creature reared back and then fell to the fields outside Mateth, lifeless. Nikoletta felt a great deal of despair for the wyvern's death, but beneath it was a fierce relief as she felt the snow elves' numbers had thinned enough that they were no longer an issue.

One of the snow elves pulled free a horn, blowing into it thrice. It was returned at another portion of the wall. Nikoletta watched cautiously, expecting the worst. When the Veidimen started moving away, she could not process what was happening immediately.

It was not until a lone soldier shouted out, “VICTORY!” that Nikoletta began to consider the possibility.

She stepped to the parapets, watching them leave. She felt a great rush in her chest as some new emotion found its way into her heart. She clenched the black whistle in her hand, raised a fist to the sky, and joined with the shouts of victory.

Much had been lost. All of Mateth's fleet was lost at the sea. The bulk of their military force was dead, the majority of them having been well-trained knights. The docks had been completely destroyed and

rebuilding them would cost a fortune in gold—a commodity which would be very precious in the wake of the civil war. They owed a huge debt to Master Castro, both in his assistance and his wyvern. Their losses were not small, but above all that, one simple truth prevailed.

Mateth had not fallen.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 40: The Marketplace of Ideas

Argrave took a drink of what Muriem had provided him. It was a warm drink, but it was quite bitter and potent. It left a pleasant aftertaste, though, and Argrave quickly enough took a second drink and placed the stone cup gingerly back on the table. Anneliese sat beside him, listening to their conversation in silence.

“It sounds like Galamon has a big task ahead of him,” Muriem said, staring at the table with her hands on her lap. “I thought that... well, I don’t know what I thought. He sends gold to us every so often,” Muriem commented, looking at her son who sat quietly beside her. “Even when he isn’t here, I can live well and take care of Rhomaden.”

“I can take care of myself,” Rhomaden refuted.

Muriem reached forward and pinched his ear. “That right? Door is over there, young man.”

“Ow...!” Rhomaden freed himself and swatted at her hand.

Argrave maintained a polite, business-like smile. “Galamon’s as quiet and grim as ever. Still, he’s one of the best at what he does. One day, he’ll be sitting beside me as we talk. You can hold me to that.”

Muriem stared at him. Eventually, she nodded. “We write to each other, at times, but... tell him that I love him, and that I just want him to be happy.” She poked Rhomaden. “Rhom, what do you want to tell your father?”

“I don’t know,” said Rhomaden with an indifferent shrug. He had all the bearing of a moody teenager, Argrave thought.

Argrave leaned to the table, setting his elbows down and staring intently. “If you don’t mind me asking... how exactly did Galamon become a vampire?”

Muriem’s deep purple eyes shook, and she stiffened in the chair. “He... never told you?”

“He’s not much for conversation, as you know,” Argrave said with a light smile. “I only know at all because I found out another way.”

“I was not there,” Muriem said after a long pause. “You would be better off asking someone who was.”

“Maybe,” Argrave conceded with a nod. “But I don’t know who was, and their stories would probably have an impersonal affect anyway.”

Galamon’s wife pursed her lips, considering whether or not to speak. Eventually, she opened her mouth. “His brother was the one who turned him into a vampire. After, Galamon killed him. He was exiled for

both kinslaying and vampirism. If you ask everyone around the city, they'll say it happened because Berran was jealous of Galamon and sought to disgrace him. But..."

"But?" Argrave pressed.

"Berran and Galamon were always on good terms," Muriem said quickly, some emotion brewing in her tone. "Berran turned Galamon; that much is beyond doubt. I don't have any evidence for this, but I simply can't believe Berran would act without another behind him, pressing him onwards. I'll say no more. If you want brutal details, you would be best asking another. I do not enjoy reliving the worst day of my life." She lowered her head, refusing to meet Argrave's gaze.

Rhomaden leaned forward and rubbed his mother's back, consoling her in the quiet. Argrave stood, taking another drink of the brew.

"Well, although this has been an enjoyable visit, I think I should leave now. I have things to attend to, and I would not want to overstay my welcome. Muriem, thank you for your hospitality," Argrave bowed cordially, and retrieved his cane.

"Oh, well..." she looked briefly overwhelmed, and then said, "Thank you for coming to me with this. Tell Galamon that I love him, and that Rhomaden is becoming a fine young man."

After nodding, Argrave tapped Anneliese's shoulder, and she stood. Both of them walked outside. Argrave sneezed as the cold outside wind hit him, and he brought the fur cloak over his shoulders a little tighter.

"That was... weird," Argrave said, shuddering as his body got used to the cold once more.

"You were expecting something different?"

"No, that was about what I expected. Just the first time I sat down and talked about pointless stuff in a while. No purpose, just an hour or so of relaxation. Hard to relax when I have so much on my mind, but I *tried* to relax, at least."

Argrave sneezed once more. "God damnit," he complained with a clogged nose. "I think I've got another cold." He reached into his pockets, feeling the bronze hand mirror but little else. "I lost my hanky. Great."

"Maybe we should head inside for the day," Anneliese offered.

"Forget that. I've got stuff to do. Far as I'm concerned, I'm behind-schedule," Argrave waved his hands dismissively and then stretched. "Let's go to that library. Rowe's hopefully there, can teach me how to hug trees and such. Maybe I can con one of the bigshot mages into curing me."

Anneliese shook her head with a quiet laugh from her nose and walked onwards, leading Argrave to where he asked to go.

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Rowe stared up at Argrave with a great measure of caution in his beady gray eyes. The nasty scowl was gone, though, and Argrave would much prefer caution over dismissal. They stood in a grandiose library

of stone. Statues and bookshelves were the room's sole decorations. A great many people wandered about the library. Argrave presumed they were all spellcasters, for all he recognized were indeed so.

"And who let you in here, hmm?" Rowe questioned, his tone low.

Argrave pointed to Anneliese behind him. "The Patriarch told me I had free rein of his patriarchate. I thought I might take a look at some of the books."

The old mage harrumphed, saggy skin shaking. "If that's the way it is, so be it." He turned to walk, but Argrave spoke again before he got too far.

"I wanted to ask you if I could take some spellbooks from here. Druidic magic spellbooks. I need a way to... well, I don't need to say what I need it for."

"You want to *take* books?" Rowe repeated. "That patron of yours didn't teach you spells? I know the Abyssal Hand Erlebnis has knowledge of our magic. I've seen those twisted abominations he calls his emissaries use them."

"Rich parents can only give their kids so much before they become spoiled," Argrave walked a little closer, cane tapping against the cold stone floor. "He decided I still have to work hard, tragic as that may be. No cranial brain-beams of esoteric magics. So can I take them?"

Rowe's bushy brows lowered. "A ridiculous request. This library took near a millennium to establish. Have you even the slightest notion how difficult paper is to get in this snowscape? Our knowledge is the fruit of our efforts and a testament to our faith."

"Come on. Don't make me beg, please." Argrave tapped his cane against the ground.

"Bah," Rowe spat, a scowl taking its place on his face. "Impertinent boy. Stop wasting my time. I've already got egg on my face from you airing my secret about Crystal Wind. I don't need to suffer yet more of your pestering."

"Then instead of helping the person trying to stop the world from ending," Argrave said drolly, stepping forward, "How about we trade? Knowledge for knowledge; human magic for elven magic."

He saw Rowe grind his teeth. "That sarcasm of yours, infuriating, as ever..." Rowe scratched the top of his bald head. "If it's a trade, I'll agree, if only because both our forces need to be strengthened. What do you offer, then?"

"I'll teach you how to Inscribe. Specifically, how to translate low-ranking spells into Inscriptions, so that you can create the simpler enchanted items. Knowing how to translate means this vast library can be put to good use." Argrave waved his hand around the room.

"Aye, if it's that..." Rowe rubbed his chin. "If it's that much, I can give you a lot in return. What is it you want?"

"Full access, obviously." Argrave spread his hand out as though it was the natural course of things.

"Full access?" Rowe repeated. "You want me to let you walk around and take whichever book you please? Oh, and I suppose you'll want them to be nicely wrapped in gold thread and delivered right to your home."

"If you can. Oh, and perfume the books." Argrave nodded, cheerily sarcastic. "Really, what's wrong with that? Did I forget to mention the part where Gerechtigkeits is coming?"

"I'm too old and bitter to be milked dry," Rowe retorted. "I made sure that the Veidimen would help you, but I did not surrender all of our earthly possessions to your cause. We still have need of them."

Argrave sighed. "Fine, I'll tell you what. I know you have some vessels that smuggle things to and from Berendar. If you send one of those to Jast, have them wait for me. I can bring a shipment of illusion spellbooks. That's a whole new school of magic for your people."

"I should trust you, the glorified lackey of Erlebnis, the big-mouth? I'm likely to be left pissing in a snowstorm."

Argrave laughed. "Not sure what that means, but I get what you're saying. Listen, we can draft a damned contract if you're so timid. Anneliese and Galamon will keep me to my word if I do that."

"Right. That one. Good head on his shoulders, that Galamon." Rowe nodded. "Well... damnit. I always come away talking with you feeling like I've just eaten dirt. I don't like it. But fine. I'll let you take what books you please, if only for a greater cause."

"Yeah. Right. I'm the one getting shorted here. Don't act like you're some saint," Argrave shot back.

Rowe shook his head, walking away muttering things like 'impertinent boy,' or 'lackwit beanpole.'

Argrave turned back to Anneliese, prepared to start perusing the wonderful new library, but her gaze was focused on another person. It was a woman. She and Anneliese were of the same height, and indeed looked quite similar in appearance. The other woman was much older. If she was allowed in the library, she must've been a mage.

"Grandmother," Anneliese greeted.

"Found another coattail to latch on to?"

Anneliese crossed her arms and looked away. Argrave frowned and took a step closer, hesitant to say anything.

"You certainly know how to rise up in the ranks. You play the innocent quiet girl well enough, but you took advantage of me to become a spellcaster, you took advantage of Patriarch Dras to earn prestige amongst the Veidimen, and now you're to take advantage of the mortal agent of Erlebnis."

"That's not—" Anneliese started.

"Don't forget everything I did for you, Anneliese. I put you in action. Everything you've got, you owe to me," she stepped forward, prodding Anneliese's collarbone.

"Lady," interrupted Argrave, stepping forward between them. "Why don't you go sit on a broomstick or something? This is a library. Quiet tones," he urged, putting a finger to his lips. Many people watched their confrontation.

"I'm saying this for your sake," Anneliese's grandmother said to Argrave. "Don't trust this one with too much. She'll wring you dry, and when she's done, she'll find another that can give her more."

"Is that right?" Argrave asked. "No wonder—"

"Argrave," Anneliese said sharply. "Let me speak."

Argrave looked back and then stepped aside, one hand in the air in a gesture of surrender.

"Everything you did for me?" Anneliese repeated. "Your only 'help' was poaching me from the other spellcasters teaching me when you saw I had a talent in the area. You never helped my mother and I when we returned to Veiden—not once. You accuse me of being manipulative, overambitious? You fail to realize that when you place glass before something black and heartless like yourself, it becomes a mirror," Anneliese finished. She turned towards Argrave, brushing past him and moving into the library.

"She speaks well, doesn't she?" her grandmother said, grinning. "Don't be charmed by her pretty face. She herself just said she was black and heartless."

Argrave spared one last glance at her grandmother before turning and following after Anneliese. Once they were relatively secluded, she stopped and turned, staring at Argrave.

Argrave waited for her to speak, but she said nothing. Argrave frowned. "What? I do something wrong?"

"You have no questions for me?"

Argrave considered this for a long while, but nothing came to mind. "I don't know. What do you want me to ask? Was she always that nasty?"

Anneliese was visibly taken aback. "My grandmother says something like that, and you have no questions? You take me on your journey so easily, without doubt, without fear?"

"Sounds like you want me to distrust you," Argrave answered back. "Not sure what you might 'wring me dry' of by coming with me. My knowledge? My life? The second might worry me if I didn't trust you, but the first is exactly what I intend to impart to you."

Argrave scratched his chin, stepping around Anneliese and asking ponderingly, "Unless... are you an agent of Gerechtigkei?" Argrave shook his head. "Not likely. He's not so good at making friends or even subordinates. I've made my decision after proper consideration. Some old hag isn't going to change that."

If she was taken aback earlier, she was shaken now—Argrave presumed it was because her conversation with her grandmother had rattled her more than she cared to show.

"Stop worrying. Let me go teach Rowe how to enchant stuff." He touched her shoulder and then walked further into the library of stone.