

Jackal 51

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 51: Hothouse Flower

Dawn light fell onto the village of White Edge. Argrave sat with legs dangling off the floor of the carriage while the door remained opened, watching the still-visible red moon dip behind the canopy of the forest. His eyes had dark bags beneath them, and he felt generally miserable. Despite that, he knew there was much to do today.

Last night, they had laid out the poison-laced deer flesh throughout the lily fields, leaving distinct marks by each to determine which poison had been effective. Today, they would have to check and see which had been consumed and which had been left alone. Argrave wished most to sleep. The feeling overwhelmed, and Argrave pulled out the bronze hand mirror and stared at it to get into the right mindset.

Traits: [Tall], [Sickly], [Weak], [Intelligent], [Magic Affinity (High)], [Insomniac], [Blessing of Supersession (MAX)]

Skills: [Elemental Magic (C)], [Blood Magic (D)], [Healing Magic (C)], [Illusion Magic (D)], [Warding Magic(D)], [Druidic Magic (C)], [Inscription (E)], [Imbuing (E)]

Argrave had mostly made advancements in druidic magic—specifically, the supplementary spells of [Pack Leader] enabling him to give vague commands to the animals he was linked to. Unplanned combat was the number one cause of death in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ and so being able to avoid it with proper scouting was quite important to him. He could already order the birds to move to specific locations, watch over him as he slept, or search for a specific thing. [Pack Leader] was but a gateway into a very useful subset of druidic spells. It would truly manifest its usefulness when he linked to animals more versatile than pigeons—animals he intended to get at the Burnt Desert.

Argrave turned the hand mirror about in his hand, about to put it away. A voice brought him from his distracted haze.

“Do you hate yourself?”

Argrave looked up, somewhat surprised. Anneliese watched, arms crossed as she stood a fair distance away from Argrave and the carriage.

Argrave frowned. “Hate myself? Where’s this coming from?”

She pointed to his hands. “Whenever you look into that mirror, I see some resentment.”

“I don’t hate myself,” Argrave dismissed, taking another glance at the mirror.

“Your face, then?”

Argrave laughed at that notion. He weighed the mirror in his hand, and then his expression grew pensive. He held the mirror out. “What do you see when you look into this?”

Argrave felt anxious even asking the question. He was probing into something he'd been doing his best to avoid thinking about—what exactly had happened to him. He worked tirelessly precisely so he never had to think about it.

Anneliese hesitated, and then stepped forward and took the mirror. She held it up before her face cautiously. "I see myself," she responded immediately, lowering the mirror as though it was obvious.

Argrave stared at the mirror in her hand for a long time. He couldn't quite comprehend what emotion he was feeling at her response—disappointment, maybe, or some warped sense of affirmation. He examined the emotion, feeling it twisting about in his head and chest. Then he placed it.

Isolation.

No matter how much more lifelike these people had become, what he knew of this world and where he had come from placed an unbreakable barrier between him and everyone else he spoke to. A game becoming reality was a difficult thing to comprehend in theory. In practice... it was enough to make Argrave lose his mind. So, he didn't accept it. He ignored it and lost himself in studying magic, poor humor, and a steady advance towards what he had done a thousand times: finish the game.

Argrave blinked quickly, trying to bring himself out of his train of thought. "I see," he finally said in response to Anneliese's statement. He reached out and took the mirror, stowing it away.

"What do you see?" she inquired.

"You said it yourself. Something I resent," Argrave responded simply with an empty smile. "A reminder."

"I don't understand," she said, a mix between confusion and concern expressed on her face. "Do you hate your bloodline, the physical traits you inherited? They are rather distinct from most humans," she answered, gesturing towards him.

Argrave stood from the carriage's floor and shut the door. "We should start heading towards the lily fields, find out what poison we need to make." He walked past her.

"You've said you trust both me and Galamon with your life," she called out. "At the same time, you refuse to trust us with simple knowledge about yourself, your plans, or your struggles. It's rather vexing."

Argrave paused and looked back. "Didn't realize I was so fascinating. Do I often occupy your thoughts?"

"And then you deflect or change the subject when I pry," she pointed out.

"Maybe there's a hint in that."

"Maybe," Anneliese continued, amber eyes unwavering. "But whatever is on your mind wears at you worse and worse. You don't sleep, you have nightmares, you bury yourself in distractions..." she trailed off, then continued. "I won't presume your burden. I don't know what it is you're thinking about because you won't share. You might think it's too much for me—for Galamon too. You might think it's inconsequential and not worth sharing. All I ask... is that you consider trying it."

Argrave bit his lip, frowning. He shook his head and turned around. "Oh, poor me. I'm a hothouse flower with a wounded soul," Argrave mocked.

"Another deflection," she pointed out with a smile that made Argrave oddly sad. "Just think about it," Anneliese concluded.

Argrave opened his mouth to say more but stopped. He turned his head to the road. "I feel something from my birds. I think something's coming up the road," he said. "Could you check it out?"

Anneliese's face grew serious, and she held out her hand while closing her eyes. After a few seconds, a pigeon in the trees flew up into the air, following down the road. Some time passed before Anneliese opened her eyes and the matrix in her hand dissipated. She nodded. "There's a carriage coming. A well-dressed man is driving, while two knights ride outside."

"Any symbols on the carriage?" Argrave followed up.

"A banner," Anneliese nodded. "A red flag with a white sun in the center."

"That's Jast's heraldry," Argrave said musingly. "But why are they coming here...?" Argrave instinctually looked for Galamon, but he had sent him out both to collect more game for a larger-scale poisoning and to deal with his vampirism.

"Be at attention. I'm not sure they'll be friendly, but I have no reason to assume they're hostile, either." Argrave lowered his head, lost in thought. "I'm not sure why these people are here... was the carriage particularly large? Did it have any wagons?"

"The carriage was quite large, but mostly empty from what I saw. There were one wagon trailing behind."

Argrave scratched at his chin. "From what you describe, it sounds like a tax collector. I was under the impression that White Edge scarcely received them."

"Tax collector?"

"They receive a portion of a village's harvest or other suitable compensation as tax. In return, the feudal lord protects them. This system is the foundation of society in most of Berendar, although it's a bit more complex than that, I'll admit," Argrave explained. "We should..." he paused, considering how to handle this matter. "...go out and meet them."

Argrave strode down the road, keeping his eyes fixed on the distant path ahead. Soon enough, what Anneliese had scouted with druidic magic came into view—a large wooden carriage driven by two horses, a man holding the reins to the horses with two knights in tow beside him. The occasional flash of red came from the side of the carriage as the banners waved.

When the knights took notice of Argrave, they urged their horses forward and rode ahead. Seeing that Argrave was taking no measures to hide himself, their caution did not rise any further than that. Soon enough, the man driving the carriage slowed the horses into a trot. Argrave waited in the road, and Anneliese came to stand beside him.

"You're blocking the road," one of the knights said as the carriage drew closer.

“Did you think I wasn’t aware of that?” Argrave asked incredulously.

The knights looked to each other after Argrave’s undaunted response. “Are you part of the village of White Edge?” one of the knights questioned. The carriage came to a stop, and Argrave was not so far from the two horses bound to the carriage. They neighed and ground their feet against the road.

“Are you tax collectors from Jast?” Argrave inquired, ignoring the knight’s question. The knight looked to the man driving the carriage.

“Yes, I’m Jorund, the tax collector assigned to this village,” the man confirmed. “Many other villages, too, but that’s beside the point. Are you a resident of this village? Likely not, judging by your company,” he looked to Anneliese.

“I’m a Wizard from the Order of the Gray Owl,” Argrave identified himself with his badge. “I was under the impression tax collectors don’t find it worth the time to head to White Edge. Why has that changed?”

Seeing that Argrave was from the Order, the man’s demeanor changed, and the knights shifted uneasily. Jorund adjusted in the seat, and then climbed down from the carriage. Once on his feet, he was taken aback by Argrave and Anneliese’s height. He approached warily.

“Good wizard,” Jorund said cordially, “I can’t claim to know why it is that I was ordered to do something, merely that I was. In the grand scheme of things—”

“Let’s skip the preamble. What’s the tax?” Argrave pressed, gesturing with his hands. “You didn’t bring a small carriage.”

“One moment...” Jorund said, unoffended by Argrave’s brusqueness. He reached into his back pocket and pulled free a rolled-up piece of parchment. He unraveled it, and then read quickly, “Count Delbraun demands half of this year’s harvest, or fifty bushels of wheat—whichever is lower—or suitable compensation.”

Argrave couldn’t exactly say whether fifty bushels was low or high, but he knew that half of the harvest was a ridiculous amount for a place like White Edge which didn’t have the most fertile lands. “That’s a bit excessive, don’t you think? I thought Jast was remaining neutral in the war. What’s the need for such a large quantity?”

Jorund rolled up the paper once more. “I’m quite curious why the good wizard is so interested in the tax collection process... enough to stop the carriage, even.”

Argrave stared blankly for a moment, debating on what to say. “Count Delbraun sent me here to handle an infestation of bugs that the people here are dealing with. I have the villagers helping me with other matters related to that, and the harvest is delayed.”

“I wasn’t informed of this,” Jorund said with a frown. “I’m certain I would have been.”

“That’s why I’m curious,” Argrave pointed to his chest. “I didn’t expect to encounter a city official here. You’re going to have to turn around until things are dealt with here.” Argrave waved his hands away.

“Wizard, sir...” Jorund said, taking a step back. “I can’t simply turn around and return empty-handed. Indeed, I’m starting to question this entire situation. You meet me so far from the village, you have one

of the... snow elves in tow. Recent rumor has it they tried to sack Mateth. Quite a dangerous people,” he commented, staring at Anneliese.

Argrave’s gaze flitted between the two knights, ensuring that things were not escalating. Eventually, his gaze settled on the tax collector. Seeing that Argrave wasn’t speaking, Jorund continued.

“It isn’t that I doubt your identity as a Wizard of the Gray Owl. Jast has innumerable such badges, and I am quite good at spotting fakes.” Jorund sighed. “Rumor has it... and this is just rumor, mind you... that the Count’s liege sent out orders to have this tax levied. Perhaps that is where this misunderstanding stems from. Bureaucracy is a complicated thing.”

“The Duke of Elbraille?” Argrave frowned. “That’s...” he paused. “Well, I won’t make these people resume the harvest. As I mentioned, Count Delbraun ordered me to take care of an infestation of insects here before it spirals out of control.” Argrave put a hand on his hip. “Suitable compensation, you say? What does that mean?”

“Anything of significant value. I would appraise it, naturally.”

Argrave nodded. “Anneliese, could you please go get my lockbox?” She looked at him, then nodded and went off to do as he asked. “Let’s wrap up this matter by saying that the people of White Edge went mining for jewels during this harvest season. I’m sure that you, as a tax collector, can know whether or not these jewels are a suitable compensation.”

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“Those were worth a lot of money,” Argrave cursed, staring at his lockbox that was a little less colorful. “Things are getting out of control. I don’t like it.”

““Out of control?”” Anneliese repeated.

Argrave shut the box, locking it with its key. He hid the key away in his pocket and then put the box back in the carriage. “That was a war tax. Had to be. Half the damned harvest? It’s unreasonable. I was counting on Jast remaining neutral.” Argrave grit his teeth. “I have to reassess things, deduce what might be happening. For now, we deal with the task at hand.”

“Right. I spent some time watching these insects. I have an idea that may work to expedite things.” She looked out into the forest where the lily fields lay beyond. “Should we wait for Galamon?”

“No, it shouldn’t...” Argrave trailed off. “Hold on. I feel... I think something’s off.”

“What?”

“The lily fields... they’re very active. That’s what I feel. I...” Argrave touched his forehead, disoriented. “I feel a lot of movement,” Argrave said decisively. Now that he had experienced scouting something with [Pack Leader], he was much more certain.

“Do you want me to—”

“No, I’m confident in my assessment. Let’s head to the fields,” Argrave said decisively. He broke off into a jog.

Nothing ever goes right, does it? he thought, fearing the worst.

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Chapter 52: Prehistoric Fears

Argrave watched atop a hill where the trees ended, fading into the lily fields beyond. In the far distance, he could see the entrance to the Lily Lurker's cavern; the entrance was shaped like a canoe, and the earth looked recently overturned. Closest to the entrance, the lilies wilted, but as they grew further away, they turned a dark red hue.

Argrave knelt down with his left hand pressed against a tree for support as he watched what exactly was occurring. The lily lurkers romped about in the field without order, uprooting and flattening the red and white flowers carelessly. It was difficult to spot reason in their movements, but they did not stray too far from a single point.

The Lily Lurkers were about the size of a human head, though three tails on their back end made them seem quite large. Their body was colored much like an orchid mantis. They had six long legs that elevated them off the ground, and twinges of pink decorated their joints. Each bore a stinger on its back with an eerie-looking pink barb on the tip.

The other two of its three tails beside the stinger swayed back and forth as the Lily Lurkers roamed, vibrating and letting out a harsh noise similar to a rattlesnake. According to in-game lore Argrave recalled, their tails allowed them to communicate with each other. As it was now, Argrave felt it made them seem much greater in number than they were. The only thing that might have made him more uncomfortable was if they had wings.

"Jesus," Argrave muttered into his hand as he watched. "Scorpions. Ants. Cicadas. Someone couldn't make up their mind."

"What was that?" asked Anneliese, her eyes closed as she used a druidic spell to scout out what exactly was happening. Above, her pigeon circled their swarm.

"Nothing," Argrave said louder, not willing to turn his head away from the scene. Those stingers captured his attention. The Lily Lurkers moved far too fast for him to count them effectively. "What do you see?"

"I am unsure. There's one in the center of their movement... looks unmoving. Dead, were I to guess."

Argrave ran his hand over his mouth, pondering this. "I think... one of them must have died to the poison, let out pheromones. It's agitated a bunch of them. These ones are searching for what happened. Ants do that, I read."

"Pheromones?"

"Don't ask me," Argrave dismissed, lacking both confidence and a sufficient explanation. "I can't exactly check my notes. Bugs don't occupy my thoughts, and I wouldn't spend any time reading about them. I prefer to pretend they don't exist."

Anneliese retracted the spell, and her pigeon flew back to the trees. "What should we do?"

"If you'll notice, they're staying near the corpse," Argrave pointed out. "Maybe they don't have ants in the snowscape that is Veiden, but if you've ever squished an ant near an anthill, they all freak out. They're searching for danger. Once they're certain there's nothing, they'll stop."

The vast majority of Argrave's knowledge on this topic came from nature documentaries. It was dodgy at best, and considering these things weren't even ants, doubly so.

"So we should wait," Anneliese finished Argrave's thought process.

"Not necessarily." Argrave finally rose to his feet, feeling some burden relieved from his knees. "I'm not certain what they're doing, but I can only see this as an opportunity. Imagine them in the trees—or worse yet, in a cavern." Argrave took one step forward. Anneliese grabbed at his arm, catching his sleeve.

"What are you doing?" she spoke urgently. "If this is how they react for one, imagine how they will react after many deaths."

"I know—more might come. If that happens, it might actually be for the best." Argrave took a deep breath and then exhaled, laughing lightly. "You want some insights into my struggles?" Argrave hearkened back to their earlier conversation. "Feeling queasy right about now. Logically, I know this is the right thing to do. Figuring out how these creatures fight is quite important."

"Right thing to do? I disagree!" Anneliese protested. "Between the two of us, you cannot believe we could take on those creatures. We don't have the magic for that. Galamon isn't even here."

"You underestimate us. And..." Argrave looked at Anneliese. "I can connect my magic to Erlebnis for five minutes," he said simply, pulling his sleeve away from her grip. "If things go sour, I can call upon that. For now, I need to determine how these things act when confronted with an enemy. It'll make the spelunking go smoother later if we understand how they hunt. Moreover, I need to learn how to fight things without using potions as a crutch."

Argrave turned back. "We have to take advantage of these things' limitations, their simplicity. Use spells like the D-rank [Wind Wall] to block them; I doubt they have the capacity to understand and adapt to magic. Use some of the lightning magic you learned, or fire magic. Even if ice magic is more powerful because you're a Veidimen, it will be too slow-moving to do much."

With one roll of his shoulders to gather his confidence, Argrave stepped into the field of white. Far ahead, where the lilies began to turn red, the bugs continued to swarm about. Their movements seemed to coincide with the roiling anxiety in his chest. He felt the wind shift, and he foolishly turned to look at his side. Anneliese walked forward alongside him. Argrave didn't need to have her empathic skills to see that she was wracked with anxiety just as he was.

Seeing her like that, Argrave had a strange moment of clarity. He turned away and clenched his gloved hands tight. *I have to become a good leader. The lesson from Mateth isn't only that this world is ever-changing; it's that I alone am not enough to deal with everything.* The white fields faded behind them as they came to the red, and beyond that into the wilted flowers.

One step after another brought the terrible rattling of the Lily Lurkers ever closer. Soon enough, the insects turned, their two tails quivering and their bright pink eyes locked on the pair as they approached.

Argrave estimated they were about twenty. Feeling the distance was sufficient for good accuracy, Argrave stopped and held out both hands, forming the D-rank spell [Writhing Lightning]. The first two bolts of lightning shot out across the field, fell crackling echoing across the fields.

The electricity struck the first bug, and Argrave paid close attention to how the creature reacted. The lightning surged through its body and then spread through the ground and some close to it. The Lily Lurker spasmed for far longer than Argrave thought it might, and then its two quivering tails changed in pitch. This change was soon echoed in the other insects present, and they surged forth with an uncomfortably fast speed.

Argrave delivered lightning spells in measured bursts, targeting the ones he already knew were damaged as he retreated backwards in slow, steady steps. Anneliese mirrored his actions. The magic was much more effective than he thought it might be, and several of the bugs died as they drew close. As they drew closer, Argrave's anxiety only rose, even though he had a plan ready.

"Stick close," said Argrave loudly to Anneliese over the din of rattling, lacking the time to check if she heard and obeyed.

One leapt towards them, and Argrave's heart leapt in unison. He instinctively used [Wind Wall], and the creature slammed against it, splaying out ungracefully on the field. Anneliese finished it off with two quick bolts of lightning.

Argrave took a deep breath, keeping an eye on the open cavern far ahead for any movement. As the remainder grew closer, Argrave continued to use lightning magic from behind the cover of his [Wind Wall], the spells passing through easily. The bulk of the insects, of which likely half remained, finally came close enough to the two of them. Argrave internally reminded himself of the purpose of this fight: to test their reactions. He was uncertain if insects would be afraid of fire as animals were.

Once many grew close, Argrave stepped out of the cover of the [Wind Wall] and formed the only C-rank attack spell he knew; [Wargfire]. A great lupine jaw emerged from his hands after the matrix formed. The creatures barely seemed to see the fire until the gaping mouth came shut, catching two. Argrave fell behind the [Wind Wall] spell once more, watching and waiting.

The aflame Lily Lurkers spasmed, their twin tails jerking about while their stinger contracted wildly. It looked as though the insect was stinging itself, but Argrave knew such a notion was ridiculous. Despite the fire, the rest of the insects rushed forward, averse to but not afraid of the flames. The dry, wilted flowers were a natural accelerant, and the flames spread alarmingly quickly.

Anneliese grabbed Argrave and pulled him away as the flames continued to grow. Argrave devoted all of his attention to getting away without tripping. Soon enough, the insects were consumed by the flames which continued to spread in the ring of wilted flowers. Argrave grew worried that he had caused a large fire, but the air was quite humid and the ring of red, unwilted lilies did not catch aflame easily. The flames were short-lived, but the insects caught fire.

Once they were a safe distance away, Argrave and Anneliese came to a stop and watched. The creatures writhed about, appearing in intense agony, but Argrave could not say for certain that insects even felt pain. He knew one thing, though.

"That seems to work," Argrave concluded as he watched. "Started to get pretty scared, there. Fortunately, these things burn easily enough."

Argrave kept an eye on the cavern entrance, looking for flashes of white to emerge and ruin the victory. Anneliese said nothing as she caught her breath.

"See? We learned something," Argrave looked back. "I told you it was purposeful. A lot less traumatic to kill insects with fire."

"You are much too reckless," she finally said. "And this knowledge is not especially useful. When a fire is lit in a cave, those inside most often suffocate, or the rock overhead shifts and falls. I have heard many tales from Veidimen miners detailing such grisly fates."

"It's still good knowledge," Argrave shook his head. "We're fighting against time. Three years until Gerechtigkeits descent might seem like plenty of leeway, but there's a lot of holes to patch in this dam before the flood comes. I need to be reckless. The fact I even have to get the Amaranthine Heart to fix my body is a waste of time."

Anneliese didn't look satisfied with the answer, but she said nothing more on the matter.

"We should stay here for a time, make sure that no more come out," Argrave nodded. He stepped into the cavern and looked into it. He saw a patch of loose dirt descend for a bit and then vanish into darkness. Even with the sun overhead, one could not see especially far down. Argrave felt an unpleasant squirming in his guts when he reminded himself he would need to go down there in the future.

"You mentioned you watched these creatures last night, had an idea about something?" Argrave inquired.

"Yes," Anneliese responded quickly. "I watched their habits. These creatures are much like you, in fact."

Argrave looked away from the cavern incredulously. "What does that mean? Too-big, spindly, highly flammable?"

Anneliese crossed her arms. "They clean themselves compulsively."

"Well, that's..." Argrave frowned. "Good hygiene is important. Even these things have some virtues, it would seem."

"They often use their mouths to clean themselves," she continued. "Each other, too."

Argrave nodded slowly, perturbed. "I can't recall doing that, unless I have some bizarre sleeping habits I'm unaware of. Might be I have some apologies to make."

"You're missing the point. We needn't lace food with poison. We need only get some of the poison on them—place it near the entrance, have them walk over it, and then clean themselves."

Argrave blinked a few times as what she said sunk in. "That is definitely worth trying," he concluded. "We still need to check which poison actually worked. They're on the far ends of the field, so they shouldn't be disturbed..." Argrave paused, looking at Anneliese. "Very observant of you. I'm reminded of why I was so willing to bring you along."

"It may not work," Anneliese dismissed with a shake of her head.

"We'll see, I suppose. I hope it works. This little venture of ours needs to end soon. That tax collector coming to this quaint countryside tells me there's a storm brewing in Jast, and I'd like to make it there before it starts."

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Chapter 53: The Blind Will See

An attendant opened a glass door, bowing humbly. Induen paid the attendant little heed, ducking through the glass structure and entering the greenhouse proper. The place was incredibly beautiful and well-kept. The plants were bright and colorful, yet they did not block off the marble pathway winding throughout the entire place. A small brook wound its way around, letting off faint babbling sound. Small bugs no bigger than a coin flew about everywhere, letting out small sparks of multi-colored electricity.

Induen looked about the place for a moment, expression indiscernible. After fixing his gold-lined black clothes, he waved away the doorman without a word. The attendant bowed once more and shut the glass door. Induen took a deep breath and exhaled, and then walked through the greenhouse.

The path was lined with plant life unending. Small trees with red knobby fruits, strange black plants that shone with purple dew, or blue vines wrapped around a fence with fruits that might've passed as grapes... Induen noticed them, but he did not seem awed with them as one might be. He headed towards the center of the greenhouse.

He came to a central square with little plant life and plenty of space for movement. A grand fountain stood in the center, spouting water five feet in the air. Small streams of water branched off it and ran underneath the marble walkway, eventually forming the brooks that lined the rest of the greenhouse. There was a single table by the fountain. It was pink and fanciful, as were the chairs beside it. Two people sat.

Both were female. One of the two people was dressed just the same as the doorman Induen had just left. The other was a beautiful young woman who wore a white and green gown without much adornment. She sat in a strange chair that had handles and two wheels on the side. A blanket covered her legs, and her eyes were wrapped in a white cloth. She had the same obsidian-colored hair that Induen did.

Induen walked closer quietly with his hands behind his back. As he drew closer, he heard the servant speaking. She was reading from a book. The blind woman sat there quietly, listening intently. Induen waited patiently. Eventually, the servant woman noticed him and stood quickly.

"Ah..." she said, surprised. "Princess Elenore, your brother is here to see you."

Elenore grabbed the table at once, clearly uneasy. "Who?"

"It's me, sister," Induen said warmly, stepping forward with his hand on his chest.

"Induen?" she questioned, face brightening. Her expression quickly returned to neutral as though she was hiding her emotions.

"Yes," Induen confirmed. "Give us a moment alone," he said towards the servant, voice considerably colder.

"At once, my Prince," the servant said prudently, walking away from the marble square quickly.

Induen stayed standing for a moment, and then slid into the chair. His sister waited there, her blindfolded face not quite in the right direction. Induen picked up the book the servant had left. "'The Golden Void,'" he read the title, opening the first page.

"It's a book about economy," Elenore answered quickly.

"Diligent as ever," Induen said, setting down the book. "I missed you. How have you been, Elenore?"

"You don't care. Why do you ask?" She waved a hand in dismissal and crossed her arms, refusing to turn her face towards him. "I'm a cripple, not a lackwit."

"Hey," Induen said in protest. "Hey, hey." He stood from the chair and moved to her chair, placing his hands gingerly on her arms. "Don't be like that, El. Father was having me do things. You know I'd visit you every day if I could," he said, trying to calm her down.

"What things?"

"Dealing with the unrest in the capital, communications with the nobles, gathering the troops, preparing the supplies..." Induen shook her gently. "I promise you I wouldn't ever avoid you."

She finally turned her head to look at Induen. "You promise?"

"I promise," Induen nodded.

She leaned forward and hugged Induen for a few seconds. After she pulled away, she gestured towards the chair. "Sit. Sit," she repeated insistently.

Induen walked back to his chair and sat down, then crossed his arms across the table.

"At least you come to visit your older sister," Elenore continued. "To all the other snakes, I'm out of sight, out of mind. It's because of that finger-eating queen of father's. She didn't raise the others right." She pointed to Induen, her finger a little off from his face. "Babies are like... animals. They're no different than dogs. Somebody has to teach them right from wrong."

Induen turned his head away, gazing out at the fountain as it rippled from the waterfalls. "Right," he agreed. "What have you heard lately?"

"Your half-brother is causing problems," she said flat-out.

"I know. The royal guards say Orion is—"

"No. Foamspire," Elenore shook her head. "Have you even been paying attention?"

Induen paused, then leaned in. "What are you talking about?"

"The bastard sold it. He got two hundred and fourteen rose gold magic coins for your little poison apple. Donated fifty coins to House Monticci in light of the snow elf invasion. 'The Savior of House Monticci,' the duke is calling him. Rumor has it Argrave's already betrothed to Nikoletta of Monticci."

"He... sold it?" Induen repeated, voice low. "Where did you hear all of this?"

"When you're blind, the other senses get sharper," Elenore said simply. "What did you think would happen? You killed his mother. That sort of grudge doesn't go away. And then you slap him around? He'll never obey."

"But father—"

"Father's way of ruling is falling apart," she interrupted. "If you were still a little kid, I'd give you a good smack." She shook her head and crossed her legs. "You hate father. I hate him. Everybody hates him, but they're afraid of him. All it takes to break that fear is one defiance. His days are numbered."

"But you defied him," Induen retorted coldly.

"I did. But I was weak, so he gouged out my eyes and cut off my feet. Margrave Reinhardt is not weak."

Induen flinched away when she mentioned what had happened to her so casually.

"I keep telling you to rein in your impulses. I told you to stop with those weird fetishes of yours—the orphan-making, the sadism. Why don't you listen?"

"Sis..." Induen lowered his head into his hands. "I just get angry, and..."

"Oh, poor you," she mocked. "Appreciate that you have the luxury to get angry. That privilege is fading fast, though."

Induen mulled on her words for a while. "You're right, El. I'm sorry."

"An apology. How rich. That'll mend things, surely," she laughed.

"I said I was sorry," Induen repeated. "What more do you want from me?"

"I want you to learn the lesson you need to," she said harshly. "My people tell me father beat you because of your handling of Margrave Reinhardt. He wanted to curb your impulsivity. At that, at least, he's right."

Induen turned his gaze downwards and refused to speak, biting his lip.

"Don't pout at me. I can practically hear your sulking," she chastised. "Well, stop being a baby. I think now is the time to start breaking free of father's influence."

Induen turned to look at her, indignant gaze replaced by a fierce intensity. He took a deep breath, digesting what she said. "I'll tell you what I can, but he's sending me to the Duchy of Elbraille," Induen told her.

"I know. Father has promised them some minor benefits—lands of the defeated, stipends, et cetera. With Mateth essentially crippled, they're quite close to the north, and the Duke of Elbraille is a coward who doesn't wish to be the bulwark against Vasquer. That's common knowledge. What a lot of people don't know, however, is that he's also a henpecked husband."

Elenore reached underneath the table and retrieved a stack of documents. She set it on the table.

“Obey father, go to Elbraille, and speak to the Duke. Behind the scenes, I’ll arrange one of my agents to set up a meeting between you and the Duchess. She and I have been in contact for some time.”

Induen frowned and took the documents.

“We need to earn their support—for us, not for the king. House Monticci is the weakest it’s been in centuries. Promise the duchess the city. She’ll get her husband in line.”

Induen set down a paper. “Even with ten men manning it, the walls of Mateth won’t fall. The Duchy of Elbraille has no navy, so a siege would be the only way.”

Elenore smiled. “I know of a mercenary on the inside. I might have to surrender a lot of gold, but she’ll do as she’s told. What is strong on the outside is often weak on the other.” She put a hand to her chin.

“Another thing. That Argrave—if what I hear is correct, he’s planning to use the rebels to gain whatever benefit he can... maybe even the throne. A jackal, that one; he’s only nipped at the heels, but he’s opportunistic. I had been ignoring him. That was unwise.”

“Should I nip it in the bud?” Induen pressed.

“No. We missed that chance, and now he’s blooming beautifully. C-rank mage, connections with the snow elves, a relationship with the Tower Master Castro, special privileges within the Order of the Gray Owl, an alliance with the House Monticci... a very prudent man. I’d like to assess things first. I believe we can yet salvage this into an alliance, though his connections with House Monticci may make such a thing difficult...” She turned her head to Induen. “No thanks to you, of course. Idiot.”

“I said I was sorry,” Induen repeated.

“I went through a lot of trouble to get Foamspire, and you spoil the whole thing by smacking the boy about,” she shook her head. “Oh well. What’s done is done, and you’re still my little brother. Let me make this clear for you; do not speak to him, do not approach him. You see him on the road, you turn around. I will handle things with him from here.”

“And if he speaks to me?”

“Like he’d want to,” she said coldly. “Now, unless there was more, you should be off,” she waved her hand away.

Induen looked back to the fountain. “Elenore. Would you let me... read for you?” he picked up the book.

Her lips trembled briefly, and she said nothing for a time. “I’ll listen,” she eventually said. “Do what you want.”

Induen opened the first page and began reading.

“No, not that part. I’m on page seventy-two.”

Induen obediently flipped to page seventy-two and resumed reading.

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The days passed by quickly, and Anneliese found herself enjoying the brief foray into this idyllic village. Argrave taught her much of herbology and applications of combat magic. The villagers were uncomfortable with two elves in their town, but Anneliese did not feel it as much as she normally would because of the company of Galamon and Argrave. There was companionship in mutual ostracization.

After Argrave dealt with the tax collector and the small disturbance of Lily Lurkers roaming the fields, few other unforeseen events occurred in the days to follow. Galamon struggled to find significant amount of game in the forests, and so they tried Anneliese's idea. After small-scale testing proved to have significantly promising results, the three devoted most of their attention to brewing enough poison to cull the numbers of the colony enough to head into the cavern proper.

Anneliese, Argrave and Galamon took turns overseeing the brewing process. Some of the villagers grew discontent with their oversight, but Argrave employed various persuasive means to keep them in line—grandiloquent speeches, displays of force, and other such largely effective tactics. On one occasion, he had the two of them catch one of the creatures alive and bring it into the village. There were few protests after that incident.

As Argrave directed Anneliese's progress on the field of magic, she noticed he had a very systematic approach to things. Rather than learn a wide variety of spells so that any situation could be confronted, Argrave much preferred to manage the situations he would find himself in. He taught her mostly electric-based elemental magic, with only a few spells to cover glaring weaknesses or perform tasks electric magic could not. He seldom explained his logic without being pressed for it, but Anneliese could find plenty if she dug.

Argrave also refused to divulge any more information about himself, a result which Anneliese had been expecting. She knew from experience that trying to bridge a gap too quickly might only break the link that binds them, so she kept her pointed inquiries to a minimum. She could not deny an intense curiosity. His knowledge was without question, but after much scrutiny, she was all but certain that its source was not something Argrave was entirely forthright about.

Eventually, more and more corpses of the Lily Lurkers littered the white fields, some of them being carried away by other workers to an insectoid midden of sorts. The activity from the colony began to fade, and what few insects the three of them did encounter were often slow and weak, easily dispatched by sword or spell.

After around six days in White Edge, Argrave finally decided things had calmed enough to do a cursory examination of the inside of the cavern.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 54: Amaranthine Heart

Argrave stood at the edge of the Cavern of the Lily's Death. The dirt beneath his feet was loose, and his feet sunk into it like beach sand. Some of the soil was still damp with the poison they had poured over the entrance. He wore a full set of leather gear with long sleeves, but it still did not feel protective enough.

"Jesus. Everything on me is going to get dirty. I hate this," Argrave waved his hands about as though trying to shake off bugs.

"You want to lead?" questioned Galamon, standing close behind him. As per usual, the elf wore his black armor alone, even with the gaping hole in its torso from the battle at Barden. His greatsword, axe, and bow had been set aside, and he carried only his dagger at the ready in his hand.

"Why would you even ask that? You can probably smell these things fifty feet away," Argrave said indignantly, only to spot a faintly amused smile on Galamon's mouth. It was perhaps a fortune the Veidimen helmet's design exposed the mouth, or Argrave might never have noticed he was joking. Argrave prodded the elf's shoulder in irritation. "Alright, enough with that."

Anneliese looked about the fields of white and red, expression unbothered. "The fields are littered with these Lily Lurker's bodies. I cannot say for sure that we will proceed unimpeded, but... it is certainly the best we can do in such a timely fashion." Anneliese crossed her arms as she thought, and then she pointed to Argrave. "If you wish, I might break the druidic link with my pigeon and instead contract with a mole or other such subterranean animal. We can scout out the cavern in great detail before proceeding."

"Not worth it. Any creatures still living will move, and I..." Argrave cut himself off from mentioning that he vaguely remembered the layout of the cavern. Anneliese had been asking pointed questions; he could not give her any more hints. *Although... what am I afraid of her learning?*

"We do this now, most of them will still be in the frenzy that Anneliese and I dealt with a few days ago. Because of the rattling tails, they'll be easier to find ahead of time, though they might be bunched up in the cavern..." Argrave stepped forward and peered into the cavern. "...in which case, Galamon will step back, and Anneliese and I will deal with the issue with magic."

Argrave took a deep breath and pulled his gloves tighter, dismissing his thoughts before he distracted himself further. "Whatever. Let's start before I talk myself out of this. I'll keep a spell up for light. Don't forget to cover your mouth and nose, Anneliese." He pulled up his own cloth before his face, and Anneliese did the same.

Galamon had no such covering. Being a vampire, Galamon did not need to breathe to survive, nor would he actually suffer if he inhaled any sort of noxious fumes. Habits built up over centuries were difficult to break, though, and Argrave knew Galamon made a conscious effort to breathe to keep in touch with the time he had been alive.

Galamon stepped ahead of Argrave without hesitation. He found himself envying his elven companion's confidence, but Argrave only grit his teeth and followed close behind, ducking into the fortunately spacious entrance. To Argrave's great displeasure, the mushiness of the soil only grew worse as they lowered further beneath the earth, and light quickly faded before Argrave cast a simple fire spell to replace it. Distant rattling echoed out from the cavern as the sounds of the outside faded.

Their party stepped around innumerable insect corpses as they trudged deeper into the underground. The light of Argrave's magic reflected off the white exoskeletons brilliantly and so they were not especially difficult to avoid, but the sheer number of them made Argrave uneasy. Most of the path was wide enough for them to pass through easily, but at times they had to duck or slide to avoid a low ceiling. The air was dank, and Argrave could feel his skin sticking to his leather clothes. He was undecided if it was sweat or the moisture in the air.

The echoing rattling grew louder with each step deeper, making Argrave's blood pump faster as his nervousness grew. Then, when the noise was unbearably loud, Galamon would lunge forward and stab before Argrave could even spot the danger. This game of anxiety repeated what seemed to be indefinitely; a constant rise and fall of nerves.

As the three of them proceeded lower like this, the smell grew very unpleasant even with a mask over their faces. It was a combination of the poison that they had been brewing and the innumerable other undoubtedly foul things in the cavern: corpses both of insects and eaten animals, the Lily Lurker's waste, and general stale air.

At times, the path would branch, and Argrave would instruct Galamon on which direction to proceed. Though Galamon shot Argrave a curious look, he obeyed without question. Argrave moved slowly to avoid twisting his ankle in the unsteady ground.

"What is that light?" Anneliese asked, and Argrave jumped a little, bumping his head against a rock protruding from the ceiling.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. "Touch me or something before you talk." He paused. "Now, what are you talking about?"

"On the ceiling," she pointed. "A faint purple trail of light—so faint I thought it was but a trick of the mind."

"Oh." Argrave nodded knowingly. He looked up, and just as she said, there was a faint line of purple on the rocks above. "It's a vein of the Amaranthine Heart. It absorbs magic by spreading veins across surfaces, seeking out anything alive and stationary. Namely, the lily field."

"And those veins are what is making those lilies change colors the way they are, if I am correct in assuming so."

"Yeah, you're right, but let's cut the chatter," Argrave said quietly. Galamon paused ahead, and then looked back.

The light from Argrave's spell illuminated the elf's face, and Galamon's helmet cast a shadow over his jaw. Argrave could clearly see his fangs in the dark, and it brought back some unpleasant memories for a moment. "Ground ahead is stone. Carved, looks like," Galamon said.

Argrave dabbed his forehead with the back of his gloved hand, feeling some sweat. "Whew. Alright, we're near where we need to be. Just keep going."

Galamon nodded and turned back. Argrave felt faintly tired, but he said nothing as he readjusted the cloth over his face and followed along. He felt a strong sense of relief as his feet hit something more solid than the dirt they'd been treading on before. Far ahead, Argrave's spell illuminated a wall of taupe stone with a large hole marring its carved surface.

The elven vampire stopped at the hole, carefully looking around before entering inside. Argrave tried to follow, but Galamon stopped him.

"Hear that?" he questioned.

Argrave listened. "I just hear that damned rattling," he said after some time.

“But only from behind—not a single one ahead. Is this out of your expectations?”

Argrave listened a bit more intently this time, realizing Galamon was right. He looked back into the cavern. “Well, yes... yes it is. You don’t hear a thing ahead?”

“Dripping water. Strange pulses—sounds like electricity, almost. No rattling, though,” Galamon summarized. “I see insect corpses ahead, but none living.”

“Hooh.” Argrave raised a hand to his mouth, adjusting the cloth. “The electricity’s just the Amaranthine Heart’s veins—it means we’re getting closer. The dripping...usual cave ambience, I guess. But no rattling...” Argrave tried to think of what it could mean. He shook his head and pointed forward. “Just stay extra cautious, keep moving as I direct you. We can’t stop here.”

Galamon nodded and turned without hesitation, his advance a little slower than before as per Argrave’s directions. Argrave and Anneliese passed the wall’s threshold and entered into the ruins proper. The first room was large and spacious, held up by four pillars in each corner of the room. The floor was the same smooth taupe stone as could be seen on the walls. Dead magic lamps hung from the pillars and walls. Sophisticated glass alchemical equipment was strewn about everywhere, most of it broken or half-broken. The tables were made of stone and had withstood time, but the wooden chairs were broken or badly rotted.

The new inhabitants—the Lily Lurkers—had very clearly made this place their home. Bones and waste occupied much of the room, alongside their corpses and mounds and mounds of dirt tracked in from the tunnels. The smell became stranger here—musky and sweet simultaneously. Argrave looked at the ceiling’s corners in paranoia but found nothing lurking there.

Argrave swallowed and followed behind Galamon, magic light swirling about his head. Anneliese cast her own spell and gave Argrave some space now that they were not in such tight spaces. Galamon walked to the only exit of the room and walked through. A hallway that went left or right waited.

“Left,” Argrave said confidently. His voice echoed uncomfortably well. “Follow the left wall until there’s a stairway down.”

The three of them walked down the hallways. Soon, the noise of the rattling behind them faded, and Argrave foremost heard the clanking of Galamon’s steel armor. They passed by innumerable rooms, and Anneliese all but stuck her head in each door, brimming with curiosity. When she paused at one door, falling behind the two of them, Argrave stopped and sighed.

“This place is an old alchemical laboratory. While I can tell you all about it later, at present, I don’t need you wandering off.”

Anneliese turned from the room, then back. Eventually, she turned and hastened her steps, catching up quickly.

“So many rooms of tools... this place looks like it was for mass production,” Anneliese pressed.

Argrave bit his lip, debating whether or not to answer at all. Eventually, he whispered back, “This civilization was studying a method to materialize magic.”

“And from what you’ve told me, this ‘Amaranthine Heart’ is their success—it extracts life and turns it into liquid mana. So why is it still here? What happened to this civilization?”

“The people are gone, stolen from us by time and other thieves. Why else would it be a ruin?” Argrave returned. “They died, and eventually this place was forgotten. I don’t know how or why. As for your other question, the Amaranthine Heart was not ever recognized as a success. It took thousands of years for its potential to manifest, after all.”

Her curiosity somewhat sated, Anneliese followed behind without more questions, though her gaze did wander to the open doorways. They passed by some rooms that had collapsed, entirely blocked off. The majority of the rooms were simple work areas, and Argrave knew they were all mostly like that.

Galamon continued to follow the leftward wall when they came to an intersection just as Argrave had directed. Far ahead, a single stairway as wide as the hallway waited. The purple veins of the Amaranthine Heart were especially concentrated in this area, surging on the walls and the ceiling and the floor. Had they been actual veins, the sight may have been unpleasant. As it was, Argrave found it rather serene.

Galamon walked cautiously to the stairs and stood before them, eyeing the purple lightshow. He looked back to the two of them, confirming that these things were harmless. After Argrave gave one nod, Galamon proceeded down the stairs. Argrave’s spell went out, and he cast another quickly. The magic made some of the veins twist and move in response, and the two of them were startled. Argrave was unaffected, and quickly set the two of them back down the stairs.

The trio walked down the first set of stairs, turned, and continued down to the second. A long hallway waited for them at the bottom, lined with pulsing purple lines. It was a little more intense than it had been before—enough to light up the hallway, even. Argrave saw Lily Lurker corpses, but none of the insects themselves.

“B2F: the Archives. No noises, Galamon?” Argrave questioned. When the vampire shook his head, Argrave took a deep breath and directed him forward.

“Why do its veins travel along the hallways? Why not move up the stone?” Anneliese questioned.

“It seeks out life; in other terms, it only follows the path the Lily Lurkers take to reach the surface. We follow the light, it’ll take us right to the heart,” Argrave remarked, eyes locked on the trail of purple.

“So... I think you can find the way, Galamon.”

“If the veins follow the creatures’ path...”

“Yeah. We might find them.” Argrave nodded. “I don’t know what’s going on. We can only be careful.”

Galamon nodded, but Argrave thought he spotted some hesitation. The elf’s steps were unfaltering, though, and he carried on down the hallway. Argrave felt a rising tension in his chest. Even he could hear the static noise coming from the veins around them. It sounded like the buzzing noise one might hear if they were close to a power line.

They went down another flight of stairs, and Argrave forced Galamon to slow further and walk quietly. Though he feared the buzzing noise of the nearby veins might be masking a rattling, Argrave could still

hear the faint ambience of other things in the ruins. The corpses grew fewer and fewer. Eventually, a room practically bursting with purple light waited ahead, and the three of them proceeded unimpeded.

Galamon entered the room and looked about. Argrave was briefly distracted by the beauty of the room. Each table, each wall, all of the ceiling and floor, had been consumed by dancing purple lights. It was like travelling through a galaxy of purple stars at light speed; Argrave briefly held his hand to the wall, overcome by dizziness. All of it came from a rather unremarkable cabinet in the corner of the room, its wood mostly rotted over the centuries. There were many glass bottles lined up on a table. Argrave walked, scanning the largest bottles for damages or contents. Finding one empty and undamaged, he took it.

Argrave took many tentative steps forward and reached out, opening up the cabinet. There, a stone no bigger than a fist waited alongside various other unremarkable objects. Its shape was rough and unrefined, though it did vaguely resemble a heart. It glowed like the veins dancing about the room. Argrave reached out, breathing quick. He took it and pulled. The veins moved with it, strained, like pulling on a wired plug attached to a wall. With a soundless snap, the veins started to break away. They all faded into nothingness, fading from the edge like a spark travelling along a fuse.

Argrave placed the stone on the bottle's top. It was just barely big enough not to fall in. As the Heart's glow faded, a black liquid started to drip out. The drip soon turned into a steady stream as though someone was wringing the stone. When the bottle was half-full, the stream slowed, and once it ceased altogether, the last light on the Amaranthine Heart died out. Argrave retrieved a cloth, wrapped the Heart, and then stowed it in a bag in his satchel.

With a deep sigh, Argrave turned around to watch the purple lights fade out of the room. "We—" he stopped quickly. Neither Anneliese nor Galamon were in the room. Argrave took a slow step forward, listening carefully. Eventually, he peeked his head out into the hall.

When he saw the two of them standing and looking into a room, some of his tension was relieved. But then he saw Anneliese shaking. Even Galamon was rattled. Argrave took cautious steps out into the hallway, and then peered into the room they were looking at.

At first, Argrave thought the room was collapsed. As his brain made sense of it, he realized what he saw seeing was too white. The light reflected brilliantly off it, like polished marble. Twinges of pink decorated it at points. Then it set in.

Argrave stared at a great mass of Lily Lurkers. There must've been a hundred, if not a thousand. He thought they were dead at first, but the faintest twitch of a tail told him he was wrong.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 55: Hibernation

Staring at the great horde of immobile Lily Lurkers, Argrave first froze as his two companions did. His rationality took over, though, and he reached out to grab both of their hands. Galamon held a dagger, so Argrave settled for his wrist.

"Just back away slowly," Argrave whispered. "They haven't moved yet. No logical reason they will now, unless we do something dramatic."

His calm words brought them out of their stupor, and both backed away further down the hall, led by Argrave. The mass of white and pink insects faded into darkness as the light of the spell illuminating them grew further away. The veins of the Amaranthine Heart slowly faded in the hallway behind them as they fizzled away. Once they were a comfortable distance away, Argrave released his grip.

“Hoo...” Argrave let out a breath of relief. “Damn. Forgot that bottle... That’s...” Argrave cast glances towards the darkness where he knew the room still was. “I feel like we still need some distance. Let’s go to the Archives once more.”

Both nodded without protest, and Argrave took the lead this time. He took the party to the stairs without issue, walking up two steps at a time. Once they reached the Archives again, Argrave led them into a room off to the side. He took off his satchel and placed it atop a table, leaning over it. His body was wracked with sweat. The other walked in shortly after, sitting to rest.

“Galamon,” Argrave called, not bothering to turn to look at him. “Were they all alive? Could you tell?”

“They looked dormant,” a low rasp answered. “Barely any heat. Slow moving. Alive, yes—but weakened. Some form of hibernation, probably. They seemed centralized around something. Thought it might be that Amaranthine Heart you spoke of, got worried.”

Argrave patted the satchel bag. “No. I got the Heart,” Argrave said.

“So your task is finished. We can leave,” Anneliese said.

Argrave slowly turned around and leaned on the stone table he’d placed his satchel bag on. “Yeah. I got what I needed. We can leave,” he said quietly.

Those words hung in the air for a bit. Everyone was clearly relieved, barring Argrave, who had a grim look about him.

“A lot more than I expected to see. We had a little bug boulder,” Argrave said. “I guess, in response to danger... or maybe to the end of autumn—the cold, you know... they all gathered around the queen of the colony. Then, come spring, they’ll become active again. By then, the poison will have soaked into the soil or evaporated or...” Argrave trailed off. “Then they’ll be back at the surface. No real damage done.”

Argrave could not help but think back to the time he’d been speaking to Dras regarding Mateth’s fate. The Patriarch offered him an easy out then, and the same thing came before him now—leave the village, claim the job was done, and with everything he needed in his pocket. Another settlement instead of a victory.

“Argrave,” Galamon said firmly. “You saw how many of them there were. We have what we came here for. No need to risk ourselves uselessly for some field of flowers.”

“You said yourself that these creatures would, at most, displace the villagers of White Edge,” Anneliese insisted, trying to persuade Argrave. “Think about this. Anything needed to kill such a large number of the creatures would be absolutely devastating. Widespread fire might warp the stone and cause the place to collapse—dangerous both to the surface and to us. A collapse alone would make all of the ground above come with it. The entire village of White Edge might sink.”

"But the problem exists, and it'll keep existing. These things will expand, maybe even migrate, in search of food. Perhaps next time, it won't be such a lightly populated area. We're here. We have a chance now." Argrave shook his head.

"Please don't even consider this," Anneliese said insistently. "How will you do this? Perhaps the same way you dealt with those druids—Galamon told me tales of that explosive gas you used on them. Or perhaps more poisons? Even if we are in an ancient alchemy lab, ingredients..." Anneliese trailed off. "Why are you smiling?"

Argrave looked over. "Relax. You make it sound like I have a complete extermination in mind." Argrave kicked off the table he was leaning on. "Cut off a snake's head, it still dies. It might writhe a bit, but it will. We kill the last member of the Lily Lurker royal family—the queen—and the colony will fall apart."

Argrave paced about the room, waving his hands as he explained. "We tell the people of White Edge what transpired, teach them how to brew that poison for the next seasons... problem solved."

"These things might be gathered around the queen—you said so yourself. It will be impossible to do as you say without triggering these creatures," Galamon rebutted.

"You said you barely felt any heat from them?" Argrave pointed. When Galamon nodded, his grin widened. "It stands to reason their dormant state is only intensified by cold—that's just the nature of metabolism and hibernation. Anneliese and I use some low-level ice magic on the bugs sparingly to send them deeper into sleep, we locate the queen, and then we dispatch it quickly."

"Then they all go into a frenzy as we saw on the surface," Anneliese countered.

Argrave nodded. "Might be. But this state that these creatures are in—if what I know of other animals is true, dormancy isn't something they can just drop into and out of immediately. They have to regain their faculties, turn their body back on."

"A lot of speculation," Anneliese said.

"Hey," Argrave raised both his hands. "We'll just test this out. If this doesn't work, I'll call it quits."

"I think this is stupid," Galamon said simply.

"Worst case scenario, we all die," Argrave said cheerily as he threw on his satchel once again. "Probably bound to happen eventually, anyway."

"You're great at raising morale," Anneliese shot back.

"One of my myriad talents," Argrave agreed with the elf's sarcasm. He walked to the entrance, then stopped and turned on his heel. "Listen... if both of you wish to bravely run away, I'll concede. This is, unfortunately, a democracy. I bring you with me because I value your opinions."

"Bring' us, like we're pets," Galamon commented to Anneliese.

"You are his mule," she said back after mulling her response over.

Argrave shook his head. "Do you have a better word for me? 'Lead,' or 'guide,' or 'escort,' perhaps?"

“‘Lead’ works,” Galamon nodded, and Anneliese shortly after agreed. He gestured with his dagger to the hall beyond. “So lead on, foolish leader. I’ll follow.”

Argrave clicked his tongue a few times, then turned around and proceeded into the halls. All of the veins of the Amaranthine Heart had faded, but the dark halls seemed a little less eerie after their banter.

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Argrave confronted a very unpleasant reality when returning to the site where the Lily Lurkers rested dormant.

Walking the walk was much more difficult than talking the talk.

Staring up at the mound of Lily Lurkers, his bravado threatened to die on the vine. At the very least, his presence confirmed they were not actively moving. He heard none of the rattling. Indeed, it was difficult to tell they were even alive. Galamon spoke up from just behind Argrave.

“Tell me again that plan of yours,” the elven vampire whispered. “They’re practically stacked atop each other.”

“Not practically. Literally, I think,” Argrave whispered back. “Maybe you could... go get your bow?” He suggested.

“Foolish. I cannot even see this queen you speak of.”

“Right. Well, first thing...” Argrave walked away from the mass of Lily Lurkers, retrieving the bottle half-full of black liquid in the room the Amaranthine Heart had once been. The black liquid was the pure mana collected by the Amaranthine Heart. The liquid was somewhat dense, but none of it stuck to the glass. Argrave wiped clean the bottle’s neck with a cloth from his satchel, then raised it to his lips. He swallowed only a tiny portion, but it made him grimace terribly. He coughed.

“Eugh. Tastes like acid...” Argrave rubbed his chest as he felt the liquid flow down. He felt a strange refreshing feeling spread across his body, and then some of his diminished magic returned. “Hoo...” he breathed, shaking his head. “That feels nice.”

Anneliese reached forward, silently asking for the bottle. Argrave handed it over. “Don’t drink too much. It’ll kill you in a violent explosion of magic.”

She examined the liquid, holding it up near the magic spell that twirled about her head and lit her surroundings. She took a drink, recoiling at the taste just as Argrave had.

After a few moments, shock registered on her face. “It really is... pure magic.” She stepped towards Argrave, holding the bottle up. “Argrave, this is... this is something the world has never seen before. Nothing the Veidimen have ever achieved in alchemy comes near this single bottle.”

“Don’t get any ideas, now.” Argrave took it back from her. “We’ll be using the Heart to make plenty later.”

“Truly?” she questioned. “I am unsure about you becoming... Black Blooded, as you mentioned some time ago. But this Amaranthine Heart alone makes the trip worth it.”

“Told you to have faith in me.” Argrave walked back out into the hallway, stuffing a cloth into the neck of the bottle as a makeshift cork. He set the bottle down, for it was too large to fit inside of his satchel. “Now, let’s make use of that faith in dealing with the queen.”

He came to stand before the mound of Lily Lurkers. Despite their activities in the other room, the things remained immobile. Argrave rubbed his thumb against his palm. The problem was so massive it was difficult to find a point to begin. Argrave’s companions, even the ever-confident Galamon, seemed to have similar dilemmas.

“...suppose I should do the test run. It is my idea, after all,” Argrave said awkwardly. The two stared at him without response, so he swallowed his saliva and stepped forward. His hand awkwardly hovered above the closest insect’s pinkish eyes. With his gaze fixed on that terrible stinger on its backside, a simple, one-dimensional spell matrix materialized in front of his hands. A mist of cold air began to emanate outward.

There was no immediate reaction to the cold. Argrave’s heart pumped quickly, but he waited as the air before him grew colder and colder. Eventually, even the faintest twitching ceased. Argrave kept up the spell a while yet. When he began to see frost on its body, he stopped.

Argrave bit his lip then reached out, grabbing the Lily Lurker. Its exoskeleton was quite hard. Argrave lifted it, and it showed no response. He took a few steps back, watching its stinger for any movement. Once he was a fair distance away from the rest of them, he set it down gently, scanning the horde beyond it. He saw no movement.

Argrave turned to Anneliese and Galamon, spreading his arms wide. “Would you look at that,” Argrave whispered. “‘Stupid,’ you called my plan.”

Galamon shook his head. “That was but one test.”

“Enough for me, I think. Let’s do it, then.” Argrave pointed to the both of them. “Anneliese, help me. I hope you know the E-rank spell [Ice Mist]; it’s best suited for this situation. Galamon, your job is to monitor and move the insects we... chill. You should also make sure the rest of them don’t start moving about.”

Both of them did not seem especially excited about Argrave’s plan, but neither protested all the same. Argrave and Anneliese used the same spell to exacerbate the creature’s dormancy, and then Galamon hauled them away a fair distance, keeping an eye to be sure neither the ones in the chamber or the ones moved aside posed any threat to them.

Their progress was surprising to Argrave. They dug at the great mound of Lily Lurkers like it was a pile of debris and not a mound of dangerous, man-eating insects. Once they made a fair bit of progress in, Argrave’s spell better illuminated the center. After studying it for a time, he pulled aside Anneliese.

Argrave pointed out. “There’s a big, bulbous... abdomen, I think it’s called, there. A lot bigger than any of the other Lily Lurkers we see.” He moved his finger slightly. “And there. A head. A lot larger than any others.”

“Your queen?” Anneliese inquired.

“Yes...” Argrave whispered back, trailing off. “Well, no, not *my* queen, but *the* queen. Don’t get it twisted.” He looked at Anneliese, brain working quickly. “Then, I think it’s... my time.”

Argrave stepped into the path they’d carved, walking past the uneasy Anneliese. He held his hand out, taking careful aim at what he recognized now as the queen for certain. He conjured blood magic for the second time in his life, using the same D-rank spell as the first time: [Pierce]. A pencil thin red bolt shot out from the conjured matrix, and with it came a burst of pain from Argrave’s wrist.

The shot narrowly missed what Argrave thought was the queen’s head, instead striking one of the nearby insects. Argrave grit his teeth and raised his hand a second time, using the same spell. It struck home this time, and the insect head exploded into white viscera.

With that death, there was a shift in the room. The largely immobile mound seemed much more alive, stirring as if that noise had triggered a natural instinct. It was like something slowly coming to life—nothing moved quickly, but it was clearly waking up.

The pain in his arm was unbearable and Argrave pulled off his glove, staring at his hand. Cracks leaking blood marred much of his skin. Galamon grabbed Argrave’s shoulder, pulling him from his stupor. “Time to move,” the elf said loudly.