

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 56: Escape

After Galamon's direction to move, it did not take further encouragement for Argrave to turn and rush down the hallway. The lack of light made him mind his steps, and he ensured Anneliese was moving ahead before coming to a jog himself. Argrave's arm felt hot, both from the surging pain and the warm blood dripping down it. Behind, the slow rattling of the waking Lily Lurkers escalated into a terrifying sound that consumed the entire ruin—it sounded like metal fragments banging around in a box. The adrenaline narrowed Argrave's focus down only to his escape.

Argrave remembered to grab the big bottle of black liquid mana, and fortunately did so without issue. Anneliese slowed with a spell matrix whirling about in her hand. A larger light spell shot out ahead, better illuminating the path. Argrave greatly appreciated it, but he did not have time to give thanks. Far ahead, Galamon kicked aside one of the returning Lily Lurkers into an open room.

As the three of them finally made it to the stairs, Argrave was already out of breath and struggling to keep his grip on the large bottle of pure magic. He spared a brief glance back to a great horde of the creatures surging along the hallway feverishly. Their movements were much more sluggish than Argrave had seen on the surface, but they were still chasing—though perhaps that was not the right word. Rather than a pursuit, their actions seemed to be frenzied.

Without pausing to rest, Argrave turned his head back to the path ahead and took the stairs two at a time. He made it to the end of the first set, and though greatly exhausted, he turned sharply and took the next. Once at the top of those, his breaths were shallow and rapid, and his thighs screamed at him. His foot brushed against the corpse of a white insect, and he stumbled.

Argrave kept his footing but the bottle threatened to fall from his grip, and he raised his other hand to correct it. The blood made it slip from his grasp, and Argrave desperately fell with it to shield it from breaking. He collapsed, huffing, and his makeshift mask slid off. The bottle remained intact, though, and he tried to scramble up.

"Idiot," Galamon cursed at him, stepping back and seizing the bottle from him. After sheathing his dagger, he grabbed Argrave's shoulder and hoisted him to his feet. The two set off once more with Argrave being all but carried by the elven vampire. His grip was no weaker than a vice.

Anneliese cast yet another spell and a ball of light shot out across the hall, moving slowly and illuminating this floor just as it had the previous. They moved beneath it, its glow following them like a spotlight.

"Just had to be the hero," Galamon said. He slowed his steps, eventually halting. "There are many ahead, at least fifty bunched up. We'll take a different path."

"No," Argrave stopped him, catching his breath. "I'll deal with them." Argrave tried to free himself but found Galamon's grip unbreakable.

"You?" Galamon asked disbelievingly.

“Just as I did the druids. Watch the rear for a moment.” Argrave finally managed to break free and stepped forward, following the light as it advanced. The din of the Lily Lurkers behind them made those ahead barely audible, but Argrave barely began to hear it before he saw many moving forth, frenzied just as those behind them.

“What are you—wait...!” Anneliese called out, but she was too far from Argrave to stop him from proceeding.

Argrave triggered the Blessing of Supersession, and at once, the small lake of magic within him was replaced by a boundless sea. That feeling of overwhelming power from within completely hid his fatigue from his own psyche.

In seconds, the hallway ahead became a show of light. Argrave first used [Wargfire] many times in quick succession. The fiery maws set upon his foe like a pack of wolves, their imitative mouths clamping shut and dicing the creatures in half and setting those near aflame. For a brief moment, Argrave felt he was astride a thousand hellhounds, tearing his foes asunder. The noise of the flame overtook that of the rattling for a brief moment.

Next, Argrave spawned a flurry of D-rank wind spells, cutting and dicing and casting the flames every which direction. The black smoke from their burning bodies dissipated in the winds, cast about harmlessly everywhere. When Argrave finally paused, watching, the hallway before them had become a mess of burnt and twitching parts, blackened stone, and fading flames.

Argrave turned back. The frenzied bugs behind them had not yet come near his two companions. “Come,” he said, gesturing.

Anneliese’s face was written in shock and awe, but Argrave’s words brought her from her stupor. Galamon rushed up, ushering the both of them forward, and Argrave did not protest as he turned and followed behind. Though he’d regained his breath somewhat, the hasty retreat once again labored his breathing.

When they made it to the final set of stairs before the cavern’s exit, Galamon simply turned to Argrave and gestured.

“What?” Argrave questioned weakly after a shallow breath.

“This’ll be easiest.” Galamon stepped forward and wrapped his arm around his torso, hoisting him over his shoulder before Argrave could even react.

Argrave opened his mouth to protest, but Galamon began moving up the stairs and Argrave’s open mouth slammed shut. His teeth clacked together loudly and some pain ignited on the tip of his tongue. Tasting blood the whole way, Argrave was ungracefully carried over Galamon’s shoulder up the stairs. The elf’s steel armor poked and prodded at his ribs.

At the top, Argrave was deposited with as little warning as the initial pickup. He stumbled ungracefully. With little time for admonishment, Argrave could only cast an indignant glance at Galamon before heading down the hallway. Anneliese held her arm up and out, a spell matrix forming, probably in preparation for another spell to light the path.

Spotting something on the walls that was white and mobile, Argrave called out, “Anneliese!”

His words came out as the Lily Lurker's stinger was already in motion. It moved lightning fast, though Argrave clearly saw it stick her arm. She staggered away, holding her arm and letting out a hiss of pain. Galamon kicked the wall, stomping the creature flat with his plate boots. After, he walked beside her, checking the injury.

Argrave bit his lip, somewhat panicked. To keep his calm, he considered his options. The Blessing of Supersession had yet to wear off, and Argrave knew their retreat might be slowed on account of the Lily Lurker's paralytic poison. Recognizing these variables, Argrave stepped to the top of the stairs, looking down.

"You two—get going for the surface. Don't argue," Argrave said loudly, not looking to be sure his orders were followed.

The Lily Lurkers moved up the stairs in bulk, though their numbers had been greatly thinned by their disorderly and frenzied pursuit. Argrave did not hesitate for a second before sending out yet more [Wargfires]. The lupine jaws of flame battered at the stairs, the walls, and the ceilings, turning the brown stone a harsh black. The creatures popped and writhed as they burned, the sound of their rattling tails slowly fading in way of the all-consuming roar of fire.

The air Argrave was breathing was soon replaced by smoke, and Argrave stopped to cough. Delivering only a few more spells for good measure, he turned and ran. Anneliese and Galamon were nowhere to be seen, but Argrave saw a distant light. He pursued it, and as he did so, the Blessing of Supersession wore off.

Argrave kept moving, and the sounds of fire and rattling slowly became distant. He dared a glance behind and saw no pursuers. As he took a deep breath and breathed a sigh of relief, he felt the ground shake. After, a distant noise reached Argrave's ears. It was rattling, but a different kind—stone against stone.

Deciding that he really had no time to rest, Argrave resumed his retreat. He finally spotted the room that they had initially entered and came to it. There, Galamon waited, Anneliese slumped over on his shoulder. After seeing Argrave, he moved for the hole in the wall, exiting back into the cavern.

Argrave soon caught up to the two of them. "Anneliese..." Argrave began despairingly, not knowing what to ask.

"Quiet, unless you wish for this to happen again," Galamon silenced. "Take your bottle, follow behind in silence. I need to hear."

Argrave nodded, and they proceeded up the cavern much slower than they had entered. Anneliese was sweating badly and breathing heavily. Her movements were stiff, and only grew stiffer as they proceeded. Argrave helped where he could, but Galamon did the bulk of things.

Just as their entry had been, they were mostly unbothered by the Lily Lurkers in their exit of the cavern. Argrave could not help but feel a strong sense of guilt and uselessness watching Galamon forge ahead, both dealing with the errant Lily Lurkers and supporting Anneliese. He tried to occupy his mind with what to do once they got out.

Though it felt like an eternity, they did eventually reach the surface. Argrave squinted his eyes at the dusk sunlight when they first re-emerged into the familiar field of lilies. He looked around briefly, then turned to Galamon.

"We have to go back to the village. We definitely have what I need to make an antidote. It should work quickly," Argrave said decisively.

"Right." He started moving, but Anneliese was nearly being dragged along. He pointed to her other side. "Support her."

Argrave rushed to get underneath her shoulder just as Galamon was, adjusting his satchel and the bottle he held. Eventually, they both hoisted her up, heading back towards the village.

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Argrave sat on a chair beside Anneliese's bed, biting his lip in silence. Though she was still sweating a great deal, Argrave had healed the wound caused by the stinger and administered an antidote for paralytic poisons. There was a great uncertainty to the whole thing, and it ate at Argrave's gut. He knew that this antidote worked in 'Heroes of Berendar.' But this was reality, and he was uncertain if things could be so simple as they were in the game.

"You should sleep," Galamon advised, placing his hand on Argrave's shoulder. "She is recovering. We can only wait."

Argrave looked around. They were in a quaint wooden house which was poorly illuminated by moonlight. One of the villagers had graciously donated the use of their residence after learning of Anneliese's injury. Argrave, though, found it impossible to sleep.

Argrave looked up at Galamon. The elven vampire had taken off his helmet. He looked as unshaken as usual.

"Every single time I try to do something beyond my means, someone around me gets hurt. Never me," Argrave remarked idly.

"What of your arm?"

Argrave lifted up his hand. The cracks that had been leaking blood were already healed by magic. "My own doing," he eventually dismissed.

Galamon picked up a chair in the house and set it down quietly. "Best get used to it."

"Hurting myself?" Argrave questioned.

"No," Galamon snorted, sitting down. "Watching others get hurt because of your choices." He pulled up his flask and took a long drink. "You want to rally people, lead them against He Who Would Judge the Gods? Then many more are going to get hurt on your watch."

Galamon pointed at Argrave with his pinky, the rest of his fingers wrapped around the big flask. "Accept it. Come to terms with the guilt. Feeling something because of it doesn't make you weak. It's a reminder you're still mortal." Galamon leaned in. "The people that don't feel guilt because of the consequences of their choices... from what I understand, your father is one such man. They call them tyrants."

Hearing King Felipe called his father was strangely agitating, and Argrave turned away from Galamon's white-eyed gaze. "Father, huh." He mulled over the word for a bit, then turned back to Galamon. He did not wish to think of the matter further, so he diverted the topic back to Galamon. "Do you ever see me as a son?"

Galamon frowned. "Generally, or...?"

"Well, you've got a kid at home, but you haven't seen him in a long while." Argrave pointed to Galamon. "Now you're sitting here, giving me life advice. I'm a bit older, granted, but I'm pretty tall and pale and..." he trailed off, noticing Galamon's look.

The elven vampire stared coldly for a long while. Argrave awkwardly scratched the back of his head, unsure of what further to say. After what seemed like an eternity, Galamon opened his mouth and said only, "You should sleep."

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Chapter 57: The City of Magic

Anneliese blinked open her eyes, dispelling the morning haze over them. For a brief moment, she entirely forgot what they had experienced yesterday, but when she moved her arm she felt a brief twinge of numbness. She was covered in sweat, and her head throbbed.

She shifted her head, looking about where she was. A cold and damp washcloth fell from her forehead. Anneliese first spotted Argrave in his freshly cleaned black leather clothing. He sat just beside her in a chair, reading a spellbook. The sight made her smile slightly until she noticed the dark bags beneath his eye.

Evidently he saw or heard her head moving about, because his gaze shifted over to her. Startled, he closed the book at once, leaning forward. "Hey, Anneliese. You're up, that's good, that's good..." he said rapidly. "How do you feel? Any numbness? I gave you something I thought would work, but I'm not entirely sure..."

"I feel much better," she said, some fatigue still leaking into her tone. "Did you watch me all night?"

Argrave frowned. "I just sat here reading and occasionally trying to help out with the fever," he said dismissively. "I got you into this mess—least I could do is take care of the aftermath."

"I got myself into this," she said with a slight slur. She sat up, her unkempt white hair falling over her face. "Got careless."

"Even if you were careless, it was still my call to do as we did—and this was against your advice. The fault is mine. I'll have it no other way."

She nodded wearily and rubbed her forehead.

"Listen..." Argrave continued. "I've been doing some thinking. About what you said. About me being unable to trust." He stared off into the distance. "If you want, I'll answer some of the questions you have."

Anneliese ceased rubbing her aching head, stopping to look at Argrave. Much was running through her head. Even unfocused as she was, she could think of a thousand questions that came to mind. Then, slowly, the image before her started to crystallize.

She could see a lot of intense emotion on Argrave's face. His eyes refused to meet hers and jumped from place to place. He was biting his lip rapidly, and his whole face was taut. Beyond that, he fidgeted with his fingers. He was a mess of anxiety and uncertainty.

"Feeling guilty?" she questioned.

"That's...!" Argrave started to protest but trailed off. "Wholly right, probably. Not fair to leave you ignorant while you do my bidding. You and Galamon both risked your life for me, and I can't answer some questions? Not right in my eyes."

Anneliese stared at him for a time, and then adjusted in the bed. She thought for a long while. Eventually, she stared him in the eyes and said, "I won't ask you any questions about yourself anymore."

"What?" Argrave said incredulously. "And why not?"

She fiddled with her hair, braiding it together. "I recall, when I was still only a child... I had a small puzzle box. It was a very complex thing, with wooden machinery and gears hidden inside. The objective was... you had to lead..." Anneliese struggled to find the words. "... a small stick with a ball at the end through a maze. The goal was to free the stick from the box. It was no larger than my hand." She held her palm out to demonstrate.

"After failing to solve it for some time, I pulled on the stick hard, and it popped out of the puzzle." She emulated the motion. "I had finished the objective. I got the stick out of the puzzle box. But it left me feeling empty inside, and I had broken the mechanisms within. I could never do it again—never do it right. I learned something from that." She nodded contemplatively. "I'll wait for you to tell me," she finished.

"Huh." Argrave leaned back in the chair. "You sure you're alright? Didn't hit your head? You're the one with a thousand questions at all times."

She only smiled quietly in response.

Argrave shrugged. "Alright. I'm a puzzle to be solved, am I? Well, maybe you'll change your tune once you get some food in you." He came to his feet. "I'll go get something for you to eat, get some water.... Not so long ago you were doing the same for me. How the tables have turned."

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After an additional day of resting per Argrave's insistence, Anneliese was all but fully recovered. Argrave had been worried he would contract yet another illness due to his venture in the dank and filthy cave, but no symptoms manifested. Argrave recalled that nature documentaries called ants 'the cleanest insect,' but they were still insects.

Argrave had plans for the Amaranthine Heart they'd retrieved, but for now, he stored it in a bag wrapped in cloth. Considering its nature, he did not dare store it in the lockbox with the rose gold magic coins or the enchanted jewelry harvested from the ruins guarded by the metal guardians. He was certain

the Heart would attach itself to them and suck the magic right out. Indeed, the Heart was the most efficient way to purge an item of enchantments without side effects.

Considering the rest of the journey to Jast was on carriage, everyone was prepared to travel. After giving some final directions to the villagers to kill the remaining Lily Lurkers with poison, Argrave was content to leave. If the villagers could not be bothered to do as he directed them, Argrave could not fight their battle for them.

And so Argrave and company departed from the village of White Edge in the early morning. The only resident that was awake early enough to see them off was the old man that had initially greeted their arrival: Bertrand. After innumerable thanks from the man, they left quietly, the two suns illuminating their road with the milky light of dawn.

Though Argrave had initially planned to take a detour to a ruin he knew of to retrieve an invaluable spellbook, on account of Anneliese's recent troubles, Argrave decided it would be best to first head to Jast and secure lodging there. Unlike in Mateth, Jast's Order of the Gray Owl branch had quite a grand library, so it was not too monumental a setback.

Once they left the cover of the forest, Argrave leaned out the window to stare out across the landscape. Jast was very obvious from a distance. The City of Shadows, some called it. It was both because of the stone used in its construction—a jet black, harsh rock—and the innumerable towers jutting out from the earth. They were tall and foreboding, and few of them had windows.

"And there is our destination. A lot less pretty than Mateth," Argrave gave commentary as the carriage rolled steadily down the road.

Anneliese also looked out the window, and she showed considerably more surprise than Argrave had. "So tall..." she murmured. "How do they stay standing?"

"Enchantments," Argrave explained. "They would fall without magic reinforcing each and every brick. And some have fallen," Argrave said regrettably. "There are more A-rank wizards in those towers than toes on this carriage, I'd bet. This place is very, very dangerous. Galamon," he called out the window. "You will have to practice extreme discretion with your drinking habit."

"No need to yell. I hear every word you say, even if you whisper," the vampire shot back, driving the carriage disaffectedly. "I've been to Jast before. I know these things."

"Spellcasters must have a reason to make this place their home," Anneliese noted, still staring out the window.

"Magic is denser here. Some natural phenomenon causes it. Which reminds me..." Argrave lifted the bottle full of black liquid off the floor. He willed much of his magic to repaying the debt he'd accrued in the Cavern of the Lily's Death, then took a swig of the bottle.

"Are you sure that liquid is safe to drink?" Anneliese asked, finally turning her head away from the scenery.

"Very sure. It actually helps me greatly," Argrave noted, holding the bottle up. One's magic capacity was like a muscle—it needed to be used to grow. By depleting it and replenishing it, it would expand to

accommodate more magic. By repaying his debt to Erlebnis and then replenishing his magic with the Amaranthine Heart's liquid mana, his prowess as a mage would increase far more rapidly than his peers.

Argrave swirled the bottle about, watching the black liquid's vortex. "Too much of this, though, and *BOOM*, no more living. You'll explode in a burst of mana. The burst looks rather neat, I must confess, though I don't care to see it from a first-person perspective."

"So it isn't safe to drink," Anneliese concluded.

Argrave paused as he felt the mana resurge in his body. "Too much of anything can kill you. You can die drinking water."

"Will you explode in a burst of water?"

"Touché," Argrave conceded. He looked out the window once more. "Alright, enough idle talk. We should discuss what we need to do in Jast."

Anneliese nodded. "That tax collector at White Edge—you truly believe that was a sign for their intention to join the war? If so, my first worry would be entering the city unnoticed. As a royal bastard, you are a target of interest."

Argrave nodded. "Entering quietly won't be a problem. I know of some less well-known entryways used by smugglers and such. Indeed, we'll need to make some connections with the smugglers regardless to deliver those illusion spellbooks to the Veidimen." Argrave looked out the window, searching for the points of entry that he remembered in the distant black city. "I know someone. If I mention a name, I have little doubt he'll do as I request with few questions asked. It's also going to be beneficial to know him. He's the well-connected sort."

"The castle Prince Induen gave me is not so far from Jast," Argrave remarked cheerily, reminded of it only now. "If we're lucky, we might see it fall into the ocean." He spotted Anneliese's frown, and quickly added, "Don't worry, I already sold it. That's how I got all those rose gold magic coins."

She crossed her legs. "Part of me thinks you like to mention ridiculous things casually to elicit a response."

"You're the empath here. You tell me," Argrave replied, neither confirming nor denying it.

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"Boss," came a gruff voice.

A man hunched over a book laid out across a desk looked up, squinting into the faint darkness beyond. A magic lamp was the sole illuminator of the dank stone room, and the place was mostly bare. The papers spread out across the desk were filled with numbers and descriptions of people.

"What is it?" the man at the desk responded. He had dark red hair, and despite his barren surroundings, was dressed quite well in clothes that matched his hair color.

A clean-shaven man with a pockmarked face entered. "New client came in for a simple quiet transfer into the city."

“And you bother me for this? I don’t think you’re that stupid,” the man leaned back in his chair, waving his hands as though to hurry the conversation.

“He matches the description of the person the Bat was looking for. Used the same name, even.”

“Is that right?” the man behind the desk leaned back.

“Aye. He mentioned your name—Rivien. Mentioned the Bat, too,” the man said grimly. “Told us that he’d know if anything was missing. Cargo was just books. Most of them were from the Order. There was also a bottle full of some black liquid—no one knew what it was.”

Rivien frowned, but a smile soon lit his face. “A visitor from the night,” Rivien mused aloud. After a few seconds of pause, he tapped his finger on the desk. “Well, the Bat just wanted word of his location, nothing more. Do as this Argrave requested. I’ll pass this information along to the Bat. Your job is done.” Rivien leaned back to his book.

“Another thing,” the other man said. “Little lord Stain came by asking about the same person, plus the people he was travelling with. Seemed to be about a tip he got about some jewels. I got the feeling he wanted to lift them—was looking for help from the rest of the boys.”

“The little lord?” Rivien asked. “This one... quite the center of attention, hmm?” Rivien leaned and retrieved a key from his pocket, using it to open up a drawer on the desk. He pulled out a piece of paper marked with a wax seal of a bat in the bottom corner.

“I see. Royal bastard of House Vasquer.” Rivien tapped the paper and then put it back where he’d retrieved it, shutting the drawer and locking it tightly. “Tell the men he’s off limits. I don’t play around with the Bat’s interests. And... tell this Argrave that he’s caught the eye of the little lord.”

The man with the pockmarked face nodded. “Should I tell him it’s the little lord Stain, or should I use his real name?”

“Stain,” Rivien said decisively. “Just tip him off that someone might be trying to rip him off. No need to bring unwanted trouble to the little lord. Keep everybody happy.”

“Alright. That’s all, boss.” The man waved his hand and exited.

Rivien watched him leave, then licked the tip of his fingers, retrieving a blank piece of paper from one corner of the desk. He picked up a stick that glowed on the edge and started to write across the paper. Instead of ink, a small flame left burnt words on the paper.

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Chapter 58: Into the Dark Streets

The man masked in a bandana held up a small stone rod, and the lock on the iron gate clicked open. He opened the gate quietly and walked in. Ahead, an overgrown garden waited. Argrave walked through, and Anneliese and Galamon followed shortly behind him. Argrave looked up, seeing several giant black towers looming above. He briefly turned back to the stone tunnel behind them, poorly lit by magic lamps.

“Welcome to Jast,” the man said. “That wooden token we gave you: hold onto it. You’ll need it. Your cargo will be at a house in the southern side of town. Search for the building with the—”

“With the horseshoe hanging from the metal fence—yes, I know, I know,” Argrave interrupted, readjusting his satchel bag where he knew the wooden token was. “That’s all. Have a pleasant day.”

“Right,” the man said conclusively, dragging the iron gate back shut. “Don’t blame me if you get lost.” He looked at Galamon and Anneliese. “Keep your elves in line. We won’t tolerate their kind if they don’t know their place.”

“It’s me you should be worried about,” Argrave dismissed. “If you’re smart, you’ll walk back into that hole,” he waved the man away down the stone tunnel.

After a begrudging glare, the man turned away. Argrave looked around the overgrown garden, feeling somewhat nostalgic. The gate finally shut, and he heard the fading noise of boots against stone as their escort returned to the point they’d been taken from.

“Do most human cities have services like this?” Anneliese questioned.

“No,” Argrave answered quickly. “Jast is special. Considering the number of wizards that make their home here, there’s a large demand for smuggling services. The Order of the Gray Owl is very strict with their management of the sale of magic goods, but a lot of wizards need a lot of money. Ergo, illegal operations like this abound in this city of magic.”

“I question if we may not have attracted more attention entering the way we did,” Galamon noted. “These people... they’re the sort that buy and sell information.”

“Well, I know who they work for,” Argrave tapped his temple. “And it isn’t particularly problematic for me if that person knows I’m here.” With that, Argrave turned on his heel away from Galamon.

Argrave walked about the garden without purpose, looking around and taking in the sights like he was returning back to a familiar place after years. The birds connected to Argrave via [Pack Leader] swooped down, landing on a particularly thick branch. In a big city like this, these birds would be largely useless.

“So, what are we to do here?” Galamon prompted, stepping up to Argrave. He carried Argrave’s lockbox in the crook of his arm, his other hand resting on the handle of his Ebonice axe.

Argrave snapped back to attention, turning back to the two of them. “First we get lodging, we get our cargo, and then we put the cargo in said lodging. I won’t say the rest here. Doubtless the little syndicate we employed has ears on this place. They already know enough.” Argrave turned, gesturing behind for them to follow. “So, let’s be off.”

They walked through the overgrown garden, carefully minding the plants and infrequent rubble. Eventually Argrave spotted a familiar overturned mossy gargoyle and a great abandoned mansion. At one time it may have been a palatial estate, but now much of the towering building was crushed beneath giant black bricks and covered in greenery.

Argrave walked along the outside of the mansion before they came to a simple stone wall. They followed it until there was a hole in the wall, and then exited discreetly into the alleyways of Jast. The buildings were all close-set and made of dark stone, so the scene was quite eerie. Argrave looked back to Galamon, who nodded as though assuring him.

After a quick and tense walk through the alleyways, the din of a great many people moving started to enter Argrave's ears. He could see light up ahead. He moved towards it, and when they passed out of the alleyways, the streets of Jast greeted them. Though not as busy as Mateth had been, the place still abounded with innumerable people.

Even in midday, Jast was a very dark place. The bricked stone road resembled concrete after rain even when completely dry. The sunlight was partially blocked by the many towers standing hundreds of feet above them. It reminded Argrave of big cities with skyscrapers, though the streets were not even a tenth as busy. That the towers above were flanked by ordinary, unremarkable buildings created a strange juxtaposition.

It was just as Argrave remembered the city. The thought made him want to sigh, but he kept it inside. Anneliese was looking around everywhere, her curiosity unrestrained as ever. Argrave grabbed her and Galamon, bunching them closer together, before conjuring a D-rank ward around them to block the sound. No one looked at them strangely—blocking conversations in this manner was a common occurrence in Jast. People mostly stared because it was strange to see three people so tall in such close proximity.

"Now that we're out of that little den of inequity, I can tell you what we're really going to do. We have enough money to buy one of these towers about town, but it's all in rose gold magic coins—a little bit difficult to pay for bread or a bed with what amounts to two thousand gold coins," Argrave explained. "We need smaller denominations.

"As such, for our first order of business we'll sell some of the jewels. Maybe even some of that jewelry from the ruins," Argrave tapped the lockbox in Galamon's hands. "From there, we'll buy some of those circlets you can see people wearing. I mentioned this to you before, Anneliese. Look," Argrave pointed to a person in a passing crowd. "See that man with the iron band on his forehead? It's a bit difficult to distinguish his features, right?"

Anneliese and Galamon both looked.

"A lot of people like to wear those here..." Argrave remarked, his head following the man as he walked along. "It's a pretty common item, especially on account of the ever-present criminal element. Just a simple illusion enchantment. Anneliese and I probably see past the magic much clearer than Galamon, a non-mage. It's going to be difficult to blend in with people because of our heights, but we can at least disguise from the general public that you're both elven... and that I'm handsome."

Both turned back to face him, neither particularly amused by his joke.

"Alright, give me some credit, at least," Argrave said defeatedly. "Anyway, from there, I have a great big list that I need to tackle one by one. I've been thinking a lot about that tax collector showing up to White Edge. I'd like to figure out what's going on before we prance on over to the Burnt Desert. If the Duke of Elbraille has decided to throw in his lot with the rebels, then it'll be over like that and we'll be on our merry way," Argrave emphasized with a snap. "If not... well, this won't be a brief stop."

"I presume you already have something in mind?" Anneliese asked.

"You presume right," Argrave nodded. "I need to have a little chat with a man by the alias of 'Stain.' He's a somewhat unpleasant person." *And a main character*, Argrave dialogued internally.

“Strong words from you,” Galamon noted.

Argrave clicked his tongue. “He’s quick-witted, I suppose, but he’s not someone you’d really trust. He’s a rogue, a thief, a swindler, and many other such reprehensible professions. His biggest merit is that he’s got a high position in Jast.” Argrave shrugged. “This may be a dead end. As I understand, he’s inclined to travel a lot.”

Argrave had changed Nikoletta’s course because he’d directly intervened in what occurred to her before the game even began. Melanie was at Mateth and would likely remain there for some time. For the other seven main characters, Argrave could not remotely predict what they’d do.

At the very least, Argrave knew Stain had reasons to stay near Jast. He was one of three characters inclined towards rogue-like professions, and Jast offered many opportunities for such individuals. This came alongside his local ties to the area.

As Argrave was lost in thought, the ward that he’d conjured finally expired, shattering soundlessly into fragments of magic and dissipating into the air. He stared at the magic briefly before tapping his feet against the ground.

“Shopping... I hate to admit it, but I am feeling strangely excited. It’s been such a long time,” some of Argrave’s giddiness leaked into his voice and he cleared his throat. “Let’s be off to a jeweler’s I know of—no delays. So much to do...”

#####

Once Argrave sold yet more of the jewels he’d pilfered in the ruins guarded by the metal things, he went to one of the more reputable and well-guarded inns on the northern side of the town. It still made him uncomfortable to leave their lockbox there, considering the fortune it held.

Argrave made sure to clean himself thoroughly in their washroom, and he finally managed to feel truly refreshed for the first time after their journey into the Cavern of the Lily’s Death. There were few opportunities to clean so distant from civilization as they had been, and Argrave made sure to take full advantage of the time he had here.

When that was done, Argrave put on his now somewhat-worn leather clothing and left the inn with Anneliese and Galamon. Jast was quite a confusing place to navigate. The city was level and much of its buildings looked the same, so Argrave mostly relied on the shop signs to remember where he was. After a few misremembered turns, Argrave finally spotted the horseshoe hanging from an iron fence.

Just behind the iron fence was a simple little house. It looked abandoned and poorly maintained even made of stone as it was. The glass windows had been blown out and replaced with wooden boards. Argrave gave the horseshoe a spin as he passed by it, and it jangled noisily against the fence. He opened the fence’s gate without any hesitation.

“You first, Galamon,” Argrave gestured. “Not expecting trouble, but don’t relax.”

Galamon adjusted his axe and shifted the greatsword on his hip. “I never do.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Argrave commented as Galamon walked by. “Worrying, even. Everyone has to take some time for themselves.”

“Rich words from your mouth,” Anneliese noted as she entered after Galamon.

Argrave entered, shutting the gate. “If I could afford to, I’d be relaxing every day. I have bigger issues. I’m sure you understand.”

“All too well,” she concluded, walking ahead after Galamon.

Argrave followed Anneliese to where Galamon waited at the door to the house. The elf held up four gauntleted fingers, and Argrave quickly processed he meant there were four people inside. Argrave nodded and gestured for Galamon to open the door.

Galamon knocked, and in not half a second the door shifted open slightly. A chain stopped it from opening too far.

“Token,” a rough voice said simply, two fingers peeking out like a pair of pliers waiting to grasp together.

Argrave reached into his satchel bag and pulled free the wooden token, handing it to Galamon who passed it on to the doorman. The door shut, and then after a few seconds of locks jangling, opened widely. A man wearing leather armor walked away casually. He was armed, Argrave noted. Galamon took steady steps forward as he ducked into the house, metal boots clanging out and disturbing the silence.

Once they were inside, Argrave shut the door behind them, looking about. Two people sat casually by the house’s boarded windows, watching the outside. They had crossbows loaded with bolts that shone with enchantments hanging idly in their hands. They did not seem to be particularly wary of Argrave or company, instead focused on the outside.

“Here are your things,” the man called out ahead, drawing Argrave’s attention. They walked into what might’ve been the abandoned house’s living room at some point. The man walked up and banged his hands against a wooden crate. He inserted the wooden token into the side of it, and it popped open. He took off the lid and reached in, trying and failing to pull something out.

The fourth man in the house walked up, helping the first haul Argrave’s chest out of the crate. They set it down loudly, huffing. “Heavy stuff. What’s in there? Dead animals? Dead people, maybe?”

“Sure, act like you don’t know...,” Argrave commented, kneeling down and popping the lid. He did a brief perusal to ensure nothing was missing, but all seemed intact. The men brought out the bottle of liquid magic next, setting it down.

“Satisfied?” the man inquired. He put the lid back on the crate and jumped up on it, sitting. The other leaned up against it, watching.

“Indeed,” Argrave said conclusively, shutting the chest of books. “There’s another matter I might employ your little crew for.”

“Is that right? Well, the boss told me to pass on something to you, so let’s get that out of the way first,” the man sitting atop the crate said. “That little lockbox you had your man there carry? Someone’s got a bead on its contents. A local thief—everyone calls him little lord Stain.”

At once, Anneliese cast a glance at Argrave.

"Did he now?" Argrave said with some pleasure apparent on his tone. "And what does he believe is in my lockbox?"

"Jewels, apparently," the man said with a shrug. "The boss thought you should know. He's told the men to lay off, but Stain isn't with our crew, so he might do something stupid. Just a friendly warning from your neighborhood heroes," the man concluded, spreading his arms wide with a grin. "Now, what's this business you wanted with us?"

Argrave let a silence take the room for a moment as he ran down the series of events that led to this. *The tax collector had to report about an anomaly in the tax collection process. Little lord Stain, well-connected to the bureaucracy as he is, heard about my payment in jewels. He'd be drawn to this, naturally.*

"Funny coincidence, this. My business was with him. Have any idea where I might find him, a general direction?" Argrave pointed with his fingers.

"You know him?" the man asked, raising a brow. Argrave did not answer, and so the man continued. "As to where he lives... well, the boss wouldn't be fond of me running my mouth. I can't help with this business of yours."

"I've learnt enough," Argrave said with a smile. "Galamon, grab the chest and let's be off. It's been a pleasure, gentlemen."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 59: Stain

A man walked down the streets of Jast with his head hung low, brown hair covering much of his face. Rather than sad or dejected, he seemed to be lost in thought. He wore somewhat rugged clothing that matched very well with the color of the buildings throughout the city, enough so that it might be impossible to see him at all in the dark.

It wasn't that I couldn't swing it. All of them were ready and eager when I told them about the score, but they changed their tune in hours, Stain considered. This guy probably had some ties with the Order here. Maybe he's a key man between the wizards and the crews. Would explain why he had jewels... might explain why he was at White Edge. Might be a warehouse.

Stain lifted his head slightly, scanning the crowd ahead. At this point in his life, he'd become very adept at spotting wealth on people. Rings on fingers, jewelry, where they might keep their gold... it was a skill that needed to be honed, just as one had to learn how to take it from them.

No luck today. Waste of time, he concluded about the passersby. His mind wandered back to the mark he'd been considering. Maybe I should go to White Edge, scout things out. It's clear that the man didn't want the tax collector going into the village. There had to be a reason for that... might be worth much more than jewels when all is said and done.

After stopping and looking to be sure none were following him, Stain turned into an alleyway. He walked quickly, taking winding turns with complete confidence, before coming to a run-down portion of Jast. Some of the finely paved street had caved in here. This place had once been a cistern, before the Order had made a more easily accessible place for the people to fetch water.

Stain walked down into the caved in portion, scrambling over loosely packed rubble. He ducked into a portion that was large enough for him to fit, and then stared out at the underground cistern. The water level had lowered over the years without management, but it was still relatively full. Stain sat, removing his boots and socks. The dagger he'd hidden in his footwear dropped out, and he caught it.

After rolling up his pants Stain entered the water, disturbing the still underground lake. Holding his dagger and boots above the water, he headed for a faint light on a distant wall. Once he reached it, he climbed up onto a raised alcove just before a simple makeshift door. He looked around a bit.

Looks like one of the lamps broke again, Stain noted, setting his footwear and dagger aside. *Cheap junk.* He turned and sat on the alcove, waiting for his feet to dry before placing his socks on. He watched the ripples he'd made spread across the cistern's water.

Without warning, something cold touched Stain's throat, and he heard a single footstep beside him. His breathing stopped, and he turned his eyes to see a giant of a man holding a greatsword down to his neck. His features were muddled, and Stain saw an iron band on his forehead—a Circlet of Disguise.

"Stand up, enter the door. Test me, you lose fingers," the man said, his voice low and gravelly.

Stain swallowed, looking between his dagger and the cistern, judging loosely if he still had time to jump in. *Getting cut once... should be worth it. I can lose him in the water—he's wearing plate mail.*

"My feet are wet. I don't want to walk barefooted, and I don't want to put my socks on when they're still wet," Stain spoke nonsense to stall for time.

Stain did not have time to react as the man's foot struck his chest, sending him sprawling back away from the water. He coughed, winded, and gazed up weakly. He heard the door open.

"Galamon...", the voice said, somewhat annoyed. "I told you not to be too mean."

"You also told me he was shifty beyond measure," the man called Galamon retorted. "He was looking for a way to run. Seen it before."

The other voice sighed. Stain tried to crane his head to look, but suddenly a foot pressed down on his chest. The one called Galamon stared down at Stain, features indistinguishable because of the circlet he wore.

"Stop it. Don't make it worse," the other said urgently. "Just bring him inside."

#####

Galamon tossed Stain against the wall, and the man slowly slid down until he was sitting. Galamon kept the greatsword in hand, but he no longer pointed it at Stain's neck. Stain looked young—he was sixteen, Argrave knew.

Argrave sat in a chair, watching this all happen somewhat apathetically. He looked around, spotting where Anneliese was idly reading through the various pieces of paper on a desk. She wore a Circlet of Disguise just as Galamon did. They had purchased them on their way here.

There was a busted lever in one corner, and a collapsed stairwell on the opposite edge of the room. There was also a badly worn and poorly constructed bed. Argrave recalled this place well. It was Stain's little hideout in the game.

"This is where you live?" questioned Argrave. "I can understand the people that want to live humbly despite their wealth, but this is just... filthy. I hate it here."

Stain caught his breath, slowly correcting his posture until he was upright. His gaze flitted between Argrave and Galamon.

"The whole point of being a thief or a swindler is to make money. What's the point if you're living in a place like this?" Argrave asked further. "Just don't get it."

Stain raised a finger slowly. "You're the guy. The... the wizard from White Edge. Seven feet tall, black hair, elven companions—that's you."

"Yes, I think I am 'the guy,'" Argrave confirmed. He had his own Circlet of Disguise just as his two companions, but he elected not to wear it at this moment.

"Listen," Stain said insistently. "Everybody else started to back off from the plan. I'm smart enough to get that message. I stopped planning to search for those jewels."

"That's nice," Argrave nodded.

"You want me to stop sticking my nose in—I get it," Stain raised his hands as if surrendering. "You'll never see me again. I'll stay out of your way. No need for this."

Argrave leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. "I'm here because of your other name. Veladrien of Jast. Now, with a last name like 'Jast,' one might think you have some ties to the lovely little city."

Once Argrave said that Stain paused, taking a deep breath and exhaling. He chose his next words very carefully. "Look. I understand that you might have some business going on in White Edge. Maybe it's got something to do with the Veidimen—I know they have some operations here, and I remember that tax collector mentioning you were travelling with two elves," he said, gesturing to Anneliese.

"You might be thinking that, because I'm Count Delbraun's brother, I might sell you out, get the Count's eye on your business. That is not the case," Stain said insistently. "That's not my business, not my nature. I've got the mouth on a statue, pal."

Argrave listened curiously. Evidently Stain was trying to save his life, though Argrave had no intention to kill him.

"Count Delbraun hates me," Stain said. "The reason why I took the name 'Stain,' is because he called me 'a stain on Jast's honor.'" Stain chuckled nervously. "That's a true fact—you ask anyone high up in the Riveters. It's common knowledge."

"Riveters. That's the name of the smuggler group, I presume," Argrave questioned.

"Aye. Rivien's crew." Stain nodded. "I live in this charming little lakeside house because I refuse to accept any of my brother's money. He'd let me live in his... his gilded palace, I'm certain, but he and I are not close at all. He doesn't care if I live or die. I am not worth your time, I assure you."

Argrave leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms. "But you're still a little entrenched in that side of things. How would you learn about the tax collector if you didn't have some connection to the Count? The count received the taxes, after all. You had to learn about the jewels from him or his people."

Stain started breathing a bit faster. "Aye, I saw the tax collector's report in Delbraun's estate, and I spoke to him, but... but everything else I said was true," Stain pointed his finger to emphasize the point. "Just ask around. You'll find the truth."

"So you can get into his estate. Did you sneak in? And be honest," Argrave cautioned.

"I-I..." Stain trailed off, brain scrambling. "No. I still have access. Delbraun lets me in, mostly on account of my other siblings there. I check his documents sometimes to find things that I might get some people on, skim a little off the top..."

"Well, that's peachy. Precisely what I need." Argrave clapped his hands together, the sound muffled by his gloves. "Here's the thing. You like money," Argrave pointed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pink coin. "I have a great deal of it. Would you like some?"

Stain sat there, mouth agape with his eyes locked on the rose gold magic coin. He was quick-witted enough to gather himself and respond, "I wouldn't say no."

"That's good. But I'm not a philanthropist." Argrave nodded and stowed the coin away. "Here's the thing. I have the sneaking suspicion that the Duke of Elbraille, Count Delbraun's liege, is preparing for war. I need to confirm that suspicion and get all the juicy details about who he intends to support in the civil war. You catch where this is heading?"

Stain's eyes jumped about as he digested what Argrave had said. Seeing that the three of them were not, in fact, here to kill him, Stain adjusted his posture.

"You want me to get some correspondence between the Duke and my brother showing if he has any orders from up high," Stain laid out, and Argrave nodded. "I can tell you what I know already. Delbraun planned to remain neutral, but lately, Jast has been quietly gathering troops. A lot of the wizards loyal to the Count have already been told not to go anywhere as their services might be needed very shortly."

"So they are going to choose a side in the war," Argrave noted.

"Aye, were I to guess," Stain nodded slowly. "But nothing's going to happen for a while. Winter's coming. No one wants to war during winter, not even with magic."

"I need more than that," Argrave declared plainly. "If this is happening quietly, the Count doesn't want people learning of which side he intends to support until it's too late. I need to know if he's going to fight for the rebels or the tyrants."

"Alright," Stain nodded. "And the pay?"

“Anneliese, give him the down payment.” Argrave said. She stepped forward and handed a sack of coins to Stain. He took them, unravelling the string and counting. He closed it, a dissatisfied expression on his face.

“Did you sell some of those jewels to get this?” he asked.

“I did,” Argrave confirmed.

“I could have got you a premium price. Big mistake,” he said remorsefully.

Argrave chuckled. “I know my business. Got nearly three thousand for a few sapphires.” He saw Stain try and hide the fact that he was impressed, and Argrave stood with a grin. “You do well, might be I’ll hand you a rose gold magic coin. Get me everything you can, Veladrien. And don’t think of running with that paltry purse. If I could find this place, anywhere else will be twice as easy.” Argrave tapped his temple and ducked through the door. “See you soon.”

“How will I get the info to you?” Stain called out.

“I’ll be back in a week or so. Might be here. Might be anywhere. Just keep watch.” Argrave waved behind him and finished, “If you have something urgent, talk to Rivien—he can probably find me.”

#####

Stain let out a long sigh as the door shut. He stood and fell back into his bed. A thousand curses were running through his head. He had not been expecting his day to be like this.

Damned scary bastard.

He was running everything through his head, trying to figure out how the man could find him here. No one knew of this place—none that he knew of, at least. This place had always been his sanctuary. He felt safe here. Yet that man had found his ‘sanctuary’ a mere day after Stain had asked a few questions about him.

Guess this is the difference between the big fish and the little fish. If they’re asking about the civil war, they’ve gotta be working for a major player—out of town, even. Stain held the bag full of gold coins in the air, moving it about with his fingers. *I do this right and I earn a lot. I catch the eye of someone high up, might be this becomes a regular thing.*

Stain sat up, looking around what he once called his sanctuary. *This is just... filthy*, the man’s words echoed in his head. Stain clenched the gold bag a little tighter and muttered, “Better get started, then.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 60: Profligate

Argrave neatly placed a single piece of paper atop the table in the center of their inn’s room. They had rented a rather large room with six beds intended as a dormitory. It had been more expensive, but Argrave thought it would be best if they slept near each other and no one protested to the idea. He might’ve found another abandoned house as he had in Mateth, but most ‘abandoned’ places in Jast had some ties to smugglers or criminals.

Galamon handed Argrave a small metal rod with inscriptions across its length. Argrave took off his gloves and grasped it. Its tip glowed hot, and Argrave touched it to his skin briefly. It was quite hot.

"Such an interesting tool. Creates burn marks in the paper instead of using ink," he mused, tapping his finger against its tip again and again. "I digress. We have a lot of things to pick up."

Argrave pointed his new writing utensil at Galamon and Anneliese, who both stood beside the table. "I'm going to write most of it down. Come, let's sit." Argrave gestured to the chairs and sat in one himself. "Let me cast a ward, block off anyone who might be listening..." Argrave provided commentary as he did just that.

"Alright..." Argrave began, voice echoing in the spell of his making. "So, first, there's the urgent matters. We have to go to the Jast branch of the Order of the Gray Owl to retrieve the shipment of illusion spellbooks for the Veidimen. Considering how long we were at White Edge, they should be here by now... at least I hope," Argrave shrugged, writing that first item down.

"While there, we can finally pick up some of the books I need there. We'll be swimming in C-rank spells, you and I," he said grandly, grabbing Anneliese's arm. "We can also learn if they decided to accept you into the Order. If fate is unduly kind, you'll be given full membership. If fate is passably kind, you'll be given honorary membership—not unheard of for elves, and it suits our purposes. If they refuse you outright... well, I'll have to teach you spells illegally."

Anneliese seemed a bit taken aback by this, but Argrave did not give her the time to say anything further.

"After, we're going to be replacing our wardrobe. Jast has passable craftsmen but an abundance of enchanters. That said, there's one world-renowned shop here that tailor-makes enchanted leather gear. For a high price, we can get it out of a special material—manticore leather, the like. This is what I'll be purchasing for us, Anneliese. I think two sets should be sufficient."

"One for each. Very generous." Anneliese nodded and smiled.

"Uh, no." Argrave shook his head. "Two sets for each. I'll not walk around without changing clothes for months, nor would I subject a companion to the same fate. Besides, they're sure to be damaged protecting us." Argrave tapped his finger against the desk, thinking. "If I remember right... the price should be altogether no more than 80,000 gold, depending on the material. I think I'll offer forty rose-gold magic coins outright... I'm sure I can swing that."

"Hold," Anneliese said quickly. "One could buy much in Veiden with that. Even some chiefs of great tribes would never see that much money in their life, before or after Dras' conquest. Is gold less valued on this continent?"

Argrave opened his mouth to answer, but Galamon took off his helmet and placed it on the table, then set his elbows down loudly. "Gold is likely more valuable here," he said, voice quiet. "A sizeable family could eat for a day off ten or so gold coins, from what I have seen in my travels."

Anneliese looked at Argrave with her eyes wide. Argrave gave a nod of confirmation and went to the paper.

“So, 40 rose-gold magic coins from our 164 brings us to 124, or...” Argrave paused, doing the math. “248,000, give or take a little. The conversion rate isn’t 2000 per coin exactly, but it’s close.”

“Wait,” she urged. “Can we be so flippant with money? You do not need to purchase so much whimsically. I would not feel disparaged were you to buy less for me.”

“And why would I do that?” Argrave responded in confusion. “All of you need to be as well-equipped as I am, if not more.”

Anneliese sat there with mouth agape, and Argrave shook his head and went back to his task. “After, we’ll need some enchanted jewelry. Metal holds magic better—as do gemstones, but well-enchanted jewelry is ridiculously expensive. The craftsman has to be able to make a ring to very precise specifications after the initial casting. It takes a jeweler knowledgeable in extremely complex enchantments. As you might imagine, such a person is not exactly common, and so they are quite expensive.”

Argrave pointed to Anneliese and himself. “For us two wizards, I say one ring each. For Galamon... you can regenerate, and rings will be cumbersome anyway.” Argrave wrote that down. “Even with our enchanted leather armor, it would be best not to grow reliant on it. The enchantment should be for protection—I’m thinking a B-rank warding spell at least. I think I’m willing to pay, at most, 30,000 for both of these rings.” Argrave scribbled the figure down, and Anneliese shook her head disbelievingly.

“But now Galamon is feeling neglected,” Argrave continued. “Since Barden, you’ve been walking about with a hole in your armor’s torso. I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know you’ll be getting new armor. I can’t afford to have someone else enchant it, but—”

“I’d like to have this set repaired,” Galamon interrupted. “I’ve done it before and I can work with the smith. With two smiths, it would still take around two weeks, though,” he cautioned.

“Don’t like human forging styles, hmm?” Argrave questioned jokingly. “Well, sure. I’m not sure if that can be done, but we’ll see. Next order of business... there’s that crown you took from the ruins a long while ago.”

Galamon nodded. “Will we sell it?”

“No, that’s ridiculous,” Argrave admonished. “It’s an artifact. It uses magic that can’t be replicated anymore. You’d be wearing it right now if it wouldn’t be odd to walk around with a crown on your head in the city streets,” Argrave pointed at Galamon. “We’ll have armor forged around it. Shouldn’t be too difficult. You do recall how much stronger it made you, right?”

“I do,” Galamon nodded. “But protecting the head is too important to use it actively.”

“That’s why we remake it into a helmet.” Argrave spun his writing utensil in his hand. “If it’s just smithing the armor... I suspect it may not even enter a five-digit figure. Spellcasters overvalue their services—go figure,” Argrave said musingly. “I’ll mark another 10,000 for your armor and helmet to be on the safe side for budgeting. So, 208,000 remaining. Time for the real money sinks,” Argrave said with a smile. They both looked overwhelmed.

“Galamon, put your metal weapons and your bow on the table.”

After glancing about, Galamon stood and grabbed his greatsword from the corner of the room. He pulled his dagger from its sheath, and lastly grabbed his bow.

“Do you like all of these?” Argrave questioned as the elf set all of what he’d retrieved down on the table.

“After decades of trial and error, these work best,” he said simply.

“I see that,” Argrave reached forward. The dagger was simple: merely a straight guard and a simple blade, unadorned. The greatsword was not so—it resembled most a kriegsmesser with the blade curving at the end. Argrave touched the sword. “Very nice. Did you get this in the north? I don’t think they make weapons like these in the south.”

Galamon raised a brow. “Yes, it was the north. You know weapons?”

“No,” Argrave dismissed. “I like them, and I know the styles particular to each region, but beyond that I have no damned clue.” Argrave thumped his finger against it, and it rung out. “I’ll get them made to these specifications. For the greatsword, we’ll get powerful offensive wind magic. It’ll make cuts easier, shear through armor as though it were wheat. You can use it at range. It’ll also reduce the damage your blade takes. Less contact.”

“Very prudent for a long journey,” Galamon noted.

“Precisely,” Argrave pointed to Galamon with his writing utensil. “Repairing enchanted stuff is expensive. Other enchantments might be more potent, but they need constant maintenance.”

“So... for a good enchanted greatsword...” Argrave tried to think back to prices in the game. “...my ceiling is probably 75,000.”

There was a palpable discomfort in the room after Argrave spoke the figure. Argrave leaned forward and laid it out. “We’re getting top-end stuff, here. I suspect this’ll be better quality than the royal guard’s weapons. This is equipment that’ll carry us for years. They need a smith that can make the inscriptions for enchantments without compromising the integrity of the blade. A mage and a smith in one.” Argrave leaned back in his chair, feeling his point was made. “That kind of expertise is costly. Don’t balk at the price.”

“It is merely difficult to process you would spend so much for equipment not intended for yourself,” Anneliese finally said.

“Oh.” Argrave nodded, finally seeing things clearly. “If I wanted money, I could make money. It would take time, that’s all. In fact, I’ll probably do a lot of money-making when this great big journey is all over, provided I don’t die terribly during it. For now, I trust two things; I trust you,” he said, grabbing their arms with each hand, “and I trust that you both know the consequence of failure.”

Both of them grew serious when Argrave said that. He tapped their arms and leaned back. “If you die because I was stingy, it would be immeasurably saddening. My success would also be much more far-fetched. So, you’ll take what I give you, I hope,” he concluded, grinning.

Galamon crossed his arms and gave a single nod, and Anneliese eventually conceded too. He deducted 75,000 from the paper.

“Wonderful. Now then. This bow...” Argrave picked it up. “We’ll hold off getting a new one. I’d rather get one from the elves in the Midwest part of Vasquer. They have some pact with the dryads, can get dryad wood... well, not important yet,” Argrave waved his hand and shook his head.

“And the dagger?” Galamon prompted.

Argrave picked up the blade in question. “Probably a fire enchantment that packs a lot of punch. I’m told burning your enemies from the inside is very potent. It’ll be temporary, and probably cost about 20,000.” Argrave wrote that number down on the paper.

“Temporary?” Galamon repeated.

Argrave crossed his legs and leaned back. “I have a set of daggers that you’re going to get eventually, but they’re not the sort of thing you can buy in stores. They’re near House Parbon’s Lionsun Castle.”

“I don’t use multiple daggers.”

“Not yet,” Argrave said simply. “When you see them, you’ll change your tune. You won’t be using them all the time, either, but instead just when we’re fighting... giant things,” Argrave concluded broadly.

“Giant things,” repeated Anneliese incredulously.

“Yes, giant things,” Argrave nodded. “I told you genuine monsters were going to appear, though there’s no shortage of giant things already in this world. Gerechtigheit is the final test, but he’s got plenty coming before. We’re talking things that make your dragon back in Veiden, Crystal Wind, seem small.”

Argrave did not give them time to digest his words. “I think this is the last thing, now. Those Ebonice daggers that Dras gave me as a gift—I’m going to reforge a great deal of them into arrows.” Argrave pointed to the elven vampire. “You’ll have to do this bit, Galamon. I don’t trust any of the people in this city with Ebonice, as they don’t work with it.”

Galamon nodded. “We’ve done it before back in Mateth. Should be no problem.”

“Good,” Argrave nodded. “We’ll also commission some enchanted arrowheads. I’m thinking... whatever brings us down to 50 rose gold magic coins flat. With that, we’ll have a generous leeway in this budget. The rest of the money I need for my plan with the Amaranthine Heart, appraising the jewelry we got from the tomb, future purchases... and rainy days.”

Argrave wrote that final bit down and tossed down the writing utensil, stretching. Anneliese and Galamon both sat in silence, and the ward blocking their sound finally broke. Anneliese pursed her lips, then hesitantly opened her mouth.

“I don’t think I realized how much money you had.”

Galamon nodded, and another long period of silence stretched out. Galamon tapped his helmet and said, “I regret agreeing to this for only three thousand gold.”

“I was poor then,” Argrave shook his head.

“You had nearly seven thousand gold,” Galamon said.

“Exactly,” Argrave nodded. “That was barely enough for one of these items.”

“That...” Galamon trailed off, and then shook his head.