

Jackal 61

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 61: Book Mule

Argrave walked into the branch of the Order in Jast with long, confident strides, though he had to admit that he felt rather isolated without his two companions shadowing him inside. They were just outside, waiting patiently. Provided Castro sold Argrave's proposition well, Anneliese would be given membership to the Order of the Gray Owl soon enough.

The Jast branch of the Order was quite a grand place in comparison to the one in Mateth. It occupied one of the taller towers in Jast. The black interior was just as grim and dour as the rest of the city, though it was brightly lit by magic lamps. At the center of the room, there was a large spire, a round desk circling around it with many attendants sitting behind. The spire was hollow, and there was one entrance at the front of it.

This place lacked stairs just as the Tower of the Gray Owl, and so the central spire housed those floating platforms of stone that would raise one from one floor to the others. They were the only way to move upwards in the tower.

He stepped to the desk, and the attendant craned her neck to look up at Argrave's face.

"Hello, sir," the woman said somewhat meekly. Argrave didn't recognize her, so she must not have been important.

"I have an inquiry," Argrave began without pleasantries, removing the circlet on his head that disguised his features. He stowed it away in his satchel bag and continued, "Has the tower sent any notices regarding the library and an individual by the name of 'Argrave?'"

"Oh," she said quickly, taken aback. "Um... yes, they have. Is that...?"

"That's me, yes," Argrave said with a small smile. "So, then I have free rein of the library?" Argrave looked towards the central spire, preparing to enter.

"Hold on a moment..." she shuffled through various papers on the desk, and Argrave waited patiently. Eventually she pulled out a piece of a paper. "Apparently... your identity needs to be verified. We'll use your magic signature... so, please empower your badge and stamp here." She held out a piece of paper.

Argrave paused, then obeyed her directive, retrieving his Wizard's badge. *Hold a moment... they take this signature when you register as an Acolyte. Will this even work? What is a magic signature? Where does it come from?*

Lacking options, Argrave could only shake his head and will some magic into his badge. It shone, then he lowered it and pressed it down on the backside where it was flat. Blackness spread out across the paper where he'd pressed like a blooming flower. After a moment, the attendant gestured towards him to pull it away, and he did so.

She compared it to another piece of paper, looking back and forth between the two meticulously. Argrave felt a little nervous. "Excellent," she said finally, setting both pieces of paper down. "Then that's done."

“So, what, I get a library pass now?”

“Oh, um...” she paused, shuffling through more papers nervously. “Yes, I think... but I don’t think I can give you it... I think you have to get it from the Order branch manager, sir. I think that’s the case.” she said respectfully.

“You do a lot of thinking, it would seem,” Argrave noted sarcastically. “Can you take me there? Or at least think about it?”

She blushed and stood from the chair. “Yes, I can take you there. Please follow me.”

The attendant opened the desk’s door and walked out from behind it, leading Argrave to the central spire. She pressed on the interface at the side of it, and before long, a wide platform came down before them. She walked on, and Argrave followed after. Soon enough, he felt his feet lock just as before, and the platform began to shift.

The desk attendant stared down at the ground, awkwardly silent the whole way. Argrave considered saying something, but then resigned himself to examining the other people moving about in the central spire. They were carried all the way to the top, and Argrave walked out first, waiting for the attendant to take him to the branch manager.

The attendant led him to a wooden door and knocked thrice before opening. “Please wait,” she said deliberately, then walked inside. Argrave heard a brief exchange between two female voices. After a few seconds she came back out, ushering Argrave inside. He entered. There, a beautiful red-haired woman wearing gray robes waited at her desk. She had sharp features that gave one an impression of fierceness—narrow green eyes, low-resting brows, and seemingly naturally pursed lips.

“Hello Elaine,” Argrave greeted cheerily. “Nice to see you. Here for my library card—got a few books in mind.”

Elaine was taken aback when her name was called, and Argrave considered that a good start. In a city like Jast abounding with smugglers and wizards, one had to be somewhat ruthless to rise to the position of branch manager, and Elaine certainly fit that bill. She was Rivien’s sister and a powerful wizard in her own right. Connections and magical power—that combination was quite potent. At present she was B-rank, and in the future she would rise to A. Argrave did not wish to linger long, but he did not wish to offend, either.

“So, the world-famous Argrave knows me,” she said, matching his cheer and thereby trying to regain control of the conversation. Her green eyes stayed locked on him. “I’m humbled.”

“Which world am I famous in? I must’ve missed the memo,” Argrave returned.

“The spellcaster’s world, of course,” she said with a smile.

“Maybe when I’m asked for an autograph, I’ll agree with you. For now, I just want to get some books from the library as Castro promised. I’m rather busy, you see, forgive me,” Argrave redirected the conversation away from himself.

“Ah, yes. I’m told you’re quite a... what’s the word... bibliophile,” she nodded, rising to her feet. She took something off her desk, but Argrave didn’t see what it was and it soon disappeared into her sleeve. “I’m told you even have spellbooks containing druidic magic.”

Argrave took a breath, considering the implications of her words. He wished to ask if Rivien had told her that, but he stopped himself. *Considering her brother is Rivien, it may well be she learned from him... but... she doesn’t know I associated with her brother’s smugglers, and it’s been only a day. It’s unlikely she would’ve learned already. Considering her talk about my fame, it’s much more likely that she learned from other people in the Order. As such, I shouldn’t reveal anything.*

“Not ‘have,’ but ‘had,’” Argrave shook his head after his correction. “I gave them all to Castro. I’m sure that’s how you know of this,” Argrave lied.

“Not quite how I learned, no,” she shook her head, walking closer while lifting her head to hold Argrave’s gaze. She was taller than most, but in front of Argrave near everyone was short. “People tell me you still have a great deal. An enviable amount, even.”

Argrave tried to keep his face neutral. *Probably bluffing. Even if she’s not, I shouldn’t admit it,* Argrave reasoned.

“People say a lot of things, Elaine,” Argrave said while sighing. “People say that the crown prince eats puppies alive for breakfast. Do you believe that?”

She laughed. Argrave thought it sounded fake. “Well, I cannot speak to the prince’s eating habits... but I do know this. If you do have any druidic spellbooks and you wish to earn some significant money... you might lend them to me for a day or so. They’ll be returned to you, and you’ll be able to receive all of the credit and the rewards for submitting them to the Order of the Gray Owl. Your coinpurse will be a little fatter, and you’ll have all the fame.”

She held her hand out, a strange metal badge in her hand. It bore an owl’s face in gold. Argrave reached out and took it. “This is the access I need for the library?”

“Yes,” Elaine nodded. “It’s usually only given to branch managers or the Masters of the Order, but Castro made an exception for you. Now—”

Argrave cut her off. “Then, is there any update on whether my friend Anneliese will be given Order membership?”

“The council will hold a deliberation at a later date. Now, back—”

“And that shipment of illusion spellbooks—is it ready? I’m sure Castro mentioned this if he sent out word of my access to the libraries...” Argrave interrupted again.

“No,” she said. If she was frustrated by his interruptions, Elaine was quite adept at hiding it. “The last of the books are arriving from the Tower tomorrow. Now, back to my offer,” she said quite deliberately.

Argrave stared at her eyes as he considered his answer. *Is it even worth considering? She probably won’t offer enough money to make a difference, and I take an unnecessary risk. There’s no benefit to this deal for me.*

"It sounds like a wonderful proposition," Argrave said, hiding the badge away. "But I cannot well knock on Castro's door and demand back what I have already given to him."

She clicked her tongue, green eyes locked with Argrave's own. She held out her hand for a handshake. "Well. If you change your mind, my offer is always open. If you have no need for money, I can offer other services."

Argrave considered that might be an innuendo, but dismissed the idea; Elaine had pride, at the very least. "Even if you offer to shine my shoes or clean my house, I simply don't have the books." Argrave shook her hand quickly. "Until next time, branch manager Elaine."

She stared for a few seconds, then nodded. "Yes. Until next time." Perhaps Argrave imagined things, but her voice sounded somewhat cold.

Argrave turned and walked out the door, a smile on his face. Once it shut, that smile vanished. *She's definitely going to have her brother spy on me to see if I actually have those books.* Argrave reached into his pockets, pulling out a folded-up piece of paper that had a list. *Looks like I have another thing to add—pay a visit to Rivien, make sure he doesn't help his sister.*

Argrave sighed, despairing, until he remembered the badge he'd acquired. He took it out and flipped it in his fingers. "I've got a golden ticket," Argrave muttered, his smile returning. He set off towards the central spire's elevator, whistling the rest of the tune.

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Argrave figured that, in the remainder of the day, whatever so-called fame he'd accrued at the Order of the Gray Owl quickly became infamy. He spent the remainder of the day hauling out books four at a time from the library at the Jast branch, feeling no shame at all for the glances cast his way as he did so. At first, no one seemed to care. After the fifth trip, people were skeptical or surprised. After the fifteenth, there was disbelief and contempt. None could protest in the face of his golden ticket, though, not even Elaine.

It was rather amusing to Argrave watching Galamon's face gradually grow more and more dour as their bags were slowly filled with books. To his credit, he carried all of them without complaint. Their innkeeper cast them a strange glance at the elf weighed down by dozens of books, but Argrave paid it little heed.

Once they were all placed in their dormitory, Argrave took them out of the bags and arrayed them out.

"You want to draw any more attention to yourself?" Galamon questioned. "Hauling hundreds of valuable books about—what were you thinking?"

"I know, I know... Originally I *had* planned to do this quieter, but something came up. We have to go speak to someone, get some protection," Argrave answered. "A man by the name of Rivien. I like him quite a bit. He's the boss of those smugglers. He'll watch our backs, I'm sure."

"You trust criminals?" Anneliese questioned.

"I trust this one," Argrave said conclusively. "He cares about reputation and image, and I can think of some things to leverage over him."

“Fine. We should do this tomorrow, though. I’ll stay here tonight, keep watch,” Galamon nodded.

“Perfect,” Argrave concluded, picking up one of the books. “Look at it, Anneliese. It’s beautiful. Every C-rank and B-rank spell we’ll be learning, all arrayed before us—completely free,” he said, barely containing his excitement. He stroked one of the books. “A-rank spells are only kept at the Tower. Sensible, I suppose.”

“We’ve got warding spells,” Argrave listed, pointing at them as he listed them. “Elemental spells and healing magic. Three illusion spells—the rest in that branch are worthless for our needs,” he said dismissively. “We’ve got blood magic. We’ve got enchantment methods,” he pointed, grabbing one. “Frankly, I don’t even know if I should have taken these. Castro only specified spellbooks. But they’re mine now,” Argrave said with a hysterical laugh.

Argrave calmed down, sighing. “This is the most fun I’ve had in a while. I can’t wait to crack these open. Maybe... no, I don’t think I need to sleep tonight,” Argrave nodded. “I slept around four hours yesterday, that should be fine...”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 62: Siblings of Vyrbell

Argrave peered past an iron fence into a well-managed estate garden. It had a fountain, a very brief hedge maze, and at the very back, a rather grand mansion. Evidently a smuggler and a branch manager of the Order could grow very wealthy working together. Argrave nodded in recognition then turned away from the fence, gesturing to Anneliese and Galamon to follow. He made his way to the gate. A lone knight guarded it rather idly.

“Hello,” Argrave greeted, voice somewhat dull. He had not slept a wink, and as much reflected in his general demeanor. He learned a C-rank warding spell, though, so the effort was not wasted.

The knight did not react, so Argrave repeated, “Hello,” louder and more insistently. The knight turned his head to the sound slowly and then came to attention when he saw the three of them approaching, placing his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“This is the estate of Lady Elaine of Vyrbell. Please keep your distance,” the knight said loudly.

Argrave knew that this was only her estate in name only—Rivien made the majority of the money, but he didn’t wish to draw much attention to himself.

“I see, I see. Well, I wish to speak to Rivien of Vyrbell. I’m sure that he’ll want to speak to me,” Argrave clapped his hands together diplomatically.

When Rivien’s name was mentioned, the guard noticeably hesitated, his helmet moving back and forth between the three of them.

“...the lord is likely having breakfast now,” the knight said slowly.

“Just tell him that Argrave would like to see him. I have a matter he might help me with.”

The knight nodded, then stepped over to ring a bell. A servant from inside the gate came rushing forward in short order, and the knight relayed Argrave’s message. Content, he stepped away from the knight, facing Anneliese and Galamon.

"Anneliese. Keep an eye on the people in this meeting, try to feel out their dispositions towards us." When Anneliese nodded, Argrave squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them, trying to dispel his tiredness. "Head's killing me. Eyes hurt. At least I'll sleep easier tonight," Argrave focused on the positives.

"I slept, so I feel fine," Anneliese said pointedly. "You should not stay up all night, even if you are having fun."

Galamon eyed the both of them. "Fun? You only studied."

"No, we learned magic," Argrave corrected. "In terms of activities, it is immensely satisfying to see one's studies come to fruition. It's like..." Argrave searched for the right words. "Building yourself. Adding to yourself. Getting new limbs, new tools, that all exist within your mind."

Anneliese nodded, then turned her head to watch the servant that'd moved away return. He spoke to the knight, and the armored man nodded. He walked over to the three of them, and Argrave turned.

"Lord Rivien will receive you alongside Lady Elaine," the knight walked to the gate, opening it. "Our footman will take you to them. I would ask that you remove the circlets disguising your appearance."

"Alongside Lady Elaine, hmm? What a delight," Argrave said with a smile, feeling like he'd dodged a bullet. "You heard him. Circlets off, company," Argrave directed, doing so as he spoke.

After a neat bow the footman led them through the garden, past the hedge maze, and through the door. They were greeted by a fanciful great room with two parallel winding stairways leading to a second floor. Here, at least, there was some respite from the constant dreary black present in most of Jast—the inside was mostly marble and dark wood, tastefully decorated with silver at points.

After some turns, Argrave and his companions were led to a room guarded by two knights. The footman wordlessly opened the door and gestured inside, where Argrave entered. A small dining room awaited them. Barring the attending servants, there were two people present. Rivien sat at the head of the table opposite the entryway, while Elaine sat at the seat closest to his left.

"See?" spoke Rivien, mouth still full of food. He chewed and wiped his face with a napkin, swallowing before saying to his sister, "I told you."

Elaine was a little shocked to see him, and Argrave relished in that fact. He walked towards them, arms outstretched. "Speak of the devil and he shall appear," Argrave said, staring at Elaine the whole while. "Though perhaps that idiom is not popular in this place. Hello, Rivien. We have not met before, but I know you quite well."

Behind, Anneliese and Galamon tried to enter but were stopped by the knights. "The guards should wait outside," he heard the knights argue.

Argrave turned on his heel. "Guards? These two are my companions."

"Let them in," Rivien said decisively. "And shut the doors."

The two elves entered the room, and the doors were shut behind them. Argrave turned back. "Very kind of you to welcome me into your home on such short notice."

"Business is scarcely kind," Rivien said, planting his fork down and taking another bite of food. He chewed, staring at Argrave. He was quite a well-built man, and that made the finely made red clothes he wore appear much grander than they were. He seemed to be around his mid-thirties, and he had a pair of bright green eyes that made his gaze piercing.

Once Rivien swallowed, he pointed to a chair beside him. "Have a seat. Your companions, too." He set the fork down for a moment, resting his elbows on the table and clasping his hands together. "I understand you wanted to have a conversation with me?"

"Yes," Argrave nodded, making a show of walking slowly to the chair. "And who is this but Elaine?" he commented. "How might you know Rivien?" Argrave pulled back the chair closest to Rivien, opposite Elaine, and sat down. Anneliese and Galamon sat to his right.

"He's my brother," she said, face taut.

"Your brother. Imagine that," Argrave said sarcastically. "It's such a small world."

Rivien was faintly amused by his theatrics, just as Argrave had been aiming for. He took his elbows off the table and grabbed the fork once again, pointing at Argrave with it. "Would you like some pork or ostrich egg? My chef is quite exemplary."

"No thank you," Argrave shook his head. "I've eaten. I have to apologize for interrupting a lovely breakfast between siblings for talk of business, but I think this might interest you."

"Certainly. But I have to ask... how is it you came to know of me?" Rivien inquired, taking another bite of food.

"Our mutual winged friend," Argrave said with a small smile, referring to who Rivien knew as 'the Bat.' In most of 'Heroes of Berendar,' the Bat was an enigmatic figure whose agents were central in many side quests. But Argrave knew who it was; Princess Elenore, a master strategist and schemer. Even blind, she sees more in Vasquer than all—or so some would say.

Of all the Vasquers, Elenore was the most reasonable and measured. On the flipside, she was the most deceptive, and capable of more cruelty than all of them. Hers was a dispassionate and pragmatic cruelty, derived not from sadism but from benefits. She worked only for herself.

As Argrave recalled, she had been one of the more popular romantic options. Many people like the idea of fixing a flawed person and winning affection from callousness. Her story was quite sad, Argrave had to admit, but then most of the Vasquers' lives were misery. Argrave did not dislike her especially, but he was not overfond of the idea of working with her. Considering her influence, it seemed an inevitability.

Argrave glanced at Anneliese. *Well, with Anneliese here, I'm sure I won't be too badly screwed by her. Even if she's not as good at scheming as Elenore, Anneliese's smart enough to stop me from getting swept into the fire.* Anneliese returned Argrave's look, confused. Argrave shook his head dismissively, smiling as though to tell her it was nothing.

"As I thought. You see?" Rivien pointed to Elaine, drawing Argrave from his thoughts. "Well, if it's that..." Rivien looked at the attendants still in the room and gestured towards the door with his head. They all bowed at once and made for the door quietly, filing out one by one. Argrave waited quietly.

Once the door shut, Rivien said, "This room is warded. You may speak freely without fear of being overheard."

"I warded it, in fact," Elaine interjected.

"How reliable, Elaine. What a power duo," Argrave clapped his hands together. "To business. Firstly, I need you to get in contact with the Veidimen smugglers that come here. I know they don't work with you, but you can swing it, I hope."

Rivien briefly looked to Argrave's elven companions. "The snow elves are skittish, especially after the failed invasion. If we contact them unexpectedly..."

"They're expecting something from me. Elaine, I'm sure you know of what I speak."

"I do. Castro sent the shipment," she confirmed.

"Excellent, excellent," Argrave nodded. "We'll have to discuss things further later."

"Alright. My commission, then," Rivien said, placing his elbows on the table and leaning in.

"Hold for a minute," Argrave raised one finger up. "There's another matter, so let's make this a bundle deal. Your crew... the Riveters," Argrave said unconfidently, and seeing Rivien did not react, assumed he said it right. "I'm going to be moving a lot of very valuable things around. Doubtless word has already reached you about the innumerable books I hauled from the Order's libraries."

Rivien put his hands out. "I ordered my men not to touch your things. If you're related to the Bat in any manner, I won't get involved. I've learned much from others' mistakes regarding that person. Much of my success can be attributed to him."

"Well that's just it," Argrave continued. "Your little crew is the largest in town, and considering the valuable things I'm moving about... protection would be nice. I'd like you to watch the inn I'm staying at, make sure no undesirables set foot in there. In general, I'd like it if you could make sure no one bothers me as I attend to my business in Jast. It would be very much appreciated."

Rivien tilted his head, expression stoic. "And if you placed some value on that appreciation?"

Argrave rummaged through his pocket and pulled out five pink coins. He slid them over to Rivien, then spread his hands out. "Is that sufficient?"

"How long will you be staying in Jast?" Rivien eyed the coins.

"Hopefully no more than three weeks," Argrave responded quickly, anticipating the question.

Rivien reached his hand out across the table and placed a single digit on each coin. "Five now. Five more in three weeks, with the possibility of extension should your business be unfinished."

"Come now," Argrave began. "Your merry band is likely the most influential in Jast. If you put the word out that the very tall, very skinny man with black hair is off limits, everyone is going to fall in line without a word. My offer is reasonable."

"You're high profile," Rivien shook his head. "The invasion at Mateth—rumor is spreading you stopped it. The Duke is calling you the 'Hero of Monticci.' There might be unexpected variables to deal with."

"Is he now?" Argrave confirmed. He started gritting his teeth after Rivien nodded in confirmation. *I told Nikoletta I wanted no credit—nothing. What is she thinking? Or is it Duke Enrico?*

"Fine," Argrave agreed hastily, both fatigued from lack of sleep and bothered by the news Rivien shared. He stood, offering his hand. "Five more in three weeks. I suppose keeping me intact long enough to pay will give you an incentive to offer good protection."

Rivien took his hand, green eyes veritably glittering. "You'll be safe, I assure you. It's my business. I'll contact the Veidimen. Shouldn't take long if they're waiting."

"I certainly hope so," Argrave nodded. "Now, Elaine. Let's work out those illusion spellbooks for the Veidimen, shall we?"

Elaine stood, her expression somewhat icy. "Yes. Let's."

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"So? Any thoughts?" Argrave asked Anneliese and Galamon as the iron gate of Rivien's estate shut behind them. Elaine had decided to go ahead to the Tower to get the shipment ready, and Argrave intended to join her in short order.

"Probably prudent. What few men I saw in his gang seemed competent enough. Well-equipped, at the least," Galamon noted as they walked away from the fence.

"I believe he was being genuine," Anneliese commented. "As for the other, Elaine... I could tell she was very bothered by the matter."

"You think?" Argrave turned. "In what way?"

"Her pride was hit. She felt made light of—slighted, mocked. I thought that may have been what you were aiming for, what with the jokes. If not... that was what you achieved."

Argrave bit his lips. "Some people... no sense of humor." He looked to Anneliese. "Do you think she'll do something?"

She thought. "Elaine also seemed bothered her brother did not defend her in the slightest. I believe... granted, I did not see much of her... certainly not enough to say with certainty... but she may not make things easy for us. If we're to be working with her, it might cause problems."

With a sigh, Argrave stopped in the road. The other two stopped shortly ahead, then walked back to rejoin Argrave. "Maybe we should just kill the old bag." Seeing Anneliese and Galamon shift uneasily at the prospect, Argrave quickly added, "I'm only joking. But something will have to be done."

"From my observations alone?" Anneliese asked uncertainly.

"Alone?" Argrave repeated. "Your observations are worth a great deal 'alone.'" Argrave looked up at the distant Order tower. "I guess I have to be more considerate of people with prickly prides and enormous egos," Argrave muttered, lost in thought. "Let's go back to the inn before we meet her. I have an idea that may benefit everyone."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 63: Friends in the Business

Argrave walked into the Jast branch of the Order of the Gray Owl, adjusting the strap of the satchel bag off his neck. He looked behind his shoulder briefly. Anneliese and Galamon waited at the entrance, unable to enter as they both lacked a badge. It reminded him of a pair of parents watching their kid to go to kindergarten, and Argrave briefly chuckled.

His mirth very quickly died when he saw Elaine standing just before the central spire elevator, staring at him. Argrave figured by and large green was a warm color, but her eyes of that color were quite cold—or perhaps what Anneliese had told him was already shading his world in a different light.

“Do you find it funny to keep me waiting?” Elaine asked when Argrave came closer, immediately dispelling any doubt he had.

“My apologies,” Argrave said sincerely, coming to stand before her. She looked up at him boldly. “There was something that I needed to get before this. I should have informed you.”

Evidently the sincerity had no holes in it, for Elaine could only stare back for a few seconds before nodding. “And my proposition earlier—I can assume your visit to my brother is your answer to that? A resounding ‘no.’”

“I can see why you might think that,” Argrave nodded. “But I was telling the truth back then. I don’t have the books.”

She kept her gaze locked on Argrave for a few moments, and then turned away. “You were smart to go to my brother. He’s the best you can ask for in town. I hope things go well for you.”

It sounded a conciliatory statement, but Argrave trusted in Anneliese’s instincts and decided to continue with his plan, beginning, “There is another thing we might discuss after we take these books to the Veidimen, though. Something far more worth both our time than books, I think.” Argrave pointed a finger. “And you know what they say—time is money.”

“Do they now?” She turned her gaze back to him.

Argrave spread his hands out. “There’s a reason I wanted someone watching my back here. Some things I’ve got... let’s just say they’re not light burdens.” He tapped the satchel on his waist. “But we’ll talk more about that someplace where everyone isn’t staring at us. Provided you are amenable to that, Miss Elaine,” Argrave finished suavely, dipping his head.

She pursed her lips. “We’ll see what happens,” she said vaguely. “They’re bringing the illusion spellbooks down. Shouldn’t be much longer.”

“I guess you would have been waiting after all. All’s well that ends well,” he said brightly, trying to focus on the positives.

“I suppose so,” Elaine agreed, turning around. Argrave raised a brow, then shook his head. *It’s a start, I suppose.*

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“Are you sure that Rivien will have things ready for us?” Argrave questioned, walking through the iron fence to Rivien’s estate for the second time today. With Elaine beside him, he did not need to wait to be seen by Rivien—one small fortune.

“My brother is remarkably efficient,” Elaine said simply. “At the very least, considering he is the person who these books need to go through, it would be best to move them to this location.”

Galamon stepped forward just behind them, carrying the large box of books as though it did not weigh as much as himself. Two of Elaine’s men moved behind him, at a loss as to what to do considering Galamon carried the cargo alone.

“Why do you travel with elves?” Elaine inquired, the first question she’d asked in during their entire walk. “Moreover, elves recently responsible for an attack on Mateth.”

“It’s nice having people the same height as you. Makes you feel like you’re normal,” Argrave said, then laughed. “Only joking. Why does anyone gain friends? It’s the way things worked out. As you can see, both are quite reliable.”

“Friends,” Elaine said somewhat disdainfully. “They aren’t being paid?”

“Anneliese isn’t. He used to be,” Argrave pointed to Galamon. “Now he’s my indentured servant.” Elaine looked at him for a moment, and Argrave leaned down and whispered, “Polite term for ‘slave.’”

She snorted and turned away while shaking her head, but Argrave didn’t miss the smile. *Seems like I’m winning her over, if only just. Unless that’s a smile of derision. Always a possibility.*

Rivien opened the door and walked out, then noticed the oncoming cargo and stepped aside.

“Going out?” inquired Argrave, stepping off to the side as Rivien had done to allow Galamon to pass.

“No. I know my sister. She’s impatient, she’d want to do this right away,” Rivien said, watching Galamon walk past.

“Come now, impatient? The nicer word is ‘prompt,’” Argrave defended light-heartedly. “She said only nice things about you, I’m sure you can manage the same.”

“Is that right?” Rivien said, glancing at Elaine. “Good to know, I suppose.” Rivien did not dwell on the subject long. “My men will lead yours to where I’ll hold the stuff. I’ve reached out to the crew I know that works with the Veidimen, mentioning what you had, your name, things like that. Should work, provided they’re actually expecting you.”

Argrave stepped inside Rivien’s estate alongside Elaine. “And I assume you’ve already got people watching out for me?”

“Yes,” Rivien nodded, stepping inside and shutting the doors to the estate behind him as Anneliese entered last. “Word is out that you’re Riveters’ property—that includes the stuff you have in the place you’re staying, that inn. Nice place. You chose well.”

Rivien stepped into the great room, continuing. “Any people spying, prying, or otherwise scrying will give up their chase or end things with a bolt to the head... and if we can’t manage to do that, we can at least warn you who’s got their eyes on you. Premium services, I’d say.”

“Better be, with what you’re charging,” Argrave said derisively.

“Well, my charging is done for now, unless you have more business with me,” Rivien said.

“Not with you. The other red-headed one, though, I do,” Argrave pointed to Elaine, who seemed surprised that Argrave had been serious. “Can we use that same room as last time for a discussion?”

“Business with my sister?” Rivien smiled incredulously as though it was amusing. “Who am I to stop you from going into any room in the house? Your name is on the deed, branch manager Elaine.”

“Right then. Shall we?” Argrave asked. “I promise this’ll be worth your time.”

Elaine furrowed her brows for a moment. After a time, she hesitantly nodded.

“Hold on,” Rivien raised a finger. “I have a question for you, Argrave.”

“So you do,” Argrave nodded. “Will you ask this question, or just hold onto it?”

Rivien snorted. “The Bat. Have you spoken to him?”

Argrave nodded. “Indeed I have.”

“Care to share anything? Might be I can waive this fee altogether,” Rivien suggested.

“Well...” Argrave paused. He didn’t want to attract Princess Elenore’s attention quite yet. Spreading details about her would be a surefire way to do so.

Argrave leaned in close as though he was telling a big secret and whispered, “‘Bat’ is not a real name. I’m sure this comes as an immense shock, but it’s actually an alias.”

Elaine laughed a little while Rivien stared with a smile on his face. “I see. I guess he must choose his agents right, because no one I’ve spoken to cares to divulge any information on who the Bat is. All I can surmise is that they have a lot of money and they’re very smart.”

“Wealthy, smart... that sounds like you’re talking about me,” Argrave pointed to himself. “Add ‘handsome,’ you’ve got a dead ringer.”

Rivien shook his head amusedly as he sized up Argrave’s spindly limbs. “Handsome? Even if there’s a sterling face on skin and bones, doesn’t change the big picture. Few women like someone they can take in a fist fight,” he grinned somewhat provocatively, but Argrave wasn’t bothered.

When Argrave didn’t rise to the bait, Rivien scratched his chin and turned, waving them away. “Well, banter aside, I have nothing else. He’s all yours, sis.”

#####

“So, what is it you wished to speak to me about?” Elaine asked, gaze sometimes drifting to the satchel bag he held.

“Straight to business,” Argrave said, shutting the door behind Anneliese. He turned to the dining table, which had been emptied. “I like it.”

Argrave grabbed the strap of his satchel bag and picked it up, laying it out across the table. He opened its flap and pulled free his lockbox, setting it on the table. The Amaranthine Heart was visible, and Argrave pushed it back into the bag self-consciously. He retrieved the key for the lockbox from his breast pocket, briefly brushing against the bronze hand mirror, and opened the box.

The metal lid of the lockbox opened, revealing glimmering jewels, jewelry, and myriad shimmering pink coins. "Take a look at this," Argrave said, gesturing towards the box. "Ignore the rose gold magic coins. That's not what this is about."

Even Elaine, who lived in a grand estate like this, showed considerable shock at seeing Argrave have such a staggering quantity of money. Argrave smiled. He had been hoping for this reaction.

By visiting her brother, Argrave had demonstrated that he did not trust Elaine. The action also wounded her pride. By showing her something that was ostensibly secret—Argrave's money—he showed that he did trust her.

Argrave knew a simple principle; by showing trust in someone, it is easier to receive it from them in return. Elaine was the manager of the Jast branch of the Order of the Gray Owl. Having a good relationship with her would make his activities in Jast go smoothly, and would likely have benefits in the future, as well. Argrave took no risk by showing this one card in his hand. Elaine was a bit ruthless, but she respected her brother's business partners.

"Look at these," Argrave continued on, fishing a necklace out of the lockbox. "Look at this lovely emerald pendant. It might go well with your nice green eyes." He held it up, and she frowned. "Don't get angry. I'm not here to sell you jewelry. Each and every one of these lovely pieces is enchanted." He dropped the necklace and it clattered against the rest.

"So?" she pressed. "They're stolen, and you want me to sell them?" She shook her head. "You'd be better off bringing this to my brother."

"No. They aren't..." Argrave trailed off. "I guess they *are* stolen," he turned to Anneliese, musing. "We took them from a grave, technically. But their civilization died thousands of years ago, so it should be fine, no?" He bit his lip. "No, I suppose not. I guess I'm a bad person."

"Talk sense for a minute," Elaine said. "You took these from a grave?"

"An elven tomb," Argrave corrected, moving his finger from Anneliese to Elaine. "Each and every piece of enchanted jewelry in here was made with lost methods. Might be some of them are useless. Might be some of them are invaluable. That's what I need your help with."

"My help?" She shook her head. "How am I to believe you about their origins?"

Argrave grabbed the crown from the lockbox. "I know this one's effect. It enhances your physical strength and stamina. Try it on."

She hesitantly took the crown from Argrave's hand. It was almost too large for her head, and it sunk down a fair bit before her bountiful red hair caught it. "I feel nothing."

"Try jumping. Or running," Argrave suggested.

She frowned at Argrave, but seeing him remain serious, she jumped. She got a great distance off the ground and panicked. After waving her arms about, she landed ungracefully. The crown fell off her head as she struggled to keep her balance. The crown rolled away, and Argrave stepped forward, grabbing it elegantly.

"That's a genuine artifact," she said, staring at it. "Physical enhancements caused by enchantments are a lost art. And it was pulled from that tomb?"

"Correct," Argrave nodded. Seeing her amazed stare at the crown remain unbroken, Argrave added, "I have some plans for this one. It's these others I want to entrust to you. When all is said and done, perhaps we can discuss selling some of these to you." Elaine's gaze turned back to stare up at his face, and she nodded.

"As I recall, you mentioned you warded this room," Argrave waved his hands about. "I need someone well acquainted with enchantments to discern what each piece of jewelry does. I can offer a significant price," Argrave added, rummaging through jewels and pink coins all but overflowing from the lockbox.

"Well..." Elaine stepped forward, picking up a piece of jewelry. She held it up in the air, studying it. "To be frank, this is beyond my expertise. It's one thing for me to know enchantments that the Order has documented and that exist, but one would need certain specialists to decipher ancient enchantments..."

"And who would know those specialists better than Elaine of Vrybell, manager of the Jast branch of the Order of the Gray Owl?" Argrave smiled.

"I guess you do know a thing or two," she admitted, lowering the jewelry and placing it back in the lockbox. "Let's talk a service fee."

At those words, Argrave nodded with a faint smile. He might be able to get it cheaper if he skipped by Elaine and went directly to the people she'd reach out to, but oftentimes knowing the right people was more important than getting the best prices. *Always nice to have friends in high places. I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship built on half-truths and money.*

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 64: Sowing Seeds

In the days to come, Galamon was strongly reminded of back when he and Argrave had been planning for the assault on the druid's camp. Argrave led them through the city as adroitly as one who lived there, heading to obscure shops and famous shops in equal measure and setting various things in motion. They were unbothered by any, though Galamon was acutely aware of the people watching them. At times, they would be accosted by irate people suspicious that they were Veidimen, but when Argrave removed his Circlet of Disguise and revealed his non-elven features, that was typically enough to send them away.

There was an undeniable tension in the city. Galamon mostly harvested his blood from places like taverns, where the people within would be less cautious of him and far easier to prey upon. While there, he often witnessed people come to blows in debates regarding the cause of the Snakes or the Lions. Common opinion seemed to favor the rebels. Furthermore, the word of an invasion against Mateth had set people against the Veidimen, stoking tempers more yet.

Much of Galamon's time was occupied with the repair of his armor, as the smiths needed to be directed in Veidimen styles. Galamon made use of the days spent on this endeavor to make the Ebonice arrows from the daggers as Argrave had suggested. Galamon used all but five daggers and chiseled out thirty Ebonice arrowheads. It would be more than sufficient for their needs for a long while, he suspected.

The rest of Galamon's time dealt with accompanying Argrave on his spendthrift shopping journeys. Galamon had been unsure that Argrave's price estimates were accurate, for most of the things he intended to purchase could be considered heirlooms in aristocratic houses. Most of the time, Argrave managed to get them far cheaper than he initially predicted. Much of it was due to Argrave's bartering prowess.

The majority of what Argrave ordered would take some time to finish, and so once all of the requests were put in and down payments were made, their party retired to the inn and devoted their time to study. Argrave often drank the black liquid magic and talked about 'repaying his magic debt quickly.' It was idyllic compared to their usual activities, and Argrave commented on that fact often.

They were only disturbed on the seventh day of their stay.

#####

"What are you doing?" asked Galamon, who'd just re-entered into the inn's room. He wore plain brown clothes with long sleeves. His frame was large and the clothes stuck tight, giving the impression he wore something too small. "What are you wearing?"

Argrave stood beside a table, where an empty pot and a potted plant rested beside each other. The 'potted plant' was, in actuality, a strange multi-colored mushroom sprouting about a foot high. Argrave wore an apron and held a small shovel, where he lowered dirt into the empty pot. Anneliese watched as though the ordeal was fascinating.

"Some light gardening," joked Argrave. He looked into the empty pot. "I suspect this much should be enough..." He retrieved a stone shaped like a real heart and lowered it into the pot. "Now, let's put the Amaranthine Heart into there... and next, this plant."

"What was it you called this?" Anneliese pointed to the plant.

"Hydra's Canopy." Argrave pulled out the mushroom and lowered it into the other pot, whereupon he promptly buried it in dirt. "It's well-known for being ridiculously resilient. You cut off the mushroom's cap, it's grown back by the end of the day and then some."

"So, because of its resilience, the Amaranthine Heart can extract more liquid magic from it before the plant dies. It has more life to convert to magic."

"Sure," Argrave said, piling dirt on. "There are plants we might use that are more cost-efficient, but this little mushroom offers the most yield in the shortest amount of time. After around three days, we get another Hydra's Canopy, and we extract all the magic the Heart's produced."

Argrave mused about the many graphs people had made to calculate which plants were most efficient, cost-wise, for the best gold-to-magic ratio. Most everyone in the 'Heroes of Berendar' community agreed that, after the player had collected enough money, it was best to spend more for the Hydra's Canopy.

"You're certain this will work?" Anneliese questioned as Argrave put the last bit of dirt over the mushroom's stalk.

"Sure," said Argrave. "I mean, it should work. I've never seen it done, and I don't know if I'm doing it right... but ostensibly, this is all we need to do."

In 'Heroes of Berendar,' it had been as simple as opening your inventory and combining the items within it. Argrave recalled the item descriptions, and this was what they described. If there was something he was missing, he couldn't be certain, but he was relatively confident.

Argrave removed his apron, folding it neatly and placing it on the table. "I know, I know. I can see the questions on your head—how does he know these things? But you forfeited your right to ask that question." Argrave cleaned off the shovel with the apron. "Having any change of heart? My offer still stands. You've done a lot for me, both of you, so if you have something to ask..."

"Hold," Galamon said, and Argrave turned towards him curiously. Then, Argrave heard it too—a set of footsteps moving up the stairs of the inn.

He heard them walk across the hall, and then a knock came to their door. Galamon held up one finger to symbolize one person and waited for Argrave's direction. Argrave nodded and gestured towards the door. Galamon moved to open it. A broad-shouldered man wearing leather armor waited, face covered by a mask.

"You're one of Rivien's men," Galamon said at once. "I've seen you watching."

"Aye, I am," he said, staring up at Galamon cautiously. "Saved me the trouble of explaining myself, it seems."

"What is it?" Argrave inquired, moving up. "Some trouble?"

"Depends. Rivien said little lord Stain came to him, said he had some urgent news for you. Considering your history, Rivien thought it'd be prudent to run it by you."

Argrave pursed his lips. "I'd like to see Stain."

"At once," the man nodded, then walked away from the door.

#####

"So this is where you're staying," said Stain idly, glancing around their room. Argrave could tell he was a bit taken aback by the sheer quantity of books. They had turned the place into a mini-library in the days that they'd been here. His gaze locked on the potted mushroom, expression perplexed.

Rivien's man that had been here earlier pushed Stain inside, and then came to stand in the corner.

"Rivien told me I should offer to stay, make sure nothing gets out of hand."

"Offer declined," Argrave said simply. "Be off, would you?"

The man nodded, unoffended by Argrave's brusqueness. He left and shut the door quickly. Argrave held out his hand and cast the new wide-range C-rank warding spell he'd learned, and at once, the four of them were shrouded in a ward from which no sound could leak.

Stain's eyes darted around uneasily. He fixed his brown hair, and then stood nervously with his hands in politely held in front of him. "I'm sorry for contacting you ahead of our date, but there was something I heard that my intuition said you might be interested in."

Argrave grabbed a chair and pulled it away from the table in the center of the room, sitting down in front of Stain. When sitting, his gaze was level with Stain's. "Let's hear it."

"Right." Stain cleared his throat. "Er... well, firstly, I figured out what you wanted me to figure out. My brother is going to be following his liege lord, the Duke of Elbraille, into war. He'll be taking the side of the Snakes, cretin that he—er, excuse me," Stain cut himself off, clearly afraid to share his opinion.

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed. "I see," he said, keeping his thoughts hidden in front of Stain. "You have proof of this?"

"Oh... erm, I didn't... it's still at my place in the cistern. I can..." he stepped towards the door quickly.

"Get it later. For now, let's finish our talk." Argrave crossed one leg over the other. "Anything else regarding the war you can mention? For example, the 'why' of things?"

"No. Even the letter I did manage to get was vague, but I confirmed that Elbraille intends to support Vasquer. Apparently, the crown prince is coming to officiate things, make some promises concrete. Typical noble back-patting, pampers and perfumes, the like."

Argrave frowned. "He isn't coming here, I hope?"

"No," Stain shook his head quickly. "The prince is going straight to Elbraille, where he'll be hosted by Duke Marauch and his wife."

"I see." Argrave leaned back in the chair, his brain spinning.

The biggest change I've caused is House Monticci maintaining its control over Mateth and its other territories. It's reasonable to assume that this is the biggest cause for this happening... I've got some ideas, but I need to talk this out with Anneliese. I'm sure she can help me make sense of this, help me make a course of action.

"Erm... now, about that thing that was urgent..." Stain spoke, breaking the silence.

"Oh." Argrave lifted his head, drawn from his thoughts. "Go ahead, tell me."

"Apparently, the young lord Elias of Parbon is coming to Jast," Stain spoke slowly. "My brother plans to host a welcoming banquet for him, and he sent out a messenger to intercept him with an invitation. Considering who the Duke's siding with, I thought this was a pretty big thing if Elias comes right into my brother's seat of power. There might be some things that happen. House arrest at best, a slaughter at worst, though I doubt he'll be killed. Elias has more value alive, I think."

Argrave furrowed his brows. "Him again?" he muttered. "Elias' escort can't be small, considering it's wartime."

"I'm not sure about all that," Stain shook his head. "From what I heard from the Count, he doesn't think Elias will even come to the banquet. I think there might be something else in the works—ambush on the

roads, or maybe even the streets. A card like that... it's got value. Knowing my brother, he'd like to keep Elias as a 'guest' for a long while."

"Margrave Reinhardt knows his son would be a prime target. I don't think—" Argrave paused before he got further into his thought process. "Alright. It was good of you to bring this to me."

"Absolutely," Stain said enthusiastically. "I'll get those letters you wanted right away, no problem at all. You need anything else, don't hesitate. You know where I am. I think. And if not, you can... find me," Stain trailed off nervously.

"There is something else. You've done well bringing me this, but I need you to do something more." Argrave leaned in. "Find Elias."

"And do what...?" Stain asked, clearly taken aback.

"Tell him that Argrave is looking for him. Tell him that we should speak before he enters Jast."

Stain nodded. "Is that your name?"

"Yes and no," Argrave said. There was some truth to that, strangely enough. "Be off, then, and retrieve those letters. Return shortly—we'll still be here."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 65: A Brief Foray

Argrave tipped back the large glass bottle and drained it of the last of the black liquid mana. His gaze stayed locked on the ceiling of the inn as it fell into his mouth. He winced at the familiar taste, twisting his lips about as though to dispel the flavor from his tongue. He felt its magic surge within him, replenishing his diminished supply.

Expending one's magic was one of the few ways to increase its size. By channeling his magic power to pay off Erlebnis' debt caused by the Blessing of Supersession, Argrave had an efficient method to drain his magic. The recovery period was shortened by the black liquid magic created by the Amaranthine Heart. Altogether, his personal reserve of magic had increased very quickly relative to most other mages. That alone made the Amaranthine Heart a worthy item to obtain.

"Right. My debt is nearly paid off," Argrave held the bottle in his hand for a moment, and then set it on the floor.

"Debt?" Anneliese inquired. She sat beside Galamon, both waiting for him to speak.

"Every bit of magic I take from Erlebnis I have to pay back. It's the same ability his Emissaries possess." Argrave wrapped his gloved hands together. "Right—to the point. Today we're going to take a brief foray from town as we wait for events to progress. I've asked Rivien to keep an eye out for Elias, too, so we can ostensibly only wait for results from either him or Stain."

Galamon nodded. "Why are we leaving Jast?"

The elven vampire was still without armor and most of his weapons. Argrave had purchased a simple broadsword for him to use temporarily, and it rested on the table before him.

Argrave leaned back into his chair, crossing his arms. “We need to get that spellbook I mentioned in the past. It’s a marvel made by the Order of the Rose. The spell is called [Electric Eel]. It’s C-rank. For Anneliese it’ll be largely useless, but I suspect I will be using it well into A-rank.”

“What makes it so exceptional?” inquired Anneliese.

“It’s weak,” Argrave began, standing from his chair and stepping about their dormitory. “It’s barely weaker than the D-rank [Writhing Lightning], and it has no area of effect unlike that spell. It’s slower than most lightning spells. Despite that, two variables make it of utmost importance.” Argrave raised a finger as he listed the two off. “It’s persistent, and it’s controllable.”

Argrave roamed about the dormitory as he continued to explain. “Once the spell has been cast, it continues to exist for about an hour... or until it strikes something, naturally. One can have it hover about their head doing nothing but simply existing. Then, when the time comes, one can use it as they please.”

Finished explaining, Argrave grabbed the back of his chair and leaned in. “As I said, the spell is weak. It’s slow... compared to most lightning magic, at least. But when a thousand of these things strike at once, even a dragon is going to take mortal damage. A wyvern might die outright,” Argrave grinned. “As I possess Erlebnis’ blessing, this spell is the perfect thing for an underdog like myself gunning for the biggest things in town.”

“For beasts and monsters, it indeed sounds very effective,” Anneliese conceded. “But in battle against mages or armies, they would all dispel harmlessly against one C-rank ward,” Anneliese posited.

“That’s why I had Galamon make Ebonice arrows,” Argrave pointed to Galamon.

“Ebonice is not especially effective against B-rank magic, and completely ineffective against A-rank magic,” Galamon advised.

“And that’s why I’m continuing to learn blood magic. Most C-rank blood magic spells can break B-rank warding magic, and that trend is similar at the higher ranks. Once the ward is broken, the spells can slip past and deal tremendous damage. [Electric Eel] may be slow compared to most lightning spells, but they’re still nigh unavoidable for your average human.” Argrave turned around. “In Mateth and Veiden, I was weak. Once we leave here, I’ll be—no. *We’ll* be a force to be reckoned with.”

#####

Argrave led his horse up the grass hill ahead of him. Anneliese and Galamon waited at the top. Though Anneliese had only ridden horses a quarter of the time that he had, she was already vastly better at it than he was. Such was her talent as one with the [Genius] trait—Argrave suspected she would become a B-rank mage much sooner than he would, too. Strangely, he felt no envy. There was only a fierce desire to work harder.

Once Argrave crested the top of the hill, he slowed his horse and it whinnied loudly. The six pigeons bound to him via [Pack Leader] swooped down, landing on his shoulder. One held a worm in its beak, and strangely enough, it did not disgust Argrave.

“I’m getting too used to bird mannerisms,” muttered Argrave.

Anneliese did not hear him, but Galamon replied, "Release them, then." He adjusted his bow. It was strung, and he wore it on his back as though the string were a strap. His quiver dangled from his side. It held only iron arrows, for they had no need of Ebonice.

"Not feasible," dismissed Argrave. "Though, if I ever try to fly off a tall building, please stop me."

"Don't joke about that," Anneliese said angrily.

Argrave was taken aback by her sharp gaze. "Uh... okay, yeah," he agreed, nodding awkwardly. Her amber eyes turned away.

"I believe this is the place you spoke of," Galamon pointed, ignorant or uncaring of their exchange.

Following Galamon's finger, Argrave's gaze found its way down a small overgrown gorge. A tiny stream moved down into it, mostly obscured by tall blades of grass barely graying in light of winter's beginning. At the very end, Argrave faintly made out a carved stone structure.

"Indeed. This is it," Argrave agreed, moving his horse forward slightly. It seemed uncomfortable at the prospect of going deeper—perhaps because it could sense what lay behind those walls, or perhaps simply because the entrance to the gorge was too steep. "Thorngorge Citadel."

"We should tie up the horses," Galamon contributed, alighting from his mount. He grabbed it by the reins and looked about for a place to tie it up.

Most of the area around them was plains without a single tree in sight. In the distance, one could see the gargantuan towers of Jast standing against the sky, casting great shadows across the plains. Beyond it, Argrave could faintly make out a single white tower ascending out of the middle of a ringfort.

Argrave touched Anneliese's shoulder. "Hey. See that? That white tower?"

She turned, looking out across the landscape. Slowly, she nodded.

"I used to own that. Foamspire, it's called. Sold it for all those rose gold magic coins." Argrave kept his eyes on the white tower in the distance. It looked small, but it probably towered fifty feet in the air. "It was built atop a sea arch. Arches form on leading-edge shorelines. This is simplifying things a great deal, but..."

Argrave tried to create the image with his hands. "The waves hit a piece of land jutting out into the water and refract, and gradually, the center wears out, creating an arch in the sea. Over time, the whole thing falls into the ocean." Argrave snapped, but no sound came out because he was wearing gloves.

"That's why I sold it. In a few months, it's going to fall into the ocean."

"A good sale, all things considered," Anneliese commented.

"I might've got more if I sold it elsewhere, but we wouldn't have any money now. Someone had the misfortune to purchase it from me." Argrave nodded, then said grimly, "Let's hope whoever purchased it isn't planning to stay there anytime soon."

Eventually, their party found a fairly decent place to tie up the horses so that the animals would not be disturbed by either people or the elements. They descended down into the gorge, mindful not to trip over the graying winter grass at their feet.

“Before we enter...” Argrave called out as they grew near the stone door. “Some things to keep in mind. There are some creatures within that don’t have arms—they’re just heads, and they’re immobile. It may be tempting to kill them, but don’t. You’ll attract the attention of some rather nasty things called Dire Eyes. They’re spiritual beings, meaning they attack the soul. Only magic affects them.”

Galamon turned around, a deep frown disturbing his face.

“As for the other ones—if they grab your weapon, Galamon, don’t try and pull it free. Just drop it. This probably won’t happen to you as you’re an experienced warrior, but just in case. Mostly, I think you’ll be using your bow.” Argrave looked about. “Anneliese, you should use the C-rank spell [Ice Spear]; it should kill most things within instantly. I will do the same—it’s why I learned that spell, you see. Always aim for the eyes. They’re very big and very vulnerable.”

“What in Veid’s name is in this place?” questioned Galamon. “You did not seem worried that I would not be wearing my armor, but the things you describe sound dangerous. What are they?”

“Abominations. There’s no better way to put it.” Argrave stepped past and approached the stone door. “The Order of the Rose fell because their members practiced necromancy without discretion. They’re the largest reason necromancy is illegal in the Order of the Gray Owl.” Argrave rapped his knuckles on the stone door. “Beyond these doors, we’ll find necromantic nightmares and horrors sculpted of flesh.”

“This is what you meant by ‘a brief foray?’” Anneliese stepped forward, pulling her long white hair aside and placing her ear to the stone door. “You showed more fear at the Cavern of the Lily’s Death. Am I to take it this place is less dangerous?”

“Largely speaking, these things are quite impotent. Strange anatomies are not conducive to effective displays of strength.” Argrave watched Anneliese as she tried to hear beyond the stone without much success. “Just have to watch the ceilings, make sure the other denizens don’t sneak up on us. That’s what Galamon is for.”

Anneliese lifted her head from the side of the door and looked at Galamon. She quickly reached back and bound her hair in a simple braid. Argrave was impressed at her speed. In perhaps ten seconds, the large mass of white hair descending to her knees was tied back in a ponytail.

“Perhaps next time we may choose a place that is not a dark, dank underground cavern. I am well tired of crouching through narrow places and banging my knees against rocks,” she said with little enthusiasm.

Argrave considered her statement, hand on his chin. “That’s unfortunate. Long-term, I believe there’s to be quite a lot of this.” Argrave looked to the door, head tilted. “On the bright side, I don’t think this place is cramped. There’s plenty of room. Plenty of space for things to hide, too.”

Galamon drew his broadsword, the steel rattling as it came free of its scabbard. He pointed towards the door. “Anything else you wish to share?”

“Hmm... just follow my directions, I suppose. As ever, you’ll take the front.”

“Right,” Galamon muttered. “As ever.”

He walked to the door. It was circular and simple. The years had cracked it, though not enough to let any light through. Galamon placed his hand on its side and pushed. It creaked, grinding against the floor, and then pushed open slowly, grating horribly.

Once it was open, Galamon stood there gazing inside. "Looks to be clear. It smells of blood, but it's... wrong. Rotten. Debased. Defiled by magic."

His gaze slowly lifted up. Something dropped down, and Galamon immediately thrust his sword up at it. Whatever was falling stopped, and blood started to drip down Galamon's blade.

A creature mostly still hidden in darkness narrowly stopped itself from being impaled, two of its many hands grasping the center of the blade. Galamon stared up at it, and Argrave prepared a spell to dispatch it. It started to move, and Galamon heeded Argrave's words, tossing both the creature and the blade away. Both tumbled, sliding, and then landed just where the sunlight fell into the ruin.

The creature's body was only a head. This head could not be any smaller than Argrave's torso. It was bald and veins bulged from its forehead as though enraged. Its neck extended down and branched off into eight arms. The arms lacked joints—its fingers had no knuckles, the forearm had no elbow. It was like a twisted mockery of a man and an octopus. Dazed, it took a moment to settle itself, and then it looked around.

Argrave met its eyes. They were an absolute black with two golden rings for irises, as though someone had poured molten gold into dual abysses. Its nose and ears had been cut off. From the still bleeding orifices, child-like hands emerged and pulled at its eyelids, keeping those dread eyes exposed and bloodshot. Its mouth had been sewn shut, but its sharp teeth pierced its flesh and left wounds from which harsh, uneven breathing came.

Anneliese took a step back, and Galamon readied himself. The creature shifted about, dragging its arms against the ground. As it made to move, a spear of ice hurtled forth soundlessly, taking it in the eye. It slid back a few feet from the impact, slamming into a wall. Argrave stepped forward, hand still outstretched after casting the magic.

"Scary bastard," Argrave commented, coming to a cautious stop. "There aren't too many of those in there, but those will be our main opponent. It's why we watch the ceilings in Thorngorge Citadel."

Anneliese let out a sigh of relief, and Galamon stepped forward and retrieved his blade, cleaning it of blood on his pants. He peered out into the hallway beyond.

"No use standing around," Argrave said cheerily. "You first, Galamon. As ever."