

Jackal 66

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Chapter 66: Thorngorge Citadel

Argrave's hand came alive with a spell matrix and a small ball of flame jumped up into the air above his head, illuminating the stone passage ahead. Thorngorge Citadel was distinct from the previous places they had explored. The tomb of metal guardians had been wide and spacious, the ruins hidden within the Cavern of the Lily's Death had been meticulously carved, but the Citadel was surpassingly simple in design.

A straight cube-shaped hallway stretched ahead. Every so often, iron bars blocked the path. They had been broken, seemingly ripped apart, and the years had rusted them to uselessness. Some of the breaks left sharp points exposed. Argrave could see dried blood on the floor on and near the sharp parts—evidently the creatures roaming the citadel had cut themselves on the exposed metal.

Galamon stepped forward past Argrave, advancing first as he had been directed. Argrave could see his head moving about, scanning each bit of the hallway before proceeding. When they came to the first set of iron bars, Anneliese paused and peered at where they met the walls.

"These bars... they can't open, nor can they slide out of the way," she noted. "You called this place a citadel? Why are these bars like this?"

Argrave had been expecting that she would ask some questions and had an answer prepared. "It's a mage's citadel. The Order of the Rose had mastery in earth elemental magic. This entire place was built with magic alone. Supposedly, they could build one of these citadels in a day provided they had enough capable spellcasters. Their mastery was great enough to manipulate even metal."

"I see," she muttered, her curiosity sated somewhat.

Galamon took his bow off his back and took an arrow from his quiver. Argrave and Anneliese paused, and in the silence, the faint sound of choked breathing could be heard.

"Be sure it's not just a head," Argrave cautioned. "Like I said, we don't want to get the attention of the Dire Eyes."

Galamon's white eyes fixed on Argrave briefly, and he nocked an arrow. "I am capable of remembering things you say. You seem to forget this often."

"I just don't want any—"

The bow twanged, and a black blur vanished into darkness. A rather unpleasant noise sounded out ahead, and Galamon walked forth. Argrave could only shake his head and follow along. When they finally reached what the arrow had hit, Argrave saw one of the eight-armed head creatures with an arrow sticking right out of its black eye. Its arms spasmed a few times, fingers clenching, and then it grew still.

Galamon put his foot on its forehead and pulled the arrow out. Argrave stepped back so that none of its viscera would land on his shoes. Galamon cleaned the arrow and then proceeded onwards. The hallway

began to slope down ahead of them, but Argrave's steps were confident. Galamon glanced back at him, brows furrowed.

"What?" asked Argrave.

Galamon shook his head, and then proceeded. The hallway levelled out again, and ahead of them finally opened up into a room. Galamon stopped Argrave with his arm, staring into the darkness beyond.

"I see one of those... heads... that you mentioned," he said.

Argrave pushed his arm away and replied, "Then you know what not to do."

Galamon nodded, entering the room. Argrave entered after him. The light of his spell illuminated some stone bedframes. The mattresses within had rotted away to nothing. When the light of the spell fell upon a head on a spike, sound filled the room, and both Anneliese and Galamon jumped.

The creature—a human-like head with a snout and a black nose—sounded like a Tasmanian devil with its rattling, dry growl interspersed with snorting. The sound echoed against the stone walls, filling the place with sound. Such a thing might've worried Argrave, but he knew most of the creatures in this place were deaf. The few that could hear were incapable of coming to the upper levels.

Argrave retrieved a decaying and decrepit canvas blanket and draped it over the head, and the sound faded somewhat. He turned back to his two elven companions.

"Noisy one, isn't it?" Argrave spoke loudly above the din, wiping his gloves clean of the dust on the blanket. "This first level has the soldiers' dormitories. The non-mages would sleep here. Rather kind of the Order to place them at the entrance of the Citadel, no? First line of defense, first to die."

Anneliese took uncertain steps forward, eyes locked on the head still growling. "Are you not uneasy?"

Argrave was perplexed. "Why? Something amiss?"

"You are eerily calm," Anneliese said. "These things..." she trailed off. "Why do they not bother you?"

Argrave frowned, turning his head back to the still-screaming head. Anneliese wasn't wrong. These things probably should make him uneasy. That said, of every dungeon type in 'Heroes of Berendar,' abandoned citadels constructed by the Order of the Rose were likely the most common. They were largely uniform in design, and the biggest risks were the traps, not the enemies. Moreover, the player could summon each and every one of the creatures within these walls if they studied necromancy.

"Fear comes from uncertainty... the unknown," Argrave said slowly, speaking only as the answer came to him. He knew Thorngorge Citadel like the back of his hand. After all, [Electric Eel] was one of his favorite attack spells, and this was one of the easiest places to get it. He had seen these creatures a thousand times before; their unusual appearances did not bother him even if they were far more realistic than he was used to.

"I know what lurks in here. We're more than capable of confronting anything within. What's there to be fearful of?" Argrave concluded, thumping the screaming creature's forehead. Anneliese stared at it as it growled beneath the canvas. She blinked a few times, then took a deep breath, nodding.

"Right. I envy that knowledge."

Argrave snorted, and then made to proceed. Opposite the hallway they had entered from, another identical one sloped gently downward. It proceeded onward for a short bit, and then opened up into a curved hallway going left and right. Argrave knew from past experiences that these two paths formed a ring containing many other dormitories along the way.

In the silence following their pause, Argrave heard a faint noise. After it repeated, he recognized it as a whisper. On the inner wall of the hallway, there was an empty space acting as a window into the portion beyond. Anneliese walked past him, leaning down and gazing into it. Argrave followed after her, staring out just as she did.

The inside was hollow and descended for a long way down. One could see the other levels of the citadel, each with an opening identical to the one they looked out of. The source of the whispers dominated most of their vision, though. Branches of bone extended upwards from the ground far below. At points, what looked like white roses bloomed. Argrave knew they were not.

The 'white roses' were humanoid faces. Each had been morphed into the shape of a rose, twisted and bent unnaturally like some terrifying modern art given life. Their black-and-gold eyes were beautiful and decidedly feminine, and each blink was exaggerated by large lashes. Their mouths would open at times and whisper haunting phrases that Argrave was well familiar with; calls for help, calls for death, questions of where and what they were... even expecting this, Argrave could not help but shudder.

He spotted movement in the corner of his eyes and noticed that Anneliese was shaking. He grabbed her shoulder, and she flinched slightly. "Take it easy. Those things can't move. They're one of the least dangerous things here."

"Right. Right," she nodded quickly as though trying to reassure herself. Argrave turned her away forcibly, leading her away from the inner wall. Galamon stared out beyond, expression passive as though he was unbothered.

She's been to war before. I doubt that it's the gore rattling her. There's something else at play... that, or I underestimated the psychological impact this place might have, Argrave reflected. He bit his lips, thinking, and quickly made a decision. "Alright. Let's hurry this up. Galamon, this way," he directed, placing Anneliese on the side opposite the inner wall and hurrying Galamon along with a wave of his hand.

Their progress was much faster than it had been before, but Galamon still maintained a cautious pace, pausing only to dispatch some of the eight-armed creatures lurking on the walls or ceilings. The Tasmanian devil-like screams of the disembodied heads filled the halls, setting the mood tenser yet. They wound around the ring, heading to where Argrave knew the main stairwell would be.

Fortunately, unlike in the ruins nested within the Lily Lurker's cavern, the stairs were not placed far from each other. The main stairwell descended all the way to the bottom, spiraling down steadily. Anneliese was quite reticent during this time, focused more on the path ahead of her than the things around her. Argrave could not deny he felt some worry, but he tried not to distract himself from the matter at hand.

On the second to last floor, Argrave led them off the stairwell. Bits of the bone and flesh plant in the central room pierced the stone of this floor, some rose-faces exposed in the hallway. It was difficult to

avoid their voices. Argrave made sure to proceed past them quickly, but sometimes they were directly above or beside the hallway, peering down and whispering.

After a good deal of walking, they came to a room that had a wooden door—an oddity, considering most other places were simply empty doorways. Argrave stopped Galamon.

“This is the place—the commander’s quarters. There’s a great hulking creature within. It’s rather unobservant, but it’s quite powerful. If you shoot one of its legs, it should be largely immobilized and easily dispatched. Each leg is about yea big,” Argrave demonstrated, creating a width about the size of a basketball. “I trust you can shoot that?”

“If I couldn’t, I might have to set the bow aside for the rest of my life,” Galamon said, weighing his weapon in his hand. “Does it move quickly?”

“Not if you hit it. It’s not very observant, so you can expect the first shot to be quite easy.” Argrave put his hand on the door, preparing to push it open.

Galamon grabbed Argrave’s wrist and pulled his hand away. “I go first, as ever.”

Argrave wasn’t in the mood to laugh at what may well have been a joke so he nodded and stepped aside. Anneliese, who had regained much of her composure, stared ahead as though refusing to look around. Galamon nocked an arrow in his bow, holding it pointed at the ground as he pushed open the door steadily.

The door pushed open slowly, the light of their spells peeking through the cracked opening. Something on the other side blocked its opening, and Galamon held up a hand to stop them from moving any further. He moved one eye to the cracked door, looking about. Evidently he found nothing out of sorts and continued to push open the door.

As the door opened, they could hear the sounds of clattering wood. Argrave could see debris being shifted about as Galamon pushed. Even Argrave was slightly worried that the beast within the room would be drawn to the noise, but nothing shifted within the room.

The majority of the room was covered in debris—splintered wood, chips of stone, or torn-apart books. It would make any significant movement impossible. Argrave could vaguely see their enemy in the corner of the room. What Argrave saw amounted to a hunk of flesh, but Galamon saw more. He drew back his bowstring, taking aim into what Argrave saw only as darkness. A twang echoed out, followed by an ear-wrenching howl.

The beast shambled out from the darkness, and Argrave saw an arrow sticking from its leg. Argrave was prepared to cast another spell to be sure it fell, but once its injured leg met the ground, it immediately tumbled and fell, exposing its great bulk in their spell-light. It crashed against the debris, sending splinters and chips of stone flying. Galamon grabbed the door and shielded himself with it, but Argrave felt some heated pain from his cheek as a flying splinter struck him.

Argrave ignored the pain and stepped back, examining the creature. Were it still standing, Argrave estimated its height at twelve feet. It had the same bulbous black eyes as on most of the creatures within Thorngorge. It was humanoid, but its flesh had uneven, clay-like burn scars marring most of its body. Its torso resembled a barrel on stilts, and both of its arms were very long and very thick—each

was about the size of Galamon himself. It tried to use its arms to rise to its feet, failing in pitiful displays. Once that failed, it tried to grasp at the doorway, but it was just shy of grabbing it.

As time stretched out, Argrave gathered himself and stepped forward, one hand raised as the creature writhed. His hand followed its head, a spell matrix forming as it did so. Seeing the light of the spell matrix changed something within it. The creature grabbed something, throwing it at Argrave. Galamon swatted it aside with inhuman dexterity, but Argrave still flinched.

It crawled back vainly, shifting debris aside and letting out noises not so distant from a dog's whimper. When its back hit the wall, Argrave saw his moment, and a spear of ice hurtled forth, taking the creature in the head. Its body convulsed once, and then came to be still.

Argrave felt a strange sense of discomfort for but a brief moment, but he pulled his gloves tighter and walked forth. He checked with Galamon to be sure that nothing else was in the room, and then proceeded in. Things had been shifted about by the creature's struggle, but it did not take him long to find a black box tightly shut with two metal latches.

Though Argrave had expected Anneliese to ask about the multitudes of books destroyed in this room, she remained silent. Argrave could only open the black box in silence. The book was within, well-preserved. Argrave opened it, and a matrix briefly projected itself into the air. After a thorough examination, he determined it was, indeed, the spell he was searching for.

"Right." Argrave shut the book, stowing it back in the box. "This is it. Let's be off."

Galamon had been busying himself pulling his arrow from the creature's leg, succeeding just as Argrave said so. The elven vampire turned to look at him. "We're not going to be dealing with these creatures? It seems like something you'd do."

"They keep to themselves, and they don't grow in numbers," Argrave dismissed. "There's a reason this place hasn't been discovered yet. We can always come back at another time." He held out the box to Galamon. "Carry this. Let's go."

Before Galamon could take it, Anneliese took it from his hands. Argrave was puzzled but did not protest to the arrangement. They walked back, taking the same path they had when they entered. After the initial entrance, very few creatures bothered them.

It did not take long before the grim Citadel was left behind them. Galamon shut the stone door, and it grated ever as loudly as it had the first time. Argrave stretched, feeling satisfied, but he heard something scrape the stone behind him and paused. There, Anneliese slumped against the wall of the ruins, hand held to her mouth as though nauseous.

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Chapter 67: Order of the Rose

Argrave approached Anneliese, who'd slumped against the wall, and put his hands on his knees.

"Feeling queasy, or is it something else?"

She nodded to his open-ended question with her hand still covering her mouth, so Argrave did not know what exactly was wrong. He knelt down, perplexed, and looked to Galamon. He did not seem to have any idea of what to do, either.

“Those creatures,” she finally said, her voice no louder than a whisper. Argrave turned his head back to her. Her gaze was locked to the ground. “Do you know what they are?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Argrave replied. When she didn’t answer, Argrave said awkwardly, “Erm... well, they’re creatures made by necromancy.”

“Are they alive?” she asked, her amber eyes finally lifting from the ground and locking with Argrave’s own. “Can they feel?”

“They’re a soul locked in a vessel,” Argrave explained. “That’s the foundation of necromantic creatures. These ones have been sculpted to resemble horrors to damage morale. They’re usually made from the corpses of the Order of the Rose’s enemies.”

“No. I have seen other necromantic creations, fought against Veidimen who turned to the darker magics in search of greater power. Normal necromantic creations felt nothing and displayed no emotion—they were but a vessel for the soul and magic.” She ran a hand through her hair. “These things... they felt. They had emotion. They were alive.”

Argrave bit his lip, unsure of what to say for a time. He thought back to the creatures. Their appearances had been all but engraved into his memory. He felt an instinctual disgust seeing them in a new perspective, but he had been mentally preparing for that inevitability for months. He supposed that clinging to the notion that they were merely souls in vessels had been helpful, but Anneliese’s insights unsettled him somewhat.

When a long period of silence passed, Argrave tried to understand further, suggesting gently, “Be that as it may, they were trying to kill us—surely their emotions couldn’t be dissimilar to those during war. After Barden, you were fine... what’s different?”

“It’s not the same,” she shook her head. “Not the same at all.” She lowered her head once more, staring at the ground. Argrave knelt there, unsure of what to do. Eventually, Anneliese broke the silence.

“When a child is born, they lack all the usual methods of communication we possess. They cannot speak, nor understand speech.” She stared at Argrave. “As a consequence, the only way they understand others is through facial expressions, body language, or tone. One can make a baby cry by scowling alone. They experience emotions more intensely, and project them the same way.

“All I saw in each of those creatures was confusion, fright, dread, and... pain. Each was projected with a childlike innocence. It...” she lowered her head in defeat. “...it probably sounds ridiculous, having seen them. They are abominations. You said so yourself, and I myself do not deny they appear and act abominable. But there is something in them that is unwitting and unwilling. Something with all the naivete of a baby.”

Argrave shook his head. “It doesn’t sound ridiculous.” Anneliese looked up at him, some measure of surprise on her face. “I won’t act like I understand because I don’t. I won’t act like I felt it too, but I trust your abilities enough to believe you. That, at least, you can be sure of,” Argrave lined it out plainly.

"I see," she said, voice cracking. She stared for some time, and then nodded. "Thank you."

"The question is..." Argrave sat down. "What do you want to do about it?"

When posed with that question, Anneliese's demeanor shifted. Her back, slumped against the stone wall, straightened, and her shaking slowed. Argrave had hoped it might have that effect. Rather than focusing on what she'd seen, she would focus on what could be done—drastically different lines of thinking, and perhaps the route to recovery.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and looked at Argrave levelly. "Do you believe we will see these creatures again?"

"Inevitably," Argrave nodded. "Ruins of the Order of the Rose are everywhere, and many of them are inhabited with creatures like we saw and worse. In the future, I must enter more of them." Argrave turned his head to the stone door they'd left. "And once Gerechtigkeid has more influence in this plane, they will roam beyond the ruins. Their creators are all long dead, and he will assume the role of their master."

"Then I would like to know about them," she said resolutely. "Their makings, from beginning until end. Their creators, and if they knew their creations felt this way. I am certain their emotions are genuine, but... beyond that, they are foreign."

Argrave nodded. "Then I will tell you what I know. Perhaps, in time, you can learn even how to make them yourself. I can make that happen," Argrave spoke calmly. The words made Anneliese frown, but Argrave carried on without heed. "I would not suggest it. It would be a waste of your talents."

"I would never create such things," she said firmly.

"Oftentimes one cannot fully understand something until they do it. I certainly didn't," he reflected, thinking back to the month he'd spent learning magic.

His words sent Anneliese into a deep introspection, her amber eyes growing distant as she was lost in her own head. Argrave waited for a time, and then eventually spoke again.

"I will explain all of what I know of the Order of the Rose and their nameless creations. If you still feel unwell, we can rest and talk for an hour or so. Otherwise, we will ride slowly back to Jast, and I will explain what I know."

"Dusk will be here in an hour," Galamon finally broke his silence.

"We'll be fine," Argrave dismissed. "Don't let that concern you. If you need to rest, rest."

Anneliese shifted, and then rose to her feet. Argrave stared up at her from the ground. "Your words and consideration towards me are respite enough. I will follow your example." She offered a hand to Argrave.

Argrave took her hand and pulled himself to his feet. "Then let's be off."

Anneliese walked past Argrave, meeting with Galamon and moving towards the horses. Argrave cast one last glance at the stone door.

“Babies, huh,” he muttered. “Just when I was getting used to sleeping better.”

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“...so, in essence, what divides the creations made by the Order of the Rose from other, less aware necromantic creations is their permanence on this realm and their capability to perform independent action,” Anneliese sought to confirm, speaking to Argrave on horseback.

“Correct,” Argrave nodded. “Can’t know for sure *why* they do what they do. Maybe it’s some last directive from the Order of the Rose. Maybe it’s just their nature. All said, the things we killed today have been wandering those ruins for hundreds of years.”

Anneliese digested the information in silence. Argrave turned away and watched the black box containing the spellbook for [Electric Eel] bounce up and down in tandem with Galamon’s horse. The box was strapped to the horse with a makeshift strap, and Argrave was somewhat concerned it would fall.

“If they’re capable of ‘independent action,’ that difference has to come from somewhere,” Anneliese reasoned, pulling Argrave from his concern. “Perhaps that cognition—no, that *emotion*, both enables them to act without direct command and experience life. Presuming one has a soul from birth, if a soul is used in the construction of a necromantic creation, it would be very similar to a baby’s— inexperienced, naïve.”

“Sure,” Argrave agreed, finding no fault in the theory. “But I’ve told you all I know, so that is only conjecture. You now understand as much as I do, I think.”

“I see,” Anneliese nodded, adjusting herself on her horse. Argrave turned his focus back to the road ahead.

Their party finally neared the black walls of Jast. Off to the side, Argrave spotted Foamspire once again, and his gaze followed it. The sun reflected off its marble walls quite splendidly, and for a brief moment Argrave considered it was a shame that it would be falling into the ocean.

“There you are,” came a gruff voice from ahead, drawing Argrave’s attention. “Mmm, look at you, taking your leisure time. I suppose I would be in no rush to return what’s borrowed, either, but then that’s my profession.”

A man with a pockmarked face sat on a tree branch, one leg bent atop it and the other dangling leisurely.

“We spoke near a week ago. You’re Rivien’s man,” Argrave called out. “Here for Rivien’s horses, I take it?”

“Partly,” the man nodded. Argrave and his party brought the horses to a stop just below him. He shifted, turning more of his body towards them. “Boss said he contacted some of the porcelain elves, just as you asked. They’ve been waiting for you before proceeding. Might be they’ve left by now—they’re the skittish sort. They’ll sail for their homeland at the drop of a shoe.”

“Cautious sort,” corrected Galamon. “We know well the cruelty of humans.”

“Is that right?” the man proceeded. “You elves might well be bold in your own eyes, but being cautious of cruelty is just a polite way to say ‘afraid.’”

“I’m bold enough to put the ignorant in their place,” Galamon said, lowering the pitch of his voice until it was deep and guttural enough to make Argrave’s hairs stand on end.

“Right, let’s save the race war for another day and focus on the important stuff,” Argrave interrupted before things could escalate further. “Mister... Man,” Argrave said, not knowing the other’s name. “Can you take me where I need to go?”

“Sure,” the man said, staring at Galamon while grinding his thumb against his fingers. “I’ll take you there.”

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The man with a pockmarked face led them away from Jast, walking against the fading suns. They headed in the direction of Foamspire, where Argrave saw the light reflected off its surface gradually turn from orange to a deep, rich night purple. As ever, moonlight was plentiful.

Their horses descended some rather treacherous cliffs, and as they proceeded further, the crashing of the waves grew louder and louder. Argrave recognized where they were going—a natural harbor formed within a sea cove. It was an unmarked location simply called the ‘Smuggler’s Cove’ in game.

After a bit of walking on the beach, the man leading them held out his hand and conjured magic to light the path. Argrave was somewhat surprised—he did not seem the spellcaster sort. Eventually, their escort paused, and the horses whinnied as they came to a stop.

“Have to go on foot from here,” the man said. “Leave the horses. I’ll deal with them later.”

“Right.” Argrave nodded and got off his horse, stumbling on the sand and rocks after having rode for so long. He stretched, legs feeling more than a bit tender.

Galamon held his horse’s reins, standing just beside it. He took off the black box containing the [Electric Eel] spell, holding it in the crook of his arm. The elven vampire stared at the wall, eyes darting from place to place as he inhaled deeply.

“Hard to get an exact count, but there’s a lot of people ahead,” Galamon muttered to Argrave. “The salt masks the scent of their bodies, and the waves the sound of their movements, but I can still tell.”

“There should be people,” Argrave replied, uncaring of his volume. “This place is a major entrepot for the city in the shadows of Jast.”

“Hah,” their escorted laughed. “You know your stuff. This way, then.” The man waved them along, sliding into a narrower portion in the cliffs at the beachside. Argrave followed, winding through just behind. They had to proceed single-file. Before long, their escort pushed open a wooden door, and Argrave stepped through it after him.

The wet seaside rocks opened up into a great cove, probably near fifty feet tall. Rocks carved out by both water and man shielded them from the elements, the ceiling supported by old stone pillars. Sheer gray rocks formed a natural landing of sorts. Built atop the landing was a small yet well-constructed

wooden harbor that had more boats than one might expect to see. They weren't grand vessels, but they were many.

"About what I expected," Argrave said, reminiscing.

"Been here? Don't remember you," their escort asked.

"You wouldn't," Argrave shook his head.

The man stared at them. "Right, sure," he said dryly. "Let's go."

Despite the fact night was falling, there were many people roaming the harbors. They were varied—some wealthy-looking nobles, some deplorable thieves. There were a great many simple stone buildings carved out of the cove's walls, square and uniform.

"This place, the architecture..." Anneliese muttered.

"Indeed it is. Another ruin of the Order of the Roses," Argrave nodded. "This place was an underground vault. Now, the years have eroded the cliffs and flooded the lower levels until it became this cove. The pillars are new additions—past thirty years or so."

"Seems you really do know this place," their escort noted warily. "Well, color me surprised. You seem the blustering sort, not the type I'd expect to have the knowledge to back their words." He paused, turning. "None of my business. That room," he pointed with his chin. "Lady Elaine is waiting."

"Right." Argrave nodded, and stepped into the room as directed, glancing about. He spotted Elaine and a few of Rivien's men, leaning on one side of the room with crossbows held idle in their hands. Elaine stood straight beside a familiar crate Argrave knew held illusion spells. Opposite them, two Veidimen stood, arms crossed and backs straight. Between them was an old elf hunched against a walking stick. He turned his head at their entrance, and Argrave took a deep breath.

"Rowe," Argrave greeted.

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Chapter 68: Breaking Walls

"Look at him," Rowe said, stepping towards Argrave. Elaine and the people with her shifted cautiously beside the shipment of illusion spellbooks. "Goes white as a sheet when he sees me."

"That's just my complexion," Argrave returned.

Argrave wanted to grit his teeth. Rowe being here did not exactly scream peace and prosperity. He was an unpleasant zealot with the power of S-rank magic to back his zeal—it was a wonder Argrave didn't enter to find that a fight had broken out with Rowe being the obvious winner. It was even more a wonder that Dras would send him here at all.

Argrave dismissed his thoughts as the silence extended between them. "What brings you to sunny Jast? You must've missed me—that's my first guess."

“Oh, aye, I missed your stupid jokes and vacant stare,” the aged snow elf said harshly, walking stick echoing through the room as it impacted against the stone. “Complete tripe. I came here on order of the Patriarch. Some things to do in this city of vapid morons.”

Elaine stepped forward and crossed her arms. “Are we going to move this—”

“Shut up,” Rowe said coldly, turning his head to Elaine. “Speak when spoken to.”

Elaine’s expression turned to one of wrath, but Argrave held out his hand and grabbed Rowe’s shoulder.

“Be nice,” Argrave said quietly. “Might be you’re the top dog in Veiden, but you’re only one of three S-rank spellcasters in this city. Even if your dragon came with you, I can’t guarantee you’d walk out of this harbor alive if you cause trouble.”

When Argrave mentioned that Rowe was an S-rank spellcaster, Elaine’s rage turned to a steady caution. Rowe turned his head back to Argrave.

“That true?” Rowe grumbled. “Your kind live barely a quarter the time we do, but you’ve more high-ranking spellcasters?”

“Using magic of higher ranking extends one’s life, and we’re far more numerous than the Veidimen,” Argrave shook his head. Argrave knew that Rowe was much stronger than the two S-rank spellcasters in Jast, but he did not care to let him hear that. “This is what you would have gone up against had your invasion continued. What I did for your people was a good thing. I spared you an inevitable retaliatory genocide.”

“I don’t care to hear you praise yourself,” Rowe shook his head. “I’ll cause no trouble. I’m smart enough for that, at least. But that one isn’t S-rank,” he pointed his walking stick to Elaine. “Her magic pool’s only a bit larger than yours. Why should I respect her?”

“I’m an exceptional case. Compared to most her age, Elaine is quite talented,” Argrave shook his head. His magic had been increasing rapidly as he paid his debt to Erlebnis. One’s magic capacity grew when expended, and Argrave expended his consistently to accommodate the Blessing of Supersession. Combined with rapid replenishing from the Amaranthine Heart, it stood to reason he progressed faster.

“On top of that, she coordinates the Order of the Gray Owl here in Jast. She’s the only reason we have these books.” Argrave frowned. “It’s common sense to offer respect when you don’t know who someone is. Why are you so socially incompetent?”

“Socially incompetent?” Rowe repeated. “Few people are worthy of respect. Even fewer are non-Veidimen. For instance,” Rowe stepped past Argrave, coming to stand before Galamon. “Galamon. It’s been some time, hasn’t it?”

“It has,” responded Galamon simply.

“The new warriors lack the steel with you gone,” Rowe said. “Spiritless. No passion. None of the other commanders come to your ankles. Had you been leading at Mateth, the city would have fallen.”

Galamon did not react to the praise, stating, “I wish I had been. Veid decreed otherwise. Such is fate.”

“Hoh?” Rowe glanced at Argrave. “So, you’re tired of this dreg?”

“No,” Galamon shook his head. “He is the second I would serve not because of obligation alone. I believe he deserves your respect.”

Hearing Galamon say that, Rowe closed his mouth and took a deep breath. When next his white eyes fell upon Argrave, there was a subtle difference in his emotion—or so Argrave thought.

Rowe walked to Anneliese next. He sized her up. “Seems you’ve improved your magic, if only just. You’re... a bit skinnier, perhaps. This one cannot feed you well, can he?”

She nodded. “Argrave is a capable leader. The road has not always been easy, but I cannot blame the leader for a rocky path when that is precisely what I expected.”

Rowe nodded, and then turned back. “Alright.” Rowe walked back to the two Veidimen slowly. “So, Elaine,” he said the name harshly as though it was difficult to pronounce. “Argrave is here, as you were waiting for. You’ll give us the illusion books, finally, and end this pointless waste of time.”

“I will.” Elaine snapped, and her two men carried the box over. Once it was set down, Rowe pried the lid open with his walking stick and removed one of the books, perusing it. He checked a few more in silence, grumbling, and then took his stick back. The chest shut.

“It’s sufficient, after what this one pilfered from us,” Rowe said with his lips upturned. He glanced at the two beside him. “You two, do your thing.” The elves with him grabbed the box and moved to leave the room. Argrave and company stood aside for their passage, and they left quickly. Argrave watched them head for a small vessel that did not seem to be Veidimen in make at all. That was fitting, at least. They were trying to move unnoticed.

“You’re satisfied?” Argrave stepped forward, staring down at Rowe.

“I seldom am,” Rowe said. “But I need nothing more from the torch over there,” he referenced Elaine’s red hair. “Hothead, that one. All my pride, tenth of my age, hundredth of my accomplishments.”

“She seemed fine to me,” Argrave disagreed, looking at Elaine. She had her arms crossed, feet tapping quickly against the ground.

“We spoke earlier. I used my restraint.” Rowe rubbed his eyes. “Bah. I’m too tired for indignance.” He looked up at Argrave. “We need to speak again soon regarding the interests of Veiden. Where can I find you?”

“Perhaps it would be best if I led you through Jast,” Argrave said delicately. “I can’t well leave an old man to wander through these dangerous streets alone. Someone might try and mug you, and you might immolate him in honor of Veid. This place isn’t like that winter wonderland you call home.”

“I’m not some animal that mauls things that come near me, boy,” Rowe shook his head. “I can be discreet. I’m no lackwit. Just tell me where you live.”

Argrave sighed. “The Knight’s Pawn. It’s an inn.” Argrave gave him its rough location. He reached into his satchel and pulled out an iron circlet—it was what Argrave had been using to disguise his appearance.

“You should take this.”

Rowe eyed it. “What is it?”

Argrave put it on to demonstrate. “Muddles the features. Very common thing in this city. Snow elves are not well-liked here. It would be best if you did not stand out.”

“Even hunched over and old, I tower above most,” Rowe rebutted. “Not worth it.”

“Take it,” interjected Galamon quietly.

Rowe glanced at Galamon, and then begrudgingly put the Circlet of Disguise over his bald head. “It’s cold. Unpleasant.” The aged elf shook his head. “Whatever. I’ll be waiting,” Rowe said, moving to leave.

“I haven’t slept. Even if you’re waiting in my room, I’ll do that first,” Argrave shook his head.

“So lazy,” the aged elf muttered loudly as he walked out the door.

Those words ignited a fire of anger in Argrave’s chest and his vision narrowed, but then he acknowledged the absurdity of the claim. Argrave shook his head and laughed heartily. “Watch your step, old man!” he shouted after Rowe. “Don’t forget your dentures!”

Elaine stepped closer to their party, arms still crossed. She let out a sigh, staring at the doorway Rowe had left. “You antagonize everyone,” she noted. “Why?”

“Antagonize? It’s just banter. I like making people laugh.” Argrave paused for a moment, then added, “Mostly myself, granted.”

“I think...” she paused. “I think that I was unduly predisposed against you. I apologize if I was brusque or dismissive in the past.”

“Fancy words.” Argrave commented, then shook his head. “You weren’t, not especially. Even had you been, I don’t care. I’m used to abuse. If there’s one thing I can take, it’s a tongue-lashing. Not that you did, of course,” Argrave added.

Being a wiki editor was a very thankless job. Argrave would spend thousands of hours working on writing some obscure details for a game, and the only time people would ever reach out was to correct some minute mistake he might’ve made—and oftentimes, they weren’t even right. Argrave sighed, wondering why’d he’d done it at all.

“Used to abuse, huh. Childhood memories?” Elaine inquired.

“Something like that,” Argrave replied vaguely.

“I’ve heard tell of King Felipe,” she said. “His trueborn sons are treated harsh enough. I can’t imagine what a basebo—” she trailed off, hesitant to finish the word. “Well, Rivien and I were street orphans. Some parents... sometimes I’m glad I had none rather than terrible ones.” She stared off into the distance. “It made us value independence early, at least. Left the both of us with paranoia—you can’t trust anyone on the streets here. Rivien likes to mock people, and he never fully trusts any besides me. I... hold grudges.”

Argrave glanced over. *Glad to see my swaying turned out to be worth the effort. She’s opening up. I think this’ll be useful.*

“So your nobility comes from your own efforts? You two don’t hail from some ruined house restored to its former glory?” Argrave asked despite knowing the answer.

“Yes,” she said proudly. “Rivien and I earned our surnames with our own two hands. We can’t claim a storied lineage dating hundreds of years back.”

“Very admirable,” Argrave flattered.

“Few other nobles in Jast agree,” Elaine said. “To them, we’re upstarts.”

“Upstarts... until you’re standing above them and they need something from you. That’s how it always is.”

She laughed. “True enough.” She looked to Anneliese. “Something I should mention. I sent a letter to the council in the Tower of the Gray Owl recommending your... friend, Anneliese for membership. With both me and Castro contributing, I suspect the council will name her an honorary Wizard of the Order. A full member is a bit far-fetched.”

“Really now?” Argrave’s eyes widened. “That’s... thank you very much.”

“Why are you thanking me?” she said. “It should be her that does,” she pointed at Anneliese.

“It was my idea to begin with,” Argrave said before Anneliese could speak. “And it’s mostly so I won’t be expelled for teaching her spells.”

“I see. You do much for the people you call your friends.” She nodded. “Consider it a favor for the business you’ve thrown my way. Those enchanted things from that elven tomb you gave me—I’ve got them in the right hands. In time, their worth will be evaluated. I can’t promise it’ll be quick. You said you were here for three weeks? So, two more left? I don’t think they’ll be done by then, feasibly.”

Argrave nodded. “That’s fine. If they’re not done appraising by that time, I’ll leave them in your hands. In time, I’ll come back and get them. Might be months. I’m a busy man.”

Argrave was not particularly concerned about the result. The majority of the items he knew could be found in those ruins were not especially jaw-dropping—the king’s crown was the most notable item, and Argrave planned to hold onto that for a very long time. This venture was merely squeezing the most wealth he could out of what he did in the elven tomb.

Elaine’s green eyes gazed at him unwaveringly, and she spoke seriously, “That’s a lot of trust to show to the sister of a smuggler.”

“Oh, you’re right. On second thought, let’s cancel all of our plans and never speak again,” Argrave said sternly, then broke into a chuckle. “Joking, naturally. Unless you plan to steal them all, I think it should be fine.”

Elaine pursed her lips, and then finally smiled. “You’re a very strange person.”

“So I am often told,” Argrave nodded. “Now, I have a temperamental old elf to wrangle in the morning, and I need my beauty sleep to retain my razor wit. I bid you goodbye,” Argrave waved, walking towards the door.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 69: Lion's Paw

Stain straightened the ribbon he wore around his neck. His entire outfit—a gaudy thing of red and white—was quite stifling, in his mind. The stifling came from two aspects. It was mentally difficult because Stain loathed wearing the red and white of House Jast. It was physically difficult because the outfit had been made for him one year ago when he was fifteen, and it did not fit as well as it had then.

It had taken some time, but Stain had managed to track down Elias. It was important that he talk to him as Argrave had said, and even more important that he did so before Rivien. Stain wanted to be paid well for this job. The pay was nice, naturally, but the connections he might earn were more important. This 'Argrave' seemed important.

"Damned bastard. *Better* pay me well," Stain muttered as he walked into the village. He kept his eyes on a white banner bearing a golden lion on it. "Better line my pockets with velvet and gold and fill my mouth with caviar and cream. Him and his two elves. Thin-wristed, dead-eyed..." Stain continued to mutter as he walked down the simple dirt road of the village.

The village was quite a humble place, with only dirt roads and wooden homes. The streets were filled with the occasional spilled grain from the recent harvest. The remainder had been placed into the granaries or kept in wooden barrels for temporary storage. Stain knew enough of the commonfolk to know that the harvest this year had been quite bountiful. It was a strangely optimistic portent for a nation on the eve of a civil war.

The militiamen watched the harvest warily, for it was their village's lifeline in essence. What was watched more warily, though, was the large contingent of white-armored knights standing just out front one of the larger places in the village. Stain loosened the white ribbon around his neck once, and then tightened it again, knowing he should appear presentable.

When the white-armored knights saw Stain, they knew immediately to pay more attention to him only by the way he dressed. Their gazes stayed all but locked on him as he approached, and even the villagers gave him a wide berth.

If my brother were here, he'd say I look noble. 'Oh, Veladrien, you project a veritable aura of righteous honor.' Stain made himself laugh as he imagined his brother's voice inside his head. *If I was watching myself, I'd say that even pigs can dress in lace and pearls.*

Stain came to stand before the four white-armored knights just out front of the building. He felt very short in front of them—a feeling he was well used to. Within, he could see many more knights enjoying a humble, if grand in size, banquet. Stain took some pleasure in seeing their white capes stained with mud, and their white metal boots lacking a shine.

"Hold," the first knight addressed. "State your business."

Stain put his hand to his chest in a somewhat out-of-practice noble salute. "I am Veladrien of Jast," Stain said smoothly. "I would speak to Elias of Parbon."

"The young lord has already received the invitation for the banquet in Jast. His reply is not yet ready," the first knight answered, clearly the talker amongst the four of them.

"I come regarding more important matters," Stain said, doing his best to use more formal, proper speech. "Something concerning your young lord."

"Something?" Another knight repeated Stain's vague wording. "You might be more specific."

"Yes, I might, if you'd just let me past so that I can speak to the one whose ear is worth bending," Stain said a little gruffly, then added in a more polite tone, "My words are for the young lord's ears only."

The two shuffled on their feet and looked at each other.

"Gods," Stain said impatiently. "I'm only one person. Search me if you must, have a mage examine me if you're paranoid. I'm sure your young lord has plenty of those in his honor guard. Parbon has no lack of toady mages, unless your fortunes have shifted dramatically."

"You two," the first knight said. "Escort him to the young lord. Watch him closely."

Two of the knights nodded, and then moved to stand beside Stain as he proceeded into the room. Several gazes turned their way. The white-armored knights weaved through tables, leading Stain somewhere. Though his escorts were especially mindful not to step on the white capes draped across the floor on account of the knights sitting on benches, Stain took no small pleasure in deliberately stepping on a few of them.

They went to the second story of the building, making their way down the hall until they reached a door. One of the knights knocked on the door, waiting a few seconds before opening up. There, Stain saw a new group of people.

Ah. These are the important ones in House Parbon, whose asses are kissed on the daily by those below. Stain saw costly clothes, glistening jewelry, shimmering weapons, and well-polished armor. Everything in here was very expensive, and Stain's fingers twitched. After seeing their clothes, Stain saw the people that wore them.

All of Elias' retinue sat by a round table with empty plates, having just finished eating. There were three knights present, and Stain could tell they were dangerous. Their armor was quite grandiose compared to those downstairs, bearing a golden imprint of a lion decorating the front. Their swords shimmered red and cast light, obviously enchanted. Stain recognized one knight—a blonde man with a broad build and a handsome face who had earned fame and wealth warring with the southern tribes: Baron Abraham.

The other two in the room besides the knights were more lightly-armored. One wore fanciful white clothing, and his red hair made Stain recognize him as Elias.

The other was a skinny, middle-aged man in heavy leather robes. His hair was dark and had a sharp widow's peak, while his beard was cut to a sharp point. His eyes glowed with light and swirled with ever-shifting purple vortexes. Stain had seen high-ranking wizards before in Jast, and he knew almost instinctively this man was one of them. He gave Stain a great deal of discomfort.

"Who is this? Why have you brought him here?" asked Elias, the first to speak. All heads had moved to the door long before they entered. Stain felt a little nervous—only a little. He tried to think about his brother, attempting to combat his nervousness with resentment.

"This one claims to be Veladrien of Jast, and has some words for the young lord," a knight introduced, touching Stain's shoulder.

"Both true," Stain said clearly, stepping forth away from the knight's grip. Baron Abraham adjusted his seat until it faced Stain, watching cautiously.

Elias leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "Veladrien. The name is familiar. You're the youngest in Jast, if I remember right," Elias noted.

"He may be lying. He has no magic, young lord, and House Jast is renowned for producing mages," the spellcaster with the purple eyes spoke.

"I have magic, Helmuth, despite being the heir to a martial house. Let us hear him out, at the very least," Elias spoke with a natural authority that reminded Stain very strongly of his brother. The spellcaster Helmuth nodded, casting his gaze at his empty plate before him.

Elias continued. "Thank you for bringing him here," he addressed the knights. "You two may leave."

The knights nodded and left.

"Now," Elias gestured, offering the sole empty seat to Veladrien. "You may speak as though those present are absent. Anything you tell me will reach their ears regardless, so do not bother asking to speak with me alone."

"I'll stand," Stain refused. "Brief message, anyway." Stain cleared his throat, then said simply, "Argrave is in Jast. He wants to speak with you before you make it there. Real important."

The name alone elicited a much larger reaction than Stain had been expecting. Baron Abraham's face grew taut and angry, and he leaned forward on his chair. The mage Helmuth lowered his head, chuckling, and Elias' face grew stern and serious.

"What does that bastard want?" one of the well-armored knights said angrily.

"Don't call him that," Elias said quietly.

"What?" Abraham turned around in his chair, facing back towards Elias. "All due respect, young lord, but he crippled your sister and humiliated your father. We of House Parbon have no reason to speak politely of him, be it in front of his face or behind his back."

Stain tugged at his collar, feeling the room growing hotter. *Crippled his...? Gods. What have I gotten myself into?*

Elias looked at Abraham passively. "I have come to know him. I will not say he is respectable, but... he is not worthy of disrespect. Indeed, he has earned some good-will from me."

"What in the gods' name are you speaking of?" Abraham stood, the chair thrown back to the ground. Elias also rose. The two stood across from each other, eye to eye. "'Come to know him?' Do you mean you've fallen to honeyed words? Actions speak louder than words, young lord. He has brought only shame to Parbon," the Baron continued.

"Your tone is bordering on insolence, Abraham," the spellcaster Helmuth cautioned.

"It's fine, Helmuth," Elias interjected. "What happened to Rosalie was an accident. Argrave has made that clear to me, and I believe him," Elias tapped on the table insistently. "Regarding other matters... my father was the first to wrong him. He escaped from my father to perform a greater duty—ending the Veidimen invasion. A task which, need I remind you, he succeeded at."

"You believe those ridiculous rumors of him ending an invasion?" Abraham's voice rose in volume.

Stain took a step back, trying to blend in with the scenery. *Another reason to hate gaudy clothes. They're designed to make you stand out,* Stain lamented.

"They aren't rumors," Elias thundered. "Don't speak of things you have no knowledge. I was in Mateth. I saw the measures he took." Elias stared at the great knight in the eyes unflinchingly, then harshly pointed at the chair. "Now sit down, Baron Abraham."

The Baron stared at Elias, eyes alight with a fiery wrath. Elias held his gaze just as unflinchingly, his ruby eyes seeming all-too-calm in the face of the renowned warrior's presence. Eventually, Abraham took his seat once more and finally broke his gaze off Elias.

Elias shot his cuffs, and then slowly lowered himself into his seat. As calmly as though the confrontation had not happened, Elias looked to Stain and asked, "What did Argrave want to say?"

"Uh... right." Stain stepped forward cautiously. "Erm... he..." Stain paused, unsure of how much he should share. "He didn't give me any details at all, only that it was urgent and that it should be done before you enter Jast."

"I see. It's like him, sharing so little." Elias nodded once, then looked to Helmuth. "I can agree to that. He did not ask me to come alone, I trust?"

"No," Stain shook his head after a brief moment of thought. "It might be hard to do it quietly if you bring the whole party with you, though. All the boys downstairs..." Stain pointed. "Not exactly stealthy. White sticks out, especially against the black Jast."

"You know this region. Where would be best, Helmuth?" Elias questioned.

"Mmm... there's a village I know. Karrel, it's called. Should be fine to meet. Plenty public, but quiet enough to avoid attention. With me present, few can threaten you, young lord."

"Sufficient," Elias concluded with a nod. "Can you convey this to Argrave, Veladrien?"

Stain was slow to respond because he wasn't used to being called that name. "Yes, I can. When would you be there?"

"Tomorrow morning, I think." Elias looked to Helmuth to confirm, and the spellcaster nodded.

"Right. I'll tell him." Stain nodded. "And, uh... sorry about your sister. And your dad, whatever happened there," Stain added. The people in the room stared, saying nothing, and Stain nervously laughed before exiting the door.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 70: Anneliese

Despite Argrave's concerns, Rowe caused no significant disturbance. By the time Argrave had arrived at the inn they were staying, Rowe had already elected to rent a room and spend the night. Galamon decided to spend some time to be sure he caused no trouble and attend to his own blood-related needs. Like that, Argrave and Anneliese retired to their dormitory, ready to sleep.

As Argrave sat in his bed, holding the spellbook that contained the [Electric Eel] spell, Anneliese walked over. Argrave looked up at her.

"Something you need?"

She crossed her arms. "Do you have a..." she paused, and then rephrased her question. "Are you tired?"

"Always," Argrave nodded. "What do you need? Happy to help."

"I'd like to talk." She stared at him seriously.

"How fortunate. I'm good at that." Argrave gestured to his bed. "Sit, if you want."

Anneliese hesitated for a moment, but then did so. Argrave looked down at her as she gathered herself. She was visibly nervous, as though she was preparing to give a speech in front of a great crowd. Argrave furrowed his brows in confusion, waiting for her to speak.

"As you said, you are good at talking," she finally began. "In fact, your ability to manipulate with conversation is enviable."

"Hah. Not a positive trait, usually." Argrave scratched the back of his neck. "I have a crutch. I know a lot of people more than they would expect me to. It's hardly fair for them."

"I disagree." She shook her head. "At our first meeting, you compared our two situations. My empathic nature, and your vast knowledge of many people and things... they have some similarities. But on my end, despite being able to understand people well, I have never been able to manipulate well."

"But one hand washes the other," Argrave countered. "In this short time, you've already been a tremendous help. I do the talking; you do the discerning." Argrave held his hands out as though they were scales. "Partnership for the centuries. I'm the Watson to your Hol—well, you wouldn't get that one."

"I have been thinking about how you dealt with Elaine," she continued. "I believe you used a phrase to describe it. 'To receive trust, one must show trust.'" Her amber eyes locked on Argrave's face. "And it worked, by my estimation. Elaine came around."

"If you're trying to make my cheeks turn cherry-pie red, you're on the right track," Argrave shook his head. "Like I said, I know her. I have a crutch. Anyone could have done what I did. I'm nothing."

"Despite your occasional shows of arrogance, you are rather terrible at accepting praise... or taking credit," Anneliese noted. "No matter. I digress." She placed her hands on her knees. "To the point, then. Lacking manipulation skills myself, I have decided to shamelessly steal yours. I will show you my trust to receive yours."

Argrave nodded, things falling into place. "The first move to open the puzzle box that is me, I see." Argrave put his hand to his chin. "I don't think you understand the finer points of manipulation. Generally, you don't make people aware of what you're doing."

"Back when we were on Veiden, despite my grandmother's admonishment and my mention of my familial situation, you did not ask me questions. You restrained your curiosity. I assumed that you, perhaps, already knew of my family. It would not be beyond you."

"I don't," Argrave shook his head.

"That is good," she nodded and smiled. "I have something to offer, then. My own situation. Perhaps... indeed, it may well be a pointless thing to bring before you. But I wish to share it, if you are open to hearing it."

"I can't deny I'm interested," Argrave nodded.

"Then I shall begin," she nodded resolutely.

Argrave waited patiently. Anneliese rubbed her hands together, staring at the ground.

"I apologize. I have never shared this," she said quietly. "My name, as you may have noticed, is unusual amongst Veidimen. I was given a name from Berendar, because I was born in Berendar."

"I heard people mention that," Argrave nodded.

"My mother was married to my tribe's best hunter," she began. "They established a contract before Veid to only love with each other. It is a common practice." She finally turned to Argrave. "That man, though, is not my father. Instead, my father was the tribe's chieftain."

"I do not know the details, for it was the day of my... conception," she said bitterly, as though the word bothered her. "...but while my mother's husband was away on a long hunt, the tribe's chief raped my mother, Kressa." She turned her head back to the ground. "In the months to come, the tribe came to know she was pregnant. My mother's husband had been hunting such a long time that the whole tribe knew he was not the father."

Argrave listened in silence, teeth clenched as his mind followed what probably ended up happening.

"Held in judgement of adultery by the very man who raped her, she was given a choice—acknowledge who the father was and join with him in matrimony or be exiled." She looked at Argrave. "My mother chose exile."

"Did she not say what happened?" Argrave inquired.

"She did. But the man was the chief, and power is power." Anneliese's eyes wandered, scanning the ceiling. "My mother's husband believed her, though he was powerless to change the inevitable result. My mother was exiled. Her husband remained, forbidden from leaving as he provided much of the tribe's food. Pregnant and penniless, she wandered through Berendar. A kind village couple showed mercy on her and allowed her to stay until she gave birth. She named me after one of the people there in return for their kindness."

Argrave took a deep breath. There was much in his head, but he knew it would be best to stay silent and wait for her to finish.

"We spent seven years in that village," Anneliese eventually continued. "My features... my mother, Kressa, has blonde hair and white eyes. I inherited all of my father's features. In that village, I learned the curse of my empathy." She placed her hand on her knees. "When my mother looked at me, there was always some hatred in that gaze. And there was fear, anger, sadness... she showed love and hate in equal measure. Much of it was physical." Anneliese looked off to the side. "I cannot blame her. Not exactly."

Yes you can, Argrave wished to say, but he stayed quiet.

"It was the worst when I asked her about it. 'Why do you hate me? Why do you fear me?' Often she did not realize herself she felt those emotions. Being confronted with them would inspire her wrath." She started to blink quicker, and Argrave spotted a faint glisten in her eyes that Anneliese tried to hide. "That way, I learned to suppress what I expressed."

Anneliese closed her eyes altogether, sitting in quiet silence. "Six years, it took for my mother's husband to succeed in having the exile revoked. Not for lack of trying, mind you," she added. "Our tribe was the last conquered by Dras. It fell because my mother's husband gave an offer to Patriarch Dras; reveal the truth to the world, and revoke Kressa's exile. In return, he would betray his tribe.

"Kressa's husband butchered his tribe's chief in the battle to come. Without leadership, they fell to Dras quickly. When the exile was revoked, he left to retrieve Kressa. It took him months to find her, and months more to persuade her to return to Veiden."

"So, I spent the remainder of my childhood in Veiden, unwelcome both by my peers and my parent. To Kressa and her husband, I was the fruit of the worst moment in their lives. To my peers, I was the strange girl on the fence between human customs and Veidimen customs. My ability to know when they lied or how they felt only earned their enmity. In time, though, I found my place. Though I earned no friends, if I remained useful, I was given esteem," she finished. Her words did not sound sad or bitter, merely hollow.

"That is why I have endeavored to be the best spellcaster I can, and to learn as much of the world as I can. I know it was empty, and I know there was no love behind it, but the few times that my mother gave me praise was when I achieved acclaim as a spellcaster."

Anneliese gazed at the floor vacantly for a time, then she finally turned to Argrave. "There you have it. I have never confided that with anyone. It is nothing special and perhaps entirely undeserving of the ceremony I gave it, but it is my past."

Argrave stared at her for a long time, blinking in silence as his brain worked on what to say. Finally, he furrowed his brows, and then leaned forward, placing his hand on Anneliese's shoulder. She was tense for a moment, but she relaxed in a second.

"I'm sorry you had to experience that," Argrave said quietly as they sat there. "Having heard that, I can say this confidently; you're one of the strongest people I know. Despite having endured all of that, you're brilliant and open-minded. I don't know how you managed. I don't think I could have."

"I doubt that." She gazed at him. "As child to King Felipe, your experience could not have been any easier."

Argrave pulled away his hand from Anneliese's shoulder and turned his gaze away. The whiplash from that statement was somewhat overwhelming. It was a stark reminder that everything he was in this world was empty and hollow, and he was living a life that he had not earned. It was easy for him to play the role of Argrave, but if he stripped away the veil, nothing of substance stood beyond.

"Don't worry overmuch," Anneliese's voice broke past the haze of Argrave's thoughts. "I did not do this expecting reciprocation. I merely thought it would be something I might share to demonstrate that I trust you."

Argrave turned his head to look at her. "Why do you trust me?"

"Because you want me to," she returned. "I am not ignorant that you speak especially warmly to me and Galamon. Notions of complete trust, friendship, consideration—I am not saying you do not hold these thoughts towards us, but I doubt that you would voice them were you not trying to earn our faith. You spoke that way towards Elaine, too, when you decided that she needed to be... placated."

Argrave straightened his back after being called out but did not deny it. "It's natural for a leader to try and earn the trust of those following him," he defended.

"I am not admonishing you," she reassured. "I am only acknowledging—"

Three knocks came at the door, drawing them both from the conversation. Galamon would not knock, Argrave knew—he would enter without a word. Argrave stood, placing what spell matrixes he knew at the front of his mind. He was glad that the Blessing of Supersession had recovered.

Argrave peeked open the door. He had to look down. There, a brown-haired man wearing worn red and white clothing waited.

"I found Elias," Stain greeted, a little out of breath.

"I hope you spoke to him as well," Argrave returned, opening the door.

Stain walked inside. "Yeah, naturally, you pisser." Stain only realized what he'd said after he said it and looked at Argrave warily, fearing retribution.

"Pisser, huh?" Argrave chuckled. "You're not wrong. Well, good work. Who all was with him?"

"Ehm..." Stain hesitated, clearly taken aback by Argrave's demeanor. "Well... don't you think I've earned some of that money you were talking about?"

Argrave smiled, then reached into his pocket, pulling out a pink coin. "Suppose you've earned it." Argrave tossed it, and Stain frantically tried to grasp at it.

Eventually Stain got his fingers on it, and he held it up to the moonlight coming in through the windows. "Gods, you just carry one of these around?"

"Now, who was there? Any names?" Argrave pressed.

“Well...” Stain gingerly wrapped the coin up in a cloth, and then stuffed it into his pockets. “A weirdo mage with purple eyes, Baron Abraham, and more knights than he probably needs.”

Argrave stepped forward. “Did you hear the name Helmuth?” he asked insistently.

“Yeah,” Stain confirmed. “Set up at meeting at some place called Karrel. I know where it is. Date’s tomorrow morning.” Stain popped his fingers. “Wish you’d da told me you crippled this man’s sister. Would have been nice information to have. Could’ve ended sourly.”

“Helmuth?” Argrave said out loud as though it was unbelievable, entirely ignoring Stain. “Why is he...” Argrave paused and shook his head. “Damn it.”

“What, did you cripple his children or something?” Stain asked sarcastically. “He seemed reasonable, just had some spooky eyes. A lot of high-ranking mages have weird stuff like that.”

“It’s the eyes that are the problem.” Argrave took a deep breath and sighed. “That one can see a lot of things he shouldn’t.”

Galamon opened the door, entering. He looked at Stain somewhat perplexedly. Stain returned his gaze with a good deal of fear.

“Rowe is sleeping,” Galamon contributed. “But I heard what you were discussing.” When Galamon said that, Stain was even more afraid of him.

Argrave was ready to dismiss Rowe, but then a thought came to his head. “Might be we need to wake Rowe up early. He might come with us somewhere tomorrow morning.” Argrave smiled wide. Anneliese shook her head, and Galamon looked confused.