

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 76: Proper Eating

Dusk light washed over the city of Jast, the orange giving the somber city an amber hue on its black stones. The towers seemed less dark and foreboding as high as Argrave was, though he was not fond of the stronger winds here.

"I'm done," Anneliese's voice broke his thoughts.

Argrave turned, feeling some gold fur rub at his cheek. He wore the fancy black outfit he had had retailored a few days ago. It had taken some extra money to have it done in such a timely fashion, but he was largely satisfied with the results.

"And?" Argrave pressed her further. The rest of the company gathered around—Elaine, Stain, Elias, and Helmuth. Galamon was present, too, but he did not need to move from his spot to hear Anneliese.

Everyone save the two elves wore very elaborate clothing. Stain's outfit was still the tight-fitting white one he'd donned when visiting Elias, and the young lord of Parbon wore his house's colors. Elaine had donned a simple but vibrant crimson dress that seemed to meld with her hair. She most often wore the baggy gray robes, but in this dress, her statuesque figure was especially evident.

"I scanned the Count's estate thoroughly," Anneliese began, gaze jumping from person to person as she recounted her experience scouting with druidic magic. "Guards patrolled the outer walls and garden, but no more than usual. None of the rooms seemed to have any large gathering of troops. Of the areas I was able to explore with my pigeon, none of them seemed to be anything more than well-prepared for a banquet. I cannot account for secret rooms or hidden compartments, but the Count is not overtly preparing to take action inside."

"I seriously doubt my brother would violate your right as a guest," Stain spoke to Elias. "People would be speaking of it until the end of time. He can't have that. People can only speak kindly of Jast, otherwise he'll toss and turn in his sleep, crying and moaning in twisted agony at his sullied honor."

"You're doing a lot for this to happen, Veladrien," spoke Elias to Stain. "Are you sure of it? I won't fault you if you renege now."

*This is why I hate goody two-shoes, Argrave dialogued internally. They always try to take less than what they need, even at their own detriment. Don't give him an out, you fool...* he wished to say, but Argrave was not genuinely concerned. He expected Stain's answer, and it came just as he thought it would.

"Call me Stain. It's the name I chose—the one I want," he insisted. "After tonight, Veladrien won't be any more. If it'll help this little deal work out, I'll formally renounce my heritage. I'm sure Count Delbraun will leap forth like a dog towards a treat at the prospect of removing me from his family. Bastard. Er, no offense," he quickly added towards Argrave, having recently discovered his identity.

"None taken," Argrave shook his head. "Alright. So, seeing no immediate danger, I think it'd be best if we decided on a plan as to what should be done once we're inside Delbraun's estate."

"We just need to get a private conversation with the Count," Elias shook his head. "We play it by ear."

"No, we don't," Argrave quickly refuted. "Our ears aren't capable of much thought. This is too important to delegate to an organ which some people live without. The stakes are a lot larger than you can see, and I'm not talking about the beef which we might find served in these gilded halls."

Elaine snorted, but most others were unamused by Argrave's pun.

"Firstly, it's imperative that we stick together. We can function better if we remain closer to each other, and in the event that something unsavory is genuinely waiting for us in the banquet hall..." Argrave bunched his hands together. "Strength in numbers, no? Moreover, we can't say when or where we'll encounter Delbraun, and so we all need to be by each other."

"The Count is sure to greet us," Elias argued. "He is the host, and we are the guest he specifically invited."

"Do you think it would be prudent to show his face if he genuinely intends to move against you?" Elaine asked. "I see, now, why Argrave asked me along. I'm a shield. The Count won't act against Elias easily if he risks offending the branch manager of the Order in Jast."

"No, not a shield. Just your presence with Elias gives a lot of credibility to our offer. And now, Elias owes you a favor. He's rather rich, if you didn't know." Argrave tapped his shoulder. "Look at this outfit. Silken white, gold threads... can't have been cheap."

"You take many liberties, putting the young lord in debt to another," criticized Helmuth.

"What can I say? I'm a free-spirited man," Argrave deflected.

Elias waved a hand. "It's fine, Helmuth," he interjected. "Alright. Say the Count doesn't arrive. Say he's not even present. What—"

"He is present," Anneliese shook her head. "I have seen him wandering."

Elias rubbed his fingers together. "How do you know what he looks like?"

"Argrave described him. Ashen hair kept slicked back, middle-aged, tall, orange eyes."

"And how does Argrave know?" Elias prodded further. "The Count scarcely leaves his estate, let alone Jast."

Argrave quickly supplied, "Stain told me," placing his hands on the teenager's shoulders.

"I did...?" He looked at Argrave, then quickly caught on. "Oh, right, I did," he said with certainty.

"Indeed," Argrave nodded, quickly pulling free his hand. "And to answer your earlier question, Elias—the beauty of a banquet is that other people will be in attendance. Most prominently, the local nobility of Jast will be present. It takes but a few pointed inquiries to incite their own curiosity; soon enough, they'll be mirroring our own sentiments." Argrave put his hand to his chest. "Why isn't the host present? When will the host be present? That sort of thing is insulting to the nobility, as you know. Might be they'll make a fuss for us."

Elias bit his lip, thinking, then nodded. "It seems a reasonable solution. I don't think I would have been able to come up with that on short notice. Perhaps it was naïve of me to think that people were fundamentally unpredictable."

"Of course, if they are fellow conspirators working with the Count, nothing will come of it," Argrave shook his head. "That alone should tip us off. It would be a good warning bell."

"Then is that all?" Elias questioned.

"No," Argrave shook his head. "I'll be doing most of the talking—it's what I'm good at, as I'm sure you agree—but this next part is very important, because he'll likely be seeking you out for responses." Argrave stepped forward, pointing at Elias' face. "Do not allow him to decide at a later date. He must decide on this betrothal at this banquet."

Elias looked up at Argrave, meeting his gaze. "Why?"

"You would make a terrible merchant," Argrave shook his head, then held out two hands to represent two examples. "Let's say you have two buyers of your product. One offers a very good deal. You know, however, the other buyer might be capable of offering even more. What do you do to maximize profits?"

Elias mused, and then bitterly answered, "I would tell the other buyer about the good offer, trying to get more out of him." He shook his head. "You think the Count will go to Elbraille—or perhaps even Vasquer—and look for a better deal."

"Precisely," Argrave tapped his temple. "Like I said, I'll be talking. I don't want you botching this entire thing by saying something foolish. If you're unsure, consult me. Don't do any ear-playing or gut-following. Think with your gut and you're acting out of your ass."

Helmuth shook his head in disapproval at Argrave's insolent words, but Elaine seemed quite amused. A silence stretched out as Argrave thought of more he could say, but he came to the conclusion that there was nothing more to add.

Argrave stepped away, shooting his cuffs and straightening his coat. "I hope the food doesn't blow. I hate fancy dishes."

"Is there nothing more? If so, we should probably head for the main gates," Helmuth commented.

"Some few guests have already arrived," noted Anneliese, looking out across the hill leading from Jast up to Count Delbraun's estate. "I will remain here, keeping an eye on things with my druidic magic. Should anything seem awry, I will fly into the banquet hall and perch on someone's shoulder."

"Be careful," Argrave cautioned. "If your pigeon is shot with a quarrel, god forbid, there will be a good deal of backlash."

"Best I suffer some than let everyone be unwitting of what is coming," she rebuked.

"If that's your choice," Argrave shook his head. "Alright. If there's nothing more..."

Elaine raised one hand. "Do you need nothing from me? Should I merely stand around looking pretty?"

“You’d have no difficulty with that, I’m sure,” Argrave complimented smoothly. “I gave you no direction because I have no issue with any interjection you might have. Unless it’s a deliberate sabotage, of course. That would not be ideal.”

“No, you have my full support,” she shook her head. “This matter with that elven spellcaster, Rowe—the deal is not yet finalized, but this could be huge for me. I have to thank you for bringing him to me.”

“I thought you might like that,” Argrave nodded. “It’s no trouble. We can talk of it later, if you wish. For now... let’s go, shall we?” Argrave spoke to everyone.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 77: One Percent**

Argrave and his entourage of well-dressed companions stepped past the open set of gargantuan carved marble doors, entering into the banquet hall just behind their footman. Two sets of stairs branched to either side, leading down below into a veritably sparkling room.

Their escort stepped to the balcony atop the stairs, announcing, “Now entering: young lord Elias of House Parbon, heir to the Margravate of Parbon, lady Elaine of Vyrbell, young lord Veladrien of Jast, and Argrave, son of King Felipe III.”

Argrave scratched his cheek as most gazes within the hall turned to them. Perhaps the title ‘son of King Felipe III’ had been intended to acknowledge his bastardry, but it seemed far more grandiose than ‘Argrave of Vasquer.’ Helmuth had been entirely excluded from the introduction. Perhaps it was because of his relatively baseborn status, or perhaps he was simply included in Elias’ retinue.

Argrave’s gaze wandered around the grand banquet hall belonging to Count Delbraun of Jast. The player did not often have cause to come here, so the place was mostly unfamiliar to him. The wide and open hall was a vainglorious testament to the power and wealth of House Jast. The place had an air quite similar to a basilica, though perhaps that could be solely attributed to the two prominent colors—white and red.

The room was near fifty feet high, and silver chandeliers bearing bright red candles illuminated the room much better than they had any right doing—most likely, they were enchanted. Marble pillars held up the ceiling, lined up all along the side of the rectangular room. The center of the hall was empty, occupied only with some chatting guests. The birch tables had been placed against the walls and were already filled with food, covered partially by red cloths. Vibrant crimson banners covered the windows, elaborate white suns embroidered in their center—Jast’s heraldry.

Obsequious servants replaced what was taken and tended to the guests ably. Though they were some of the first few to arrive, the hall was already quite filled, and curious eyes watched them readily. After a brief scan, Argrave could not spot Delbraun.

“These places make me nervous,” Elias muttered to Argrave.

“Do they?” Argrave asked rhetorically. He stepped towards the stairs, continuing, “Don’t let it bother you. I can’t hold your hand, you realize.”

“Don’t know what it is. The big crowds, the open spaces... well, banquets and balls have their fair share of tragic endings,” Elias mused. “Maybe it’s only reasonable to be nervous.”

"I know why it bothers you," Argrave said, placing his hand on the rail and walking down the rightward flight of stairs as he assigned names to those present. "You care what people think about you."

"Well..." he paused, then said defensively, "Everyone does."

"There will always be some, sure. It's never pleasant to be hated. It generally only leads to sadder days." Argrave glanced back. "You can care less about what they think, though."

"How?" Elias questioned.

"View things with a larger perspective," Argrave stated simply. "Me, or you, or anyone in this room—we live relatively meagre existences. We'll live, we'll do things, and then we'll die. First, we'll die physically. Then, as time passes, people will forget us, and we die spiritually. On this plane, at least," Argrave added. "Who knows what happens after? I don't."

"Your solution for combatting anxiety is to contemplate death?" Elias frowned as they came to the final steps before the banquet floor.

"Recognize the unimportance of your actions," Argrave urged. "Being disliked by another is nothing on a cosmological scale."

They came to the banquet floor. Already, some people stepped towards them. Elaine asked Argrave, "You truly believe this?"

"Of course not," Argrave said incredulously. "My vying heart battles my logical brain, and oft wins, I find. I wouldn't be doing this if I thought my actions didn't matter. Rather, I plan to leave an indelible mark before I leave this earthly realm—if indeed I leave it at all. Living forever is not so far-fetched for one of my talents."

"You're a real headcase, huh?" Stain mused.

"It's a joke. I'll probably die young," assured Argrave. He watched Elias, who fidgeted noticeably less. Argrave had given that little monologue only to ease his nerves, and by his estimation, it worked splendidly. There was a small group of people headed their way, and Argrave stepped forward, assuming the role as their leader.

"Look at this," he said levelly. "So many beautiful people so busy looking so good. Let's mingle, shall we? Follow, and remember—our host is not present, and we must ask why that is."

Argrave greeted those approaching with a convivial smile, assuming a neat dignity that integrated itself naturally. While a discerning viewer might comment that Argrave lacked noble graces, it proved to be no barrier to his inclusion in the conversation, and he very quickly drew the rest of his company into the fray.

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Count Delbraun, a tall, ashen-haired man with somewhat animalistic orange eyes, looked through what appeared to be a simple glassless window. If one were to peer through on the other side, though, they would see only stone—it was an illusion enchantment of the highest order, and the window itself was so small that it did not draw much attention even should the magic fail. Few save the Count of Jast knew of

the existence of these windows, spread throughout the entire estate. Sights and sounds both passed through the portal, and the hall was so spacious that voices echoed well.

The Count watched an extraordinarily tall black-haired man converse with a very sizable crowd of people, his every word drawing them in. Delbraun watched the man with such scrutiny it was as though he was trying to decipher how a magician performed a magic trick. He listened to his words just as thoroughly.

Eventually, he closed his eyes and nodded. He stepped away, moving through a confined passageway of marble poorly lit by magic lamps. He pushed on a wall, and it flipped open. An empty bedroom lay beyond. He made sure the hidden door in the wall was in perfect alignment, then he moved to pull a string beside his bed. Just outside the door, one could hear the faint ringing of a bell.

Some time passed as the count removed his white, silken vestments. After a few moments, three knocks came at the door, and then someone entered. A servant waited.

"Fetch me something in a muted red," Delbraun commanded naturally. "My younger brother is here, and I do not care to match with him."

"At once, Count," the servant bowed, then stepped off into another room.

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"...you have been pleasant company thus far, and if you might allow me to step outside my bounds and inquire about something of a political nature, good sir Argrave, I would like to ask a question of you," a well-dressed man spoke. He had rather well-groomed facial hair, perhaps to accommodate his quickly balding head.

"The intent of the question is the important part," Argrave raised a brow. "No need to stoke tempers at a pleasant banquet, yes? We're all waiting for our host to arrive, and I'd prefer not to have him come to some petty squabble regarding the civil war."

Many present agreed, taking drinks from their glasses. As Argrave had come to discover, this place was a banquet mostly in name alone. The food went largely untouched, and the majority of people were standing and speaking. Argrave was veritably surrounded by a wall of silks and suedes, so entrapped he was in well-dressed people. His company had been pushed to the fringes of the crowd.

"Yes, of course, I agree fully," the man returned. "I simply wished to inquire about rumors abounding, their origins in Mateth."

All present paid attention, waiting for Argrave's response. "Mateth, is it? What do you wish to know? Yes, it's true—the walls are truly a hundred feet tall, and the seafood is unmatched."

A mixture of fake and real laughter spread out in the crowd. Someone offered Argrave wine, but he acted as though he didn't notice. It wouldn't be prudent to drink here.

"We wished to hear about your role in the invasion," a woman spoke up.

"I don't recall invading Mateth," Argrave deflected with a smile.

"I've heard Duke Enrico calls you the 'Hero of Mateth.' And a good deal of people tell me that you came from Mateth."

"I came from Mateth to here, yes," Argrave nodded.

"So it's true?" the initial well-groomed questioner asked. "You stopped the invasion with the help of Tower Master Castro?"

"I wasn't in Mateth when the invasion was happening," Argrave shook his head. "It's hard to end an invasion when you aren't at the site of the invasion. Unless, of course, people think I sailed from the shores, into the frigid seas, and set foot on the snow elves' homeland. A bit far-fetched, isn't it?"

"I cannot make sense of this," someone shook their head. "Why does the Duke praise you, then?"

Argrave sighed as though in remorse. "It all stems from a misunderstanding, you see. Master Castro initially came to Mateth seeking me out, and—"

A click echoed out across the banquet hall, and Argrave's head turned to the side, seeking its source. The door across from the main entryway slowly opened, and a servant stepped out, coming to the balcony. He opened his mouth, beginning the word 'announcing,' but the Count's hand grabbed his shoulder, silencing him.

Count Delbraun stepped to the balcony. He wore a pleasant dark red outfit, lined with threads of white and silver links. His back was indomitably straight, and his gray hair was neatly slicked back. Shimmering jewels lined his fingers, a testament both to his wealth and his desire to display it.

"Everyone," Count Delbraun's voice thundered out. His voice was deep and powerful, yet it had a certain tenseness to it that made each word seem measured. "It brings me great pleasure to see you all assembled here today, giving welcome to Elias, heir to the Margravate of House Parbon. I apologize for my tardiness. Unexpected issues kept me." His eyes scanned the room.

"Though this banquet may seem to have political undertones, I hope that everyone is willing to set aside whatever allegiances or doubts they may have of the current state of the realm and enjoy a night of fine conversation and pleasant accommodations." He clasped his hands together, and dipped his head slightly. "When the sun fades beyond the mountains, the banquet doors will open, and anyone may roam the gardens. House Jast has been maintaining them for hundreds of years."

"Utter trash. He had the garden re-done last year," Stain commented quietly to Argrave. "Uprooted the trees our mom planted."

"For now," Delbraun continued, "Please enjoy the food and drink. I have scheduled some musicians for later. You may look forward to that."

"I thank you for welcoming me into your home, Count Delbraun," Elias called out. "I offer a toast to our host. I am glad of the opportunity to give you thanks," he raised his wine glass.

The rest of the crowd mirrored Elias' toast, then took a drink. Elias looked to Argrave.

"So, what now?"

Argrave watched as Count Delbraun stepped down the stairs. “He came, as I expected. We should go and greet the host. It’s only polite.”

“Just like that?” Elaine asked.

“Just like that,” Argrave confirmed. He took the wine glass from Elias’ hand and placed it on a nearby table. “Come on. The gardens will open soon, and undoubtedly we will have our privacy with the Count then.”

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 78: One Job**

Argrave stared out beyond the hedge maze. He was just tall enough to see over the well-trimmed bushes. Night had fallen, bathing Count Delbraun’s estate in pearly moonlight. The wind had grown colder yet, and Argrave was glad of the golden fur lining his lapel and collar. He pulled his gloves a bit tighter and turned around, watching the last of his company for the banquet take their seats. Count Delbraun sat at one end of the table, back straight as an arrow.

They had moved to a marble terrace just beside the banquet hall. An abundance of greenery made it quite the secluded place, though the plants were kept well enough that the privacy appeared deliberate. The tables and chairs were a gray stone and had been marked with hand-carved floral designs.

Argrave pulled back the chair opposite Delbraun, taking his place at the head of the table. His gaze quickly jumped between Elaine, Stain, Elias, and Helmuth, finally landing at the Count. The man reminded Argrave of Duke Enrico, somewhat—a cold, business-like atmosphere, though Delbraun seemed to lack what little warmth the Duke had.

“To begin with, I’d like to thank you for giving us your time,” Argrave began amiably.

Delbraun stared at Argrave in silence, only blinking and waiting. Stain tapped his nails against the stone table, biting his lips in the quiet terrace. Elias seemed to wish desperately to interject, but he only watched Argrave, eyes pleading.

Being met with all the response a statue might offer, Argrave shifted in his seat. Delbraun was not especially involved in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ so it was difficult to get an accurate bead on his personality. The player had but a few brief interactions, most of which were insubstantial. In the game, he had remained neutral with Elbraille until the war was all but finished. That told Argrave only of caution.

Argrave tilted his head, meeting Delbraun’s gaze. “Perhaps you would like me to skip the niceties and get to the point, Count Delbraun.”

This got more reaction, but only just—the Count raised an eyebrow.

“Doubtless you’re curious about why Elias would come here. He has no good reason to accept your invitation, ostensibly.” Argrave leaned forward and laid his arms on the table. “I’ll lay it out plainly. This civil war is rather concerning. With Mateth crippled as it is, Jast stands to be the primary military power at the edge between the north and the south.”



The Count held up a hand, a spell matrix swirling about. Argrave knew the Count was a B-rank mage, and so tensed, prepared to move at but a moment's notice. Looking at the spell, Argrave quickly deduced it was a warding spell. A bubble expanded outwards, enveloping them.

"Some letters of mine were missing," Delbraun's gaze fell on Stain. "Something would come of it, I knew."

"Ahah," Argrave laughed awkwardly. "I hope you won't pay that any mind. A necessary act."

"Is your intent to coerce me, Argrave of Vasquer?" Delbraun's orange eyes switched back to Argrave, not a hint of fear on his expression despite his words. "You bring an S-rank spellcaster into my domain. As a mage, you can't be ignorant that people would take notice of a veritable monster walking about. You arrive at my banquet unannounced. If you *do* intend to coerce..." he closed his eyes and shook his head. "...Imprudent."

Elias reacted strongly to the word 'coerce,' adjusting in his seat and looking urgently to Argrave. Perhaps contrary to Elias' desires, though, Argrave did not immediately deny it.

Argrave rubbed his thumb against his palm. "You're taking a course that's against the best interest of the realm. That's why Elias and I are here today."

Using the phrase 'the realm' made his words ambiguous, and deliberately so on Argrave's part. 'The realm' might mean Vasquer, or it might mean Jast. Argrave trusted that uncertainty would get under Delbraun's skin.

The Count took a deep breath and exhaled, gaze now locked on Argrave unblinkingly.

Argrave proceeded after a moment's pause. "Perhaps 'taking a course' is the wrong term for this." Argrave held his hands out, open-palmed. "You stand at the beginning of a path. Or, better yet, a crossroad," Argrave amended quickly.

"Your liege lord, Elbraille, fears the might of Vasquer, and has decided to accept the meagre benefits thrust upon them by King Felipe III. As of now, you obey the words of your liege, unheeding of the righteousness of the situation. I cannot fault you for this—you swore an oath of fealty, and you are a man of honor." Argrave gestured towards Delbraun, expression serious. "Elias, however, has a proposal for you."

Elias opened his mouth to speak, but his voice failed on account of his prolonged silence. He cleared his throat and continued, saying, "Correct. I believe it would be in everyone's best interest to forge a union between House Jast and House Parbon, by way of myself and a woman of your house—your sister, Ridia, perhaps."

The Count did not relax, but Argrave thought some of the tension in his face fell. He looked to Elias, letting the silence hang once more. Argrave waited patiently.

Delbraun spoke evenly. "Noble houses rise and fall with the passing of time. House Jast is five centuries old. We are the oldest house in Vasquer, barring the royal family itself. Over centuries, this place rose from a barren wasteland of black stone into a city of magic famed across the realm. Why?"

Delbraun leaned in. "As one house of wizards surrounded by a thousand others in this land of dense magic, my house learned well when to fight and when to endure. Powers great and small all fell, but when the king chose a Count of this burgeoning city, he named it Jast." Delbraun leaned back. "I see no need to stick my neck out. In times like this, it makes it only easier to cut."

"In a war of honor and righteousness, you'd eschew your duty to your people to retain your position?" Argrave criticized. The words were mostly for show—Delbraun's resistance was only ceremony, Argrave suspected.

"Who is to say who is right or just?" Delbraun questioned coldly. "Vasquer has ruled for 872 years. The realm has only prospered during this time, growing and expanding ever further."

"And yet it falters now," Argrave countered. "Vasquer's king is ruthless and uncompromising, sowing misery where he treads. Its heir is worse yet—cruel, taking pleasure in suffering."

"We all swear fealty to the king," Delbraun shook his head. "I bear the title of Count only by his grace."

"And the king swore to protect you in turn. At this, he fails miserably—indeed, he actively harms your people and your realm in vainglorious grasps at power to strengthen House Vasquer." Argrave leaned in, entwining his hands. "Nothing is black and white, Count Delbraun, but do you recall a history where a villain won? Never, considering who writes it." Argrave unwound his fingers. "Furthermore, should a new king be enthroned, with Parbon as the sole decider, doubtless that new king would bestow you a title with equal—if not greater—grace."

Their heated back and forth slowed for a moment as each stared the other down. Finally, Delbraun asked, "You believe House Parbon to be the victors?"

Argrave was tempted to confess that things looked dire without Jast's aid or neutrality, but doing so would damage his position in the exchange.

"Unnecessary death is always a tragic thing. Whether it's Veiden attacking Mateth or Elbraille supporting Vasquer, both create only havoc. You won't experience much of it. The people will, though. Your soldiers, your civilians... they'll bear the brunt." Argrave pursed his lips. "I stopped what was beginning in Mateth before it could spiral out of control. I cannot stop this civil war. I hope that, by facilitating this, the war can end quickly with a crushing victory."

"Yet Parbon cannot protect their own. Word came today that five men under prince Induen stormed a castle and killed its lord. This was in House Parbon's territory no less." Delbraun waved his hand.

Argrave frowned, ignorant of this happening. Realizing his mistake, he smoothed his face and deflected quickly, saying, "An assassin can achieve much if the receiver is unprepared. If this does not illustrate Vasquer's treachery thoroughly, I am unsure what will."

Delbraun returned to the silence he'd cultivated at the beginning of the conversation, staring at Argrave. His gaze was lost in deliberation, and Argrave waited for him to process things.

"You wish to speak of coercion?" Argrave continued. "Vasquer has practically forced Elbraille into support. The Duke fears reprisal on account of being so close to the bulk of Vasquer's power, and Vasquer has leveraged that fear well with minute rewards." Argrave shook his head as though

disappointed. "I believe that, in times like these, it is a vassal's place to advise their liege to take a different, more mutually beneficial course of action."

Elaine placed her hand on the table. "The Order of the Gray Owl presently maintains its politically neutral stance under the leadership of Master Castro. Individual mages, however, are free to hold their own allegiances. As are the nobility of Jast. Something you might wish to consider, Count Delbraun."

Delbraun did not look at Elaine, eyes staying locked on Argrave.

"Another matter," Argrave held Delbraun's gaze. "Your brother, Veladrien of Jast. I am well aware there exists some hostility between the two of you," he pointed two fingers at each of them. "Elias, though, is rather impressed by his talents. Should this betrothal occur, perhaps Veladrien might, as a show of good faith, renounce his family name and enter into service under Elias?"

"Hah." Delbraun laughed once, a smile splitting his stern demeanor for the first time in the conversation.

Stain had been watching passively throughout the whole conversation, but that brief laughter made his face shift. It was like watching some last holdout fall—some last hope that, just maybe, his brother still had some love for him. The teenager's gaze drifted to the floor, as though his triumph was stolen from him.

"You came well prepared, Argrave," Delbraun watched Argrave, uncaring of his younger brother's plight. "You wear your House's colors, yet you work against their interests. A rather baffling thing. I do not like proceeding with uncertain variables. Where is your stake in this?"

Argrave touched the gold fur on his coat. "I merely like these colors. There is no deeper meaning behind it. This outfit is rather nice, by my estimation." Argrave adjusted his clothing.

"As for my stake..." Argrave searched for an answer, brows furrowed. "I was being genuine earlier. A loss of life is a tragic thing, to be prevented by any means necessary. If war cannot be stayed, let it end quickly. The war has not yet begun and both sides seem even, but should Vasquer keep power, things will be... unpleasant for the populace, largely. If those ruling are unjust, it is the people's duty to step up and remove them from power. There are others more suitable to the throne, with a claim to it or no."

This was his true position on the matter. Should the rebellion succeed and should Argrave possess a pivotal position in said rebellion, he would be in a good position to enthrone a new ruler without significant unrest. He might achieve a better end than existed in 'Heroes of Berendar.' Not all deviations from the normal course needed to be negative. Even a game as dynamic as 'Heroes of Berendar' was not without limits in terms of options, and now those limits were gone.

Delbraun nodded. "If you phrase it like that, I think I see."

"I am glad to hear it. Now, then, unless you have more questions, all present are very eager to hear your answer." Argrave placed his elbows on the table and leaned against it.

Delbraun shook his head. "This is not something I, alone, can decide. I must consult with my vassals, few though they may be, and ensure that everything is considered before making such a decision."

"If you can't decide here, we'll take your answer as a 'no,'" Elias spoke up, and Argrave hid his smile upon seeing Elias' disappointment. Evidently the young lord of Parbon did not like that Argrave's advice had been accurate.

"I do not like being forced to answer." Delbraun raised a hand to the table, gripping the side.

"Need I remind you that you are, nominally, our enemy?" Argrave smiled. "I have read the letters. We came here in good faith to try and pull you away from the path you're about to tread at the risk of Elias' life. I believe this is the least that you can do," Argrave stated seriously. "You hold the most authority in Jast—any decision you make will be followed."

Delbraun's gaze locked on Argrave, resuming its silence. After a few moments, he looked to Elias and asked, "You would give me, at the very least, until the end of this banquet?"

"That..." Elias paused, "...should be fine, I think."

Argrave hid his expression with his hand. *Jesus, Elias. One job.*

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 79: It Can't Happen**

"I see no reason to think that Delbraun would cheat us on this matter," Elias said with a determined stare at Argrave. "He will give us his answer at the end of the banquet, just as he said." He still sat in the stone chair beside the table they'd spoken to Delbraun at. Argrave leaned up against the terrace's railing.

Argrave sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "I wonder, then, why he can't be found anywhere in the banquet hall." Argrave lowered his hand. "What did I tell you? I specifically told you not to let him answer later. I didn't think I needed to specify if the quantity of time was hours or days. Evidently I was wrong," Argrave said exasperatedly.

"Count Delbraun will come back," Elias insisted.

"Here's what I think will happen. Hours will pass, and then the banquet will end. Servants will refuse us, citing some annoyance the count must deal with—or perhaps he's simply fallen asleep in deep contemplation." Argrave shook his head. "There's a term for this. Stonewalling."

"You are too cynical," Elias said finally, refusing to argue the point further. Elias' retainer, Helmuth, seemed to share Argrave's sentiments, but he did not voice them.

"Fine. Whatever. I did my best," Argrave shrugged in defeat. "I don't think we're at risk anymore, and Anneliese will still be watching for suspicious happenings. Let us wait to see who is right." He looked to Stain, who sat at the table still. "Stain," he called out, and the teenager raised his head. Argrave reached into his pockets, retrieving a small pouch. "Here. Well-earned," he tossed it.

Stain caught the pouch, perplexed. He opened it, peering within, then quickly shut it and looked around. "Gods, you have to stop carrying this much around. Four rose gold coins?"

"Hope you like it," Argrave said, falling into thought.

"Well... whatever happens, I'm no longer a Jast." Stain pocketed the pouch. "Every bit helps. I have to leave this place. Leave this city. I want to vomit."

"Try not to puke, please," Argrave advised idly, busy thinking.

*I think I can finish my business in Jast without a problem. Elbraille doesn't seem to intend to go public with his support of Vasquer for a while yet.*

"Argrave," began Elaine. "Perhaps you might simply enjoy the rest of the banquet for what it is?"

Argrave lowered his gaze to meet Elaine's. He considered her point for a moment, then shook his head. "The food is likely cold by now."

"The servants are adept," she countered. "And I see something fine over there. Would you like to come?"

"Sure," Argrave finally agreed.

Elaine and Argrave walked back into the mostly empty banquet hall, heading to a table full of fine foods. Argrave looked around at the various foods, puzzled, before finally settling for a piece of bread with a shake of his head.

"I don't know what half of this stuff is," he commented, tearing the bread and taking a bite. Once he'd finished chewing, he commented, "At the very least, this is certainly bread."

"You could try something new," she suggested, retrieving a plate of strangely cut meat sloshed with some yellow sauce.

"And risk making a bad night worse? I'll stick to this any day." Argrave waved the bread about.

"Consistency is key. Hard to ruin bread."

"The night was not so bad. You speak well. I learned much about you," she stared at him.

"Most of it was made up," Argrave shook his head. "I don't care what these people think of me. I'd prefer they didn't think of me—that would be best."

"I must say, I have never been asked to a banquet on business before," she looked around the hall.

"Would you prefer to have been asked for other reasons?" he inquired, taking a bite of bread.

"Generally, no," she shook her head, and then fixed her red hair. "Were it you, though, I think I would have liked it very much."

Argrave stopped chewing for a moment, tempted to break his rule of never speaking with food in his mouth. Elaine smiled at him as he chewed quickly, swallowing. He asked cautiously, "Are you being serious?"

"If I am?" she returned a question.

"That would be very surprising," Argrave set the bread down, feeling it was out of place for this conversation.

"It would be. Many men have tried to court me. I have considered some. And now, I am considering one in particular."

Being confronted with this, Argrave could not help but size Elaine up. She was a beautiful woman, undoubtedly—bright red hair, unblemished skin, and enchanting green eyes. She had a certain fierceness to her face that betrayed some of her personality. The dress she wore tonight only served to accentuate her prominent features. She was a bright woman, too—a B-rank mage at her relatively young age.

"You want me to... court you?" Argrave asked, but Elaine only crossed her arms and smiled. "We have not known each other long. Why?"

"Is that not the purpose of courtship, to get to know each other?" She waved her hand towards him. "You're intelligent, but you're not pretentious. You don't care about what my brother does to earn money. That alone means more to me than you know. I know that you treat the people close to you well—those two you would call 'friend,' Anneliese and Galamon, are evidence enough of that. And I think that... I think I would like it very much if I was one of those people."

"Their case is a bit different, but..." Argrave trailed off, lost in thought. He let the silence fester in the air for a time as his thoughts ran in his head.

When his thoughts came to a conclusion, he turned to Elaine. "Listen. You're a very beautiful woman, Elaine, but beyond only that, you're intelligent and ambitious. I would be lying if I said anything else."

Her face grew a little tense. "It doesn't sound as though you're about to say 'yes.'"

Argrave scratched his cheek, wondering how best to phrase this. "Let me ask you this. Could you, tomorrow, set aside everything that you've built and leave Jast to go wandering for years on end? This is no journey of self-discovery, either," Argrave cautioned. "It will be a journey fraught with perils, and there will be no time for frivolities or luxurious amenities."

"What do you mean?" she frowned.

"Jast is but one stop in my long, long journey. I lingered here far longer than I wanted to. There is... something that I have to do. Something that I have to achieve. I might die. I almost expect it."

"Are you toying with me?" she questioned somewhat indignantly.

Argrave sighed and shook his head. "If only. When I leave Jast, I'm headed to the Burnt Desert. I'll be crossing the mountains using the abandoned Low Way of the Rose."

"You're being serious," she realized. "That's... immeasurably dangerous."

"I know. I might take a more respectable road, but I need something there." Argrave shrugged. "When my business in the Burnt Desert is done, I have to head to the northeast of Vasquer. Maybe you've heard rumors of the plague beginning there?" Argrave smiled bitterly. "It's more dangerous than this civil war, I believe. I have to quell it. My schizoaffective half-brother blessed by many gods will be there, provided nothing too strange happened."

Argrave continued, waving his hands. "After that, more, more, and more. I cannot rest. I cannot afford it. All the money in my pocket can't buy the time I need to fix this continent's misery."

"I see. Then, that earlier, was you..." she trailed off. "How long will you do this?"

"Three years and some months, as a rough estimate." Argrave stated plainly, leaning up against the table. "You see, now, why your offer is difficult for me to accept."

She turned away from Argrave, arms crossed as she lost herself in thought. Eventually, her green eyes fell back upon Argrave. "I felt that you were being... especially considerate of me. Was I wrong, then?"

Argrave was taken aback. It was true—he had been nicer to her than most, but that was only to ensure she caused no problems. He had wanted a transactional relationship more than a genuine one. In the end, she had been a great help: the matter with Rowe, recommending Anneliese as an honorary member to the Order of the Gray Owl, and showing up here today.

"You weren't wrong," he stated hesitantly.

She seemed hopeful given his answer. "Then, when all is said and done... when those three years have passed..." she said the words slowly, as though she herself found them ridiculous.

People started to enter the banquet hall quickly, led by servants. Argrave looked around perplexedly—it seemed as though all of the guests had had been led back. Elaine shifted uncomfortably on account of their privacy being so quickly disturbed. The doorway opposite the entryway opened once more, and Count Delbraun stepped out. Beside him was an ashen-haired woman with orange eyes. She was slender and seemed rather meek in front of the crowd.

"Everyone," Count Delbraun called out. "I apologize for having my servants retrieve you all so suddenly. I have a very important announcement to make."

Elias came out the door just behind them. Delbraun ushered him in, until the two stood side-by-side.

"As of today, I am very proud to announce a union of two great noble houses. My sister, Ridia of Jast, is now the betrothed to Elias of Parbon, heir to the Margravate." Delbraun smiled, and clasped Elias' shoulder.

Argrave's mouth fell open. He could not help but say, "What?" His voice was rather clear in the silence of the hall. Very quickly, though, clapping drowned out his voice.

#####

"So, he spurned her," said Elenore, setting the teacup down.

"It seems to be that way, my princess," a maid said, lowering the paper. The princess was surrounded by many maids, each of them with papers in hand. They seemed more like bureaucrats than servants as they were. The maid continued, adding, "The remainder of Elaine's writings only reports what we already know—Jast is allied to House Parbon." The maid straightened the papers. "It is unfortunate she could not grow closer to him."

"Not necessarily." Elenore pulled at the blindfold hiding her empty eye sockets, briefly exposing scarred flesh. "I believe her affection was genuine. She would not have cooperated had he agreed."

The maids looked among each other, uncertainty clearly on their mind. None voiced their concerns, though.

“Should we send Elaine the usual payment we provide for new informants?”

“No,” Elenore shook her head. “Pay her generously. Make sure she knows we are being generous. Compensate Rivien, too, for his part in this.”

“Are you sure, princess? Money is tight after recent investments...” one of the maids asked.

The princess remained unoffended by the questioning of her judgement. “These investments will pay for themselves in months. There is money to be made in war—one needs only to be flexible. We will be fine, my little Wings, fret not. This bat is not yet done soaring.”

Most present nodded in quiet acquiescence. The princess mused aloud, “I did not think I had another competent brother.”

The maids looked amongst themselves, somewhat surprised. Their princess did not give praise easily.

“He killed my designs in infancy,” she noted passively, more an observation than anything. “Unknown motivations, unknown allegiance... and many more unknowns. I am decidedly perplexed.”

“Elaine thinks he wishes to be king,” one of the maids noted. “He plans to achieve great fame for various deeds, all the while aiding the rebellion.”

“I’m... not sure. Perhaps she misunderstood him. Or she’s trying to mislead me deliberately.” Elenore scratched at her chin. “I need to think. I need to plan.” She fumbled briefly for the teacup, and then took another drink.

“Set the rest of the documents aside for now. Fetch my prosthetic feet. I must walk to work my mind lest my thoughts escape me.” She shifted in her wooden wheelchair. The maids stood rapidly, scattering, leaving Elenore in quiet.

“How sad,” the princess whispered aloud in the empty greenhouse. None but her could know what she was referring to.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 80: Wrapping Up**

The worst part about Elias being correct had to be the fact that he *wasn’t* smug about it, Argrave had come to realize. Were it anyone less decent, Argrave was sure they’d be rubbing his error in judgement in his face, and he’d be able to confront it squarely. A week had passed, and yet Argrave could still not feel unbothered by it.

House Jast and House Parbon had entered into an alliance. Elias would soon be returning to Parbon to get his father’s approval, alongside a contingent of mages sworn to Jast’s service. The true effects of that pact would surely be felt in the days to come as it spread throughout the land—Argrave would need to see if Elbraille did indeed fall in with the rebels as he and Anneliese had theorized. He had many doubts regarding whether or not things would proceed as planned, but he tried not to dwell on them. As Argrave had come to understand, many things were beyond his control.

Yet the uncertain future was not the sole thing disturbing Argrave. Elaine seemed content to never again bring up what she’d mentioned at the banquet, and Argrave was not exactly eager to broach the subject. It had made the business between Rowe and Elaine a good deal more awkward.



"Why are you sulking, boy?" Rowe's voice broke Argrave's thoughts. "Bothered you're still dealing with my requests?"

Argrave, who was sitting in a chair, looked up to the aged elf. He had not especially liked Rowe in the game, mostly because he was very difficult to fight. Rowe alone was hard enough, but the fight was cheap—two on one, Rowe and his dragon, Crystal Wind. Now, after some time spent with him, Argrave started to view him as a senile old uncle with outdated ideals. It was difficult to dislike that.

They were in the Vyrbell manor. Argrave was waiting for Elaine to return from the bathroom so that things could proceed. Galamon was busy at the blacksmith, finalizing the reforging of his armor, and Anneliese remained at their inn, wrapped up in study.

Argrave rubbed his hands together. "How could I be bothered by that? It seemed like things were wrapping up. We've worked out an equitable illicit exchange of knowledge between Jast and Veiden. I'm sure your pride as an honorable Veidimen must be direly wounded."

Rowe grinned. Despite his age, he had a rather clean set of teeth. "To think that Dras thought this would be difficult."

Argrave frowned. "Meaning what?"

"Dras is a smart man. I don't say this lightly." Rowe tapped his staff against the ground, and then pulled up a chair. "I didn't come here to tour your continent, looking at your ridiculous gaudy enchanted architecture," Rowe waved his hand. "This deal was precisely the reason I came here."

Argrave was perplexed. "What are you talking about? This is what you wanted all along?" Argrave leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms. "Why not just ask? Seems simpler."

"Dras knew if I came to you, asking to set up contact between me and an influential person in this city, you'd wring us dry. Money. Books. Whatever other damnable things you can conjure in that dome of yours," Rowe shook his head, lips curled. "So, Dras gave me some lines, instructed me to lead you to where he wanted, and... well, here we are."

"Smart. Be stingy with the guy fighting against everyone's enemy." Argrave nodded drolly.

"You seem to misunderstand something." Rowe leaned his staff against the wall, and then pulled his chair a touch closer towards Argrave. "To Dras, you are merely the one who made him aware of He Who Would Judge the Gods. You made all of Veiden aware of his coming." Rowe shook his head. "To the Patriarch, and to Veiden, that is the end. You do not matter. If you die, our fight continues. Whatever you achieve is of no consequence. At best, you could facilitate an easier landing on Berendar."

Argrave was a bit offended at first, but his reason shone through and he accepted Rowe's words with a quiet nod.

"Even if you've a god at your back, Dras doesn't see what you can reasonably achieve as one man. Despite the two formidable allies following you about like little ducklings, you're not much to him."

"He's only one person, too. Why is he forgetting that?" Argrave shook his head, then examined something about the way Rowe was speaking. "You're separating yourself from them," Argrave noted. "You're not saying 'we,' but 'Dras' or 'Veiden.'"

“Unfortunately, I can’t disregard you. You seem to worm your way into important people’s ears with ease. Not just that, your mana grows too quickly, for reasons I cannot understand,” Rowe veritably grumbled. Argrave had not made the existence of the Amaranthine Heart known to any outside of Anneliese and Galamon, after all.

“When you aren’t doing something to benefit yourself or your companions, all you do is read spellbooks. At the very least, you have aptitude and drive. You remind me of others I’ve known. More talented than me, more hardworking than me. That girl with you, Anneliese, is one of those number.” Rowe gripped his staff. “They’re mostly dead, though. Some I watched die. Some I killed when they overreached. Don’t forget that. Talent and hard work cannot bring you everything.”

“Real heartwarming talk, Rowe,” Argrave said exasperatedly. “What’s your point?”

“Don’t get stupid. Don’t get cocksure,” he said sternly. “Had I the time, and were you less insufferable, I might teach you some things. As it stands, your jokes make my head ache and I’m to be very busy dealing with that red-haired one... what’s her name... Elaine.” He came to his feet, using his staff to lift himself up. “I’ll say it plainly. Keep as you are, but know your limits. One mistake, one misstep, and you might end all your progress. You can’t restart life, boy.”

Argrave blinked, taking in Rowe’s words. “This is a very strange way to express concern.”

“Whatever. I’ve said my piece. Live or die, it’s not my concern. It’s yours. We probably won’t speak again for some time. I understand most of your business is near done in Jast.”

“That’s—” Argrave was about to confirm, but the door opened and Elaine reentered.

“Apologies,” she said, adjusting her gray robes. “I believe we were finalizing things?” she questioned, tone completely business-like.

“Right,” Argrave agreed, standing up.

Argrave thought that it would be for the best if they continued like this, ignoring what had been said. At the very least, things could continue as they were.

#####

“Here are the first two outfits,” the tailor introduced obsequiously. She was a short woman with neatly cut short brown hair. “It was very pleasant to work with such strange dimensions. A tall, thin figure like yours... uncommon. As you requested, I left room in case your physique should change somewhat. The lady, too, was an enjoyable challenge,” she gestured to Anneliese.

Both of the outfits had been laid out across the table, likely because they had no mannequins that could reasonably fit either’s size. Argrave stepped forward, removing his gloves. Both leather outfits were a dark steely gray, lined with white at points subtly. Argrave could faintly feel the enchantments as he ran his hands across it.

“It consists of the base—leather boots, leather pants, and the leather shirt, long-sleeve. Overtop that, you may wear a heavier duster lined with fur on the inside, in case the weather should grow cold... or if more protection is needed. It has a hood to protect the head, too.”

The tailor stepped up beside Argrave as he examined their new gear. "Each is made of leather and fur from the Snowstrider Bears in the north—very durable leather, shrugging off blades by itself. The fur is soft and warm, and mostly lines the inside. The enchantments, too, should ward off much magic. The materials and the enchantment you chose work well in tandem, sir. My compliments," the tailor nodded.

"Excellent work," Argrave said, withdrawing his hand. "Anneliese?"

"It is... very overwhelming," she said, staring at the outfit as though she were staring at a pile of gold. "Oh—I do not mean this negatively. I am simply in awe," she quickly added.

The tailor smiled amiably. "The other set, then. This way, if you would."

She led the two of them to another table. There, a black set waited. It was distinctly different in design from the other.

"Here it is. You mentioned that this would be for the Burnt Desert, sir, and so I prepared it with this in mind. I took some liberties that I hope will not be contrary to your preferences." She grabbed some of the joints of it. "It's made of the very breathable Krell leather from the distant jungles, so I felt as though some areas could be blocked off to prevent sand from entering the boots or other parts of the clothes."

Argrave grabbed the sleeve of the outfit, weighing it. "Feels light."

"Indeed, sir," the tailor agreed. "A very lightweight set. Just the same as the other, it consists of boots, pants, a shirt, and a duster—the duster will likely be needed sorely in the Burnt Desert. I included some face wrappings, free of charge," she picked them up. "The enchantments on this are split between protection against physical and magical attacks. All said, I think these outfits will serve you both for decades."

"You should wait until you see what we have to do before you make that judgement," Argrave said, and the tailor took it in jest and smiled. It was no joke, though.

Argrave reached into his pocket and pulled free a bag. "I'm very satisfied with your work. Here's the remainder of the payment."

The tailor held out her hands, receiving the bag. She opened it quickly. "Ah... my apologies, sir, and meaning no offense, but I would like to count these."

"I understand. You're right to be cautious," Argrave dismissed. "Go ahead."

"Thank you for your understanding, sir," the tailor bowed, then stepped away elsewhere.

"So," Argrave turned to Anneliese. "Thoughts?"

"They look rather hardy. The first one, in particular, would be right at home in Veiden." She looked back to it. "I feel guilty that Galamon receives no such thing."

"He's getting a killer sword and a dagger. He wears armor, anyway. And if he gets hit, it matters less," Argrave shrugged. Anneliese looked at him strangely. "Uhh... I'm not saying he's less important, but only that... well, you know what I mean," he shook his head. "He's got a unique constitution. A regular tough guy, that one."

"I understand," she nodded. "Thank you very much for doing this. Even if you do not seem to expect it, you deserve gratitude."

"Yeah, I know, I'm a saint," Argrave waved his hands dismissively. "The other thing. Elaine gave me this, for you." Argrave retrieved a silver badge and handed it to Anneliese.

"What is this?" she took it, moving it about. "An owl? I—oh. This is that matter you mentioned earlier," she quickly put the pieces together.

"Congratulations, Anneliese, honorary Wizard of the Gray Owl. I will no longer be risking expulsion from the Order when I lend you the books from the library." Argrave clapped quietly. "You can also enter the Order buildings without being suppressed by the myriad enchantments in the place." Argrave tapped the badge gripped in her hands. "It's a blank canvas now, but you should will some of your magic inside. It'll mark you as the owner."

She nodded and did so. The badge shone. She held it up in the air, pointing it at Argrave. "Yet another thing to thank you for."

"Benefits me more than you. Like I said, no more risk of expulsion," Argrave shook his head. "Well, we have but a few more things to do on my list." Argrave retrieved the paper, from which many things had been crossed out. "We have the two enchanted rings to get, there's Galamon's enchanted weaponry... plus his enchanted arrows..." Argrave briefly looked up to Anneliese. "See, he got plenty..."

"And after your list is over and done?" Anneliese pressed.

Argrave lowered the paper, stashing it back away in his pockets. "We buy what we need for travel, and we leave."

"Back to the road once more," she nodded, gaze distant as though preparing herself for that.

Argrave shifted. "I won't lie. Given your experience in the Thorngorge Citadel, the place we're going to next may be... very difficult for you. The Low Way of the Rose abounds with creatures made by the same magely order. These ones aren't impotent, though. These are well-oiled machines made by the Order that far outlive their masters."

"Well-oiled?" she questioned. "Meaning...?"

"Er... they're tried and tested. Effective, meaning dangerous. They were intended to be patrolling guards for the underground roadways bridging the Burnt Desert to the lands of Vasquer." Argrave turned his head to see the tailor returning. "We've done a lot of preparation for this trek. Whether it'll be enough... we'll have to find out."

"I will not see your journey stalled by my own issues," Anneliese said resolutely. "Even if creatures resembling those at Thorngorge Citadel should frequent this Low Way, I will overcome it."

"Don't push yourself too much," Argrave advised. He was ignorant of Anneliese's eye roll at his hypocrisy. "We'll have to associate with a group called the Stonepetal Sentinels. I'm not too sure about what to expect."