

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 86: Stone and Bone

Argrave looked back, seeing none of the moonlit night beyond. The Stonepetal Sentinel's encampments was far beyond them. "Galamon... anyone behind us?" he asked uneasily.

"No," the elven vampire answered after a moment's pause.

Argrave breathed a sigh of relief, and then conjured an E-rank spell for light. It jumped into the air and Argrave's eyes closed instinctively, adjusting to the new brightness. Soon enough, his eyes opened, and he saw the spell light reflecting off the gray stone around them.

The beginnings of the Low Way of the Rose were well-made, each stair descending downwards in perfect order. The pillars were carved in the likeness of rose stems, thorns poking out along their surface. Torch sconces were cleverly disguised into the thorns, but they had neither lamp nor torch in them at this point.

"What a disaster," Argrave said, both to himself and his companions. "Flew too close to the sun, and the gods burnt my wings."

"We should be moving," Galamon said, unheeding of Argrave's comments. "No telling if... or when... pursuit will come. We need a comfortable distance ahead."

"Yeah... yeah," Argrave nodded, and then they continued down the stairs. Their pace was a moderate one—a little slower than a jog. Each stair was very large, and it was difficult to proceed down them quickly. Argrave was certain that his knees would ache tomorrow. "In a while yet, the tunnel will open up into the real Low Way. There, we can reassess things," he called out to both as they proceeded.

The briars about the ceiling and walls gave the impression the room was twisting and writhing as they proceeded downwards. Had Argrave not known the name of this place, he might've assumed the thorns everywhere were spikes, and this place the abode of some fell creature. Thinking of what was ahead, Argrave realized that impression was not entirely false.

"Rowe was right. I got cocksure, and now look where we are—enemies ahead, enemies behind." Argrave shook his head. "The plans I had—up in smoke."

"Neither of us questioned your judgement, Argrave," Anneliese argued as she moved beside him. "The fault is not yours alone."

"How could you question my judgement?" Argrave said interspersed with laughter. "I didn't share it. I just insisted you follow along. Everything went so damned well in Jast, I thought the world was my oyster. Fat chance of that if I keep counting chickens before they hatch. Things went to hell in a day."

Galamon spared a brief glance backwards but said nothing. Silence settled over them as they proceeded.

Anneliese finally broke the silence. "After Thorngorge Citadel, when I could hardly stand, you asked me a question. I will return it to you now, in hopes you understand the point I intend to make." She pulled ahead of Argrave, stopping him. "What do you want to do about it?"

Argrave stared down at her, regaining his breath. After letting her words sink in, he slowly nodded. "You're right. Should reflect on mistakes, not dwell on them." He looked down the tunnel. "Probably getting close to the end of this stairway."

"Yes. The air shifts ahead, and I hear the rush of water echoing against cavernous walls," Galamon said. "Not much further."

Anxiety rose up as a tide within Argrave's chest as they resumed their journey downwards. Faint, reddish light greeted them, draped like a mist over the cold gray stone of the stairs. A horrifically potent and sharp smell reminiscent of truffle oil and iron invaded his nostrils, but Argrave shook his head and pushed past the feeling. The sounds of rushing water grew louder as they approached the red light.

The tunnel that led into the Low Way was grand in scope, its ceiling towering hundreds of feet above them. That, though, seemed small in comparison to the grand chamber that opened up before them. The Low Way of the Rose was truly massive, enough to house the grandest of cities—and indeed, at some point, it had.

"Welcome to the trading city of Nodremaid," Argrave announced.

Nodremaid had been, once, a city of impeccable order. That order remained in the architecture. Several terraced pyramids held tall stone buildings, residential and commercial both. Stairways led from terrace to terrace and pyramid to pyramid, giving Argrave an impression not entirely dissimilar to a teocalli. These terraced pyramids were divided by large canals that moved beneath sets of stairs, each flowing to the center.

The order brought by the angular paths and canals was entirely destroyed by that which had grown over it. The walls and the ceilings housed vines of bone and flesh that wound in and out of the stone, flowers blooming at points that held the image of twisted faces. They had seen one of these 'plants' at Thorngorge Citadel—these in the Low Way were intended to support the ceiling and provide light. Their eyes, ever open and shining like spotlights, illuminated the dead city of Nodremaid with red light.

Though the waterways were mostly clean, pure water, at points they merged with viscous flows of blood pouring out from a waterfall in the far end of the cavern opposite them. Over the years, strange plants had begun to grow by the canals, and much of Nodremaid was consumed by foliage. The majority of the growth was hued red, offering little reprieve from that color.

Galamon and Anneliese both looked around with some confused mixture of awe and horror. Even Argrave felt some, despite knowing fully what to expect. Few people save the Stonepetal Sentinels understood just what the Order of the Rose had left in their wake.

"This place... how could people have lived here?" Anneliese gazed at the flesh plants in the ceiling. "How could anyone feel at ease here?"

"Wasn't always this bad, I don't think." Argrave looked about. "Even were that not the case, if you see something every day, you get used to it, I suppose."

"We're out in the open here," Galamon said. "I smell the same rotten blood as in Thorngorge Citadel. It's in the water, the buildings, the ceilings... this place reeks of debased flesh."

"I know..." Argrave began confidently but trailed off. "I know someplace that's *likely* safe and secluded enough that the Stonepetal Sentinels won't be able to find us... if indeed they are pursuing. This place is full of secrets. I know a great deal of them."

"Then let us go and reassess what we must do," Anneliese said.

"Right. Don't let your guard down." Argrave adjusted the collar of his gray enchanted duster, then pulled his hood over.

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"Looks to be an enchanted weapon that killed him, not magic. Fire-based. Probably a dagger," commented Jean, kneeling beside a body. The corpse had been stripped of its armor barring the helmet, which had partially fused with his face from the heat.

"Can you recover the helmet?" Alasdair questioned, standing at the head of a crowd of people.

Ossian scoffed. "Nice priorities, old man," he rebuked.

Alasdair cast a reproachful glance at Ossian while Jean shook her head and said, "No. The enchantments on the helm are ruined anyway. Meant to protect against threats without, not within, and the person who attacked knew this."

Alasdair nodded, then directed his voice to the crowd. "On the morrow, he'll be buried, the proper hymns sung to send him to the gods' hands."

"What of the three that did this?" one of the knights asked, clearly emotional for the person who'd died.

"Why are you asking him?" questioned Ossian. "He's a Master Sentinel, not our leader. Why was this done without approval from anyone, Alasdair? You mobilize men without a majority vote from the other Master Sentinels?"

Alasdair turned and spat angrily, "You mean to tell me you wouldn't have done the same?"

Ossian pointed at Alasdair. "Don't deflect. Doesn't matter what I would have done. You aren't our leader, Alasdair. Claude is. Until a month passes, and he's declared dead, we're in a state of interregnum."

Alasdair waved dismissively. "They may have already intended to enter the Low Way."

"Oh, and they happened to do so just before you stormed their tent while they slept," Ossian laughed. "Just rich timing on their part, then?"

Alasdair crossed his arms, metal armor creaking. "We should strengthen the guard around the tunnels. In pairs, something like this won't happen again."

"Hold on a minute," Ossian interrupted. "It sounds to me like we aren't going to be chasing after them."

"You were the one most eager to welcome those three," Alasdair deflected. "Now you wish to hunt them down?"

"You didn't answer my question," Ossian shook his head, undeterred. "Are we going to chase after them? Time is of the essence."

Alasdair glared at Ossian. "It's not reasonable. The Low Way is vast and dangerous. If they aren't killed by us, they'll be killed by the dangers within. Few save us Sentinels can survive for long in there."

"I can't believe this," Ossian said, too surprised for indignance. "They kill one of our own, and you're simply going to wait them out?"

"They're dead men walking," Alasdair insisted. "Those on the surface are ignorant of what lies beneath these mountains. If they return at all, it will be from where they entered."

Ossian stepped towards Alasdair. "And Argrave, did he seem ignorant? Not at all. On the contrary, he seemed to know too much. I'll admit he was suspicious, but was *this* the way to handle things?" Ossian held up a finger. "No—don't answer. I don't care to hear you justify yourself. You want to do things on your own because of Claude's absence? Fine. I'll do just the same."

Ossian made to leave, but Alasdair called out, "Stop."

Ossian ignored him. "I won't leave justice unmeted." He spread his arms out. "Anyone that wishes to come with, follow me. Elsewise, I'll go alone."

Though the knight's words were brash and passionate, the sentiments resounded with many within the crowd, who stirred on their feet as though their bodies told them to follow. Ossian simply walked towards the tunnel with purpose, then turned on his heel, waiting for any who would step forward.

"Ossian. This is foolish," Alasdair reprimanded, stepping out in front of the crowd. "Gathering men to confine a potentially dangerous individual was reasonable. Scouring the Low Way for a fugitive is simply... foolish," the aged knight repeated, unable to think of another word to describe the situation.

"Time is of the essence. Who will come?" asked Ossian, ignoring Alasdair entirely.

When the first stepped forward, he was soon joined by others. Ossian stared at Alasdair passively. Soon enough, he was flanked by many others. Some of the female spellcasters even moved to join him, too.

"Then I am off. Wish me luck," Ossian said neutrally.

"Ossian!" Alasdair shouted urgently as the man started to move towards the tunnel. "Be reasonable!"

But Alasdair's words were not answered. Their group, numbering near twenty, proceeded into the Low Way of the Rose. As they entered, six pigeons perched atop a cliff above the Low Way watched, each far more focused on their party than the birds ought to be.

Alasdair clenched his gauntleted hands. "Reckless, Ossian..." he muttered. "But that's what I'd hoped to see." His traces of displeasure were nowhere to be seen.

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Chapter 87: The Lame Will Walk

The point of Nodremaid closest to the tunnel entrance from which Argrave and his companions had entered was the most thoroughly 'cleaned' by the Stonepetal Sentinels. It was largely devoid of danger or foliage, and the city retained some of the order it attempted to create in the distant past.

These facts made it dangerous. It would be the first place pursuers might look.

Argrave was certain there were pursuers. The six pigeons linked to him via [Pack Leader] had been keeping an eye on the tunnel entrance, per Argrave's directions—they could not follow into the tunnel through the darkness and the link between them grew faint, but Argrave knew that a sizable group had entered. He could not be certain of how many, nor their composition, but knowing they existed was a very valuable piece of information.

The three of them had moved to a building temporarily, to seek shelter for a time and to decide their course of action. It was an abandoned merchant's stop, though the furniture within had rotted over the centuries that passed. It was just a wreck of rotten wood and cold stone, now.

"Alright. Given my recent lack of success, I'm going to float to you all the ideas running in my head, and then we can decide from there." Argrave said, leaning up against a wall that faced the open doorway so as to keep watch. It was a pointless gesture, he knew—Galamon would notice interlopers long before he did.

"Be concise. We should hurry, lest we lose our head start." Galamon urged.

Argrave glanced at Galamon. Though acknowledging this bothered him, Argrave had to admit he felt some frustration Galamon had so quickly disposed of the Stonepetal Sentinel guarding the tunnel. Of course, without him, they may have all been killed. A simple fact kept his frustration in check; all of this was Argrave's fault to begin with. He was the reason that man guarding the tunnels was dead.

"Right," Argrave nodded, dismissing his errant thoughts. "We can't stay here, where the city is least heavily influenced by the abominations left by the Order of the Rose. The Sentinels know this area best. Only a matter of time before we're found."

Galamon and Anneliese both nodded, and so Argrave continued. "That said, going into that jungle of flesh and bone is all but suicide. The Guardians roam Nodremaid in large groups. If one of them should find us, it'll be difficult to escape unscathed even if I call upon Erlebnis' power. These creatures are fast, ruthless, and intelligent—far different from those we witnessed in Thorngorge Citadel."

"Leaving us with what option?" Anneliese inquired.

"The way I see it, we should move into the vampires' territory—the headquarters of the Order of the Rose. They hunt the Guardians just as the Sentinels do, and we need to engage with them eventually, be it on friendly terms or... otherwise. It'll be safer there than here, and it'll place us closer to our goal."

"Given what you disclosed to the Sentinels, they'll be expecting us to go there," Galamon pointed out.

"I thought the same," Argrave crossed his arms. "Before recent events, I had intended to use the Sentinels as a cudgel against the vampires—win them to my side, talk them into coming with me." Argrave scoffed at himself. "Guess I learned that you shouldn't mess with the crazy. Regardless, if they're pursuing us, the only thing I can think of is trying to force a confrontation between the vampires and the Sentinels. Maybe diplomacy, maybe just shepherding..."

"It's an obvious thing to do. If the leader of the group pursuing you is competent, he will notice that intent immediately," Galamon shot down quickly. "That said... it's not a bad idea to head into the vampire's territory. At the very least, I understand how they might be better than dealing with these... Guardians. I can keep watch better."

"Okay. We can refine things further as we journey, but for now, we head to the headquarters of the Order of the Rose in Nodremaid, where the vampires reside. We'll stick to the perimeter of the city—fewer areas the Guardians might approach from if we've a wall on one side."

"We will have less maneuverability," rebutted Anneliese.

"True, but that's only if we're caught." Argrave nodded. "I don't think it's possible for the six pigeons linked to me via [Pack Leader] to come down through the darkness. I wish I had thought of this when we were escaping, but... well, what's passed has passed. As such..." Argrave raised a hand, a spell matrix forming. The link between him and the birds shattered. He felt a strange emptiness in his chest, as though an emotional piece of him had been torn away. "If possible, forming a druidic bond with local fliers is paramount."

"There are birds down here?" Anneliese asked incredulously.

"...no," Argrave said after a pause. "Bats."

"Oh, right," she nodded, somewhat embarrassed. "Stupid... question."

Argrave smiled, finding some solace in amusement amidst the constant uneasy dread. "Can't blame you. Place is big enough for birds. I suppose we should count ourselves lucky there are no flying Guardians in this hellhole," Argrave mused. He looked at Anneliese for a while. "How are you holding up?"

"I knew what to expect. I steeled myself. And... we have only barely begun," Anneliese shook her head.

"Alright. Things ever get too much, don't hesitate to stop us," Argrave said.

Argrave felt a hypocrite saying that to Anneliese when uneasiness and anxiety plagued him so terribly. A voice echoed in the back of his head, saying, 'This is it. This is where the skies end, and where I plummet into what I knew was coming.' Try as he might not to dwell on it, Argrave had a fear of death as sharp as mint on his breath.

Argrave stepped to the doorway. "Let's get going. Galamon, keep an eye out for bats, would you?"

"Bats, people, vampires, necromantic abominations... anything else?" he shook his head bitterly, adjusting his helmet.

"Not yet," Argrave shook his head. "Soon, though."

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A servant poured water over a plant in the greenhouse. The flowers resembled poppies, but they were a deep and rich purple that shimmered in a way that was not entirely mundane.

"That is enough," Elenore said, standing just behind the servant. She wore a white and green dress, as ever. The dress was long so as to cover the stumps that were once her feet. She wore white prostheses

that barely showed beneath the dress. They were accurate imitations of feet, with the nails made of gold.

"But..." the servant said. "I only just began watering this one, my princess."

"These are the Imperial Poppies—I remember their smell. You overwatered them yesterday, and they don't need much water to begin with. You were distracted. I remember," Elenore said neutrally.

The servant seemed surprised the princess even knew where they were standing. She opened her mouth and started to say, "I—"

"Don't argue," Elenore interrupted. The princess turned her head to the side. A maid walked down the aisle of greenery.

"My princess. You called for me?" the maid greeted, curtsying. Despite the fact that her master was blind, the maid had been quite diligent in maintaining her appearance—her orange hair was neatly bound in ring-braids, and every part of her uniform was impeccable. The princess' head stayed idle, facing the maid as though watching her, despite the blindfold hiding her empty eye sockets.

"I did call." Elenore held out her arm. "Walk me back to the fountain."

The maid hurried to obey, gingerly grabbing the princess' arm. She walked forth slowly, the princess' steps beside her confident. One could not be certain if it was trust in her servant or confidence in her abilities that made the princess' steps so sure.

"Induen has declined to return from Elbraille. He intends to... do something. He did not specify what," the maid relayed quietly once the servant was beyond them.

"I see," Elenore said. "Keep in touch. Watch over him. Inform me of his doings."

"Yes, my princess," the maid nodded. "One of the royal knights at his side is one of your Ears."

"I know," Elenore said. "Make sure communication is infrequent and discreet. I cannot risk my brother learning I have one spying on him."

"Yes, my princess," the maid said once more.

"Therese," the princess stopped walking.

The maid was surprised that the princess knew her name, and her eyes widened. "Y-yes, my princess?"

"Many of the other maids that serve me have loose tongues, and loose fingers. They take money where they can. If I did not so ruthlessly punish traitors, they would doubtless sell my information to the nobility."

"P-princess, I have never..." the maid stuttered.

"I know. As I said, the maids have loose tongues, especially for each other's misdeeds. Most thefts, I am aware of. I make an example of some that cannot be ignored without an adverse impact on my respectability. Yet you... for years, you have never been dishonest. That is why I intend to give you a position of importance."

Therese's eyes widened.

The princess turned her head towards the flowers nearby, stepping close. She inhaled sharply through her nose, and then exhaled. When that was done, she looked back to the maid. "Things must happen in the coming months. The opening I saw to fly away from this place has closed. Elbraille has folded. I must find another path. If no opening exists... I must create one. To create one, I must poke holes in that which has been built around me."

"I live to serve, princess," Therese said, placing her hand to her chest.

"Live for yourself," the princess shook her head. "But know that beneath my wings is the best place for you."

"I-I have never heard you speak like this, princess," Therese said uneasily.

Elenore stepped forward. "And you will be the only that does, I believe." She fumbled about, but eventually her hands grabbed Therese's shoulders. "There must be upheaval, chaos. The box that contains us must shake until it tears. You are capable, you are loyal. I wish for you to do this."

Therese took a deep breath, and then exhaled. "What must I do, princess?"

Elenore leaned in and whispered, "Margrave Reinhardt's brother, Bruno of Parbon. He still lies in my father's hands." Elenore paused, and then continued, "We must begin the process of planting one of our own in the team that tends to him. My father has him guarded well—he is of great value to securing victory for Vasquer. That is why he must die, and the whole world made aware of his death."

Therese shook, but eventually nodded. Realizing the foolishness of the gesture in front of a blind person, she quickly said aloud, "I will, my princess."

"Do not rush things," the princess said sweetly. "Be slow, be quiet. Leave no loose ends. Inform me before you take any action. Can you promise me this?"

"Yes," Therese said at once. "Yes, I can promise, my princess."

"Good." Elenore smiled. "And... when we are alone, call me Elenore."

"T-thank you for this grace... Elenore," Therese said somewhat awkwardly.

The princess reached to her ears and fiddled for a moment, before pulling free both of her earrings. They were studded with many diamonds, their base gold. "Take these. Sell them. It is but a beginning to a long and fruitful relationship. In time, you will become my right hand." Therese looked overwhelmed, and Elenore placed the earrings in her hands. "Now, go."

"Yes, my princ—Elenore," Therese corrected, then curtsied and moved away. Elenore stayed facing her as she left, smile on her face. The maid had already long gone, yet it remained. Only after a great deal of time did her smile fall.

She took a deep breath as though taking in her surroundings. She felt around, feeling the nearest flowers.

"The white roses... three hundred steps to the square," she recited in a low mutter.

The princess walked forth with no escort by her side, perfectly in the center of the pathway.

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Chapter 88: Oppressive March

If there was one thing that Argrave hated above all, it would be ignorance. More specifically, his own.

Seeing something he had no clue about made him squirm. When he encountered such a scenario, Argrave took two routes: ignore the thing in question entirely or learn it completely. Perhaps that was why he had taken up the role of editing the wiki for the game—to seek remedy for his ignorance by learning every detail that there was to be known about ‘Heroes of Berendar.’

This trait had helped him a great deal, both in the past and after his arrival at Berendar. It allowed him to focus on magic far beyond a point most would deem normal. Argrave found magic interesting, and it was also largely foreign to him. It had become a conduit that his efforts could be directed to, just as his fascination with ‘Heroes of Berendar’ had been in the past. In essence, he had replaced one outlet with another.

In the Low Way of the Rose, his dislike of his ignorance served as prime kindling for the all-consuming flame of anxiety. Uncertainty was Argrave’s primary companion, being both pursued by the Stonepetal Sentinels and flanked by the horrors of the Low Way.

Their trek through Nodremaid was harsh. The stone beneath their feet was hard and wore out the back, and much of the path was stairs. The way forward was often blocked by dense foliage, forcing awkward maneuvering. The air reeked of foul, unnatural smells at all times. Prevailing above all was the scent of iron, yet beneath it was strange, exotic, and earthy smells—mushrooms and other foul things lined their path, much of it growing atop equally rancid fertilizer.

That alone was challenge enough, but at times, Argrave could see *them* beyond the wide leaves and towering buildings. The Guardians of the Low Way. They were brutal creatures with a cold simplicity. Their body resembled a human head, though with the jaw removed. Two muscular arms sprouted from enlarged ears. Eight black eyes with golden irises stared off in all directions. Weapons of varying types had been buried in the back of their hands, held secure by metal bolts. Lack of maintenance over centuries left near all of them badly afflicted by rust.

Every time Argrave spotted one of these creatures, his blood would run cold and his body would shake. They crawled on the cavern walls, on the roofs of buildings, and even swam through the canals, fighting against the current like some twisted mockery of salmon. The three of them moved cautiously enough to avoid being seen, Argrave reasoned. Galamon ensured their party never strayed too close. Still, their fleeting presence bred uncertainty within his mind.

The oppression of the Low Way wore at Argrave’s sense of time. The unceasing light from the flesh plants above furthered that effect. The rays would flicker at times as the faces blooming on the flowers blinked, casting ever-dancing shadows that gave one the impression the entire city was constantly moving.

Worse yet was the constant noise. The streams flowing through the canals emitted an unceasing roar. The sound would shift in volume as they moved, rebounding off the stone corridors and growing more or less intense as they moved up and down stairs. Buzzing or chirping insects occupied everywhere,

making even the areas away from the canals constantly awash with sound. At times, the constancy of these noises would be supplanted with howls, screams, and roars—they were infrequent, and that infrequency only increased Argrave's uneasiness as he tensed, waiting for the next to come, fearing what it might be. He had guesses, of course—he knew what was in the Low Way. But there was no certainty.

Argrave tried his damndest to suppress all of that. Anneliese was with him—she would certainly be having a rougher time than he. Galamon remained constant, leading their advance as ever, undaunted and steady. Argrave had no place to be held back by these things. He tried to find the same courage that he'd mustered within Thorngorge Citadel, only to realize that had been confidence, not courage. He had known what to expect. Now, though, he felt exposed. He felt his feet were metaphorically bare and cut as he trod through a salt mine.

The sole comfort he found in this place was the distant sight of the headquarters of the Order of the Rose, brightly lit by the red lights of the flesh-plants winding in and out of the stone on the cavern walls and ceilings. Of all the buildings, the headquarters was the only one that broke the uniformity in Nodremaid. It resembled Petra vaguely, if only by its entrance alone. All of the vines of flesh and bone originated from the building, and as such, the light was most intense there. Beyond the entrance was darkness, though.

Argrave crested the top of one of the terraced pyramids, eyes fixed on their destination. Breathing heavily, he raised his hand to his mouth and a spell matrix swirled, conjuring water that he drank sloppily. Galamon stopped, waiting. Anneliese stepped up beside Argrave, significantly fatigued but nowhere near as badly as he.

"Haah..." Argrave exhaled after he'd finished drinking. He spent some time to catch his breath, then said hoarsely, "Not much further. Let's keep going, end this quickly." Argrave veritably dragged his legs forward.

"No." Galamon stopped Argrave. "I smell the foul blood of the Guardians ahead. It's moving away. We can take another path... or wait. I would advise the latter."

Argrave was secretly relieved for the opportunity to rest and looked about for a place to do so. The higher portions of the city were mostly crossroads, so there were few buildings about. After some time, they decided to descend down the stairs a small amount further to enter a decrepit residential building.

Once within, Argrave sat on a solid piece of rubble. It wobbled briefly, but he settled it and leaned back. His knees, feet, and back all ached horribly, and the pain surfaced as he stopped his motion. Galamon stood at the doorway, watching and waiting, while Anneliese found a place near Argrave to rest.

"You're damned reliable, you know that, Galamon?" Argrave said, wiping some sweat that leaked into his eye.

"Hmm," he grunted half-heartedly.

Argrave brought his feet up, removing his gray leather boots. He cast low-ranking healing magic to relieve some of the pain. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Anneliese moving about. He raised his head, watching her. She had a book in hand.

"You're reading?" Argrave inquired.

"I need a distraction, anything," she answered quickly, voice taut. "I'm at the cusp of learning B-rank magic. I will press towards that."

"Not good to distract yourself in a place like this," Galamon said, though his tone was not especially judgmental.

"This place is utterly devoid of all that is good," she rebutted quickly. "Escaping from it, if only with my mind, will keep me sane."

Galamon had no rebuttal. Argrave took a deep breath, feeling some measure of guilt well up within. He finished healing his feet, and then removed a vial of black liquid from his backpack. He downed it quickly and felt the magic resurge within.

Argrave sat in silence, his taxed mind and shaken body regaining some clarity. He rummaged in his backpack, pulling free the bronze hand mirror to strengthen his resolve. Something came to mind, like a bolt from beyond.

I'm the reason these people are here. They're following me.

His gaze turned away from the mirror to each of his two companions in turn, examining them. They were battered and weary—they had endured the same things that he had. They did this willingly. They did so because of conviction, because of duty, and because they should. They were people willing to die for these simple facts.

What did he give them in turn? Empty words. Absolute trust... but at arm's length. He told them nothing beyond what they needed to know. *Why was that?* he wondered. And Argrave knew the answer. Beneath all the veneers, his refusal to examine his own reality led to an inability to accept these people as people at all.

The realization set in like a chill, and Argrave shuddered. It was a difficult thing to stomach, and he didn't really want to think about it now. He cast another glance at Anneliese and Galamon. *Things have got to change. You'll only fail if you keep on as you are. You have these people by your side for a reason—because they're capable. Let them in. You, alone, have proven insufficient.*

Another voice argued against him, admonishing, *Where would you even begin? You keep them in the dark for a reason. Better to be a false apostle than a madman. Honesty doesn't earn any friends. You might not be able to see through it, but stone is harder than glass.*

Rowe's words came back to him—the fact that he had no plan if he should die. *It would be for the best if I convey all that I know to these two. This way, even if I die, I'll leave a successor—someone that can be sure the world doesn't end. Anneliese would be perfect. Smart, capable...*

Yet again, another voice argued, *If you die, what's the point of anything? Let them die without you.*

"They've moved on," Galamon's voice split into Argrave's thoughts, and he flinched.

"Oh," he said quickly. "That's good. That's great," he stood, quickly putting his boots back on. "Come now," he said, mustering false cheer. "The road has been long and hard, yet every step we take, we grow closer to our goal. Struggle begets growth." Argrave walked towards the doorway.

Set this aside for now. Listen to Galamon. A distraction in a place like this will kill you.

Argrave walked back out into the city of Nodremaid. Just as before, it was a harsh and grating place. Nothing offered reprieve—the dreadful atmosphere was suffocating. Argrave took a deep breath. His chest felt strangely tight.

“I wish I could say we’ll be moving to safety. Instead, we’re just embracing another threat,” Argrave mused, staring out at the headquarters of the Order of the Rose. “At least this one is more manageable. Vampires sound nice at this time of day.”

“One who is dehydrated would be remembered as the greatest fool if they drown in the first spring they find,” Galamon said, stepping past Argrave and moving to the stairs. “Do not rest easy. I am not infallible.”

Argrave nodded. “But you’re damned reliable, like I said. Let’s go.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 89: Fewer Options

Darkness loomed ahead, starkly contrasting with the red lights shining behind. Argrave tried to peer beyond to little effect.

“I don’t sense anything ahead,” said Galamon. “Only... debased viscera,” he contributed after pausing a moment to find the word. “The vampires may be using magic to disguise themselves. You mentioned they were apprentices of a mage group—the Wayward Thorns,” Galamon turned to Argrave.

“Doubtful. They know rudimentary magic, nothing beyond that. Centuries mean very little if you don’t have access to spellbooks, or the genius needed to make your own spells. They have ridiculously deep magic pools, but no spells beyond D-rank. There are reasons for that, but... I’ll share them when we aren’t caught in a vice.” Argrave raised up his hand, a spell matrix forming. A ball of light jumped into the air, banishing some of the darkness before them.

The headquarters of the Order of the Rose in Nodremaid may once have been grand, but its residents had changed it. Much of the place had been dyed red from centuries-old blood. It wasn’t the site of some bloody slaughter—instead, the roses of flesh that gave off light winding about the ceiling had been torn down and destroyed by the vampires to shroud the place in darkness. The ‘bodies’ of the flesh plants were much less frightening than the things themselves. Once the flesh rotted away, all that was left was long stalks of ivory.

“Is light wise?” Anneliese questioned, staring at the ball of flame cautiously.

“They’re vampires, the majority of them older than Galamon. Darkness means nothing for them.”

Anneliese stepped forward, contributing her own light and further illuminating the place. “It’s... quiet here. Figuratively and literally.”

“You mean... not picking up any feelings? Empathy meter goes cold just ahead?” Argrave inquired.

“Yes.” She spared a glance back, then examined the bottom of her boots. Her eyes stayed locked on the corpse of one of the Guardians. The thing’s arms had been torn off. It had been drained of blood. “Still... I cannot say this place is particularly soothing.”

“Right with you,” Argrave agreed, stepping up beside her. The harsh and piercing smell of iron still persisted here, but most other scents died. No insects made noise in the darkness beyond. Indeed, the only noise still present was the barely audible sound of the canal outside, but once they proceeded deeper, Argrave was sure it, too, would fade.

The central lobby was quite a large place. A statue fountain about ten feet tall stood decorating the center, but the fountain had been rendered useless, the faintest bit of polluted red water spouting pathetically out of the statue’s chipped mouth. This place was largely free of the foliage consuming all of Nodremaid.

The main square branched off into three paths, yet there were also two sets of spiral stairs leading up to a second floor. One of the stairs had collapsed midway. The ceiling was quite high. The light of their spell did not illuminate beyond the central lobby, so nothing could be seen of the second floor or beyond.

“Let’s get to a safer place, finally,” urged Argrave with a tired sigh. “Go right. There are some bigger rooms that way that only have one doorway. Good place to hole up. Anyone disagree?” He made sure to seek their opinion out this time.

No one dissented, and Argrave’s directive was obeyed. Galamon did not proceed as quickly as he had back in Nodremaid. The hallways were tall and ornate. Nodremaid had been unadorned, but the halls here were lined with jade and silver, and the walls were much more finely carved. Argrave kept imagining things in the shadows waiting with teeth bared, but no such things existed.

They first passed by an open area that was once a dining room, though like all other places in Nodremaid, it had fallen into ruin, the ceiling partially collapsed. Galamon examined the room for enemies a long time before he was comfortable proceeding.

After passing by many rooms that Argrave could not discern the purpose of, they finally came to the rooms that had only one doorway. They looked to be storage areas, for they were often blocked with thick iron doors and filled to the brim with shelves and crates. Galamon examined the insides of many, deeming most unfit for reasons Argrave did not begin to guess.

Finally, Galamon pushed open one door and looked around slowly. “This place... looks to be sufficient,” he said after a time.

Argrave pushed past him, eager to sit down and rest his feet once more. When his spell light trailed into the room after him, it illuminated a fairly empty storage room. Argrave was looking at one of the crates, when something caught the light of his spell, reflecting back at him. It took him a second to process that they were eyes.

The vampire started to close the gap between them quicker than Argrave could even recognize what it was. Once Argrave realized it was a vampire, bad memories resurfaced of Barden, of him calling out for Galamon moments before being seized, his very blood stolen. He froze. The vampire didn’t seek to seize Argrave, though—its long nails aimed for his neck, hunting for a quick kill.

Galamon pushed Argrave aside, casting him to the ground. He met the vampire’s charge, seizing its arm and stopping its attack. He took two steps back before its momentum ceased. Once he had stable footing, he overpowered it easily, tossing it away. It staggered back, falling to one knee. Galamon drew his greatsword from his waist and swung in one fluid motion. The steel missed, but the wind blade

created by enchantments leapt out, cutting it across the nose. It cried out and scrambled away quickly, knocking over a crate.

"You hid yourself well," Galamon said.

Argrave came to his feet as quickly as he could. His arm hurt where he'd fallen, but in front of the task at hand, he barely noticed it. The vampire, who Argrave now recognized as a man, retreated further, joining up with two others.

All three of the vampires wore rich crimson robes. The passage of time had decayed them, though, and most of them were missing sleeves. The main robe itself was full of holes, some of it covered with patchwork cloth. It was all the same color, though—a deep red. Argrave considered that it was probably easy to keep clothes red in the Low Way of the Rose, but quickly dismissed that errant thought.

"Not the others?" one said, a woman, voice low and urgent.

"No. Not the Sentinels, either," the one who'd attacked answered, wiping his face free of blood. Once he'd done so, the wound was already closing.

Argrave preemptively cast a C-rank ward in case one of them should lash out with spells. Once that was done, he caught his breath, rubbing his arm to dispel the pain. An uneasy silence stretched out between them as each waited for the other's actions.

"...I think the choice of diplomacy or confrontation has been made for us. We must block the door. They cannot tell others," Anneliese said quickly.

"Maybe we can..." Argrave started to suggest diplomacy, but his voice did not go beyond the ward and he did not trust he would not be attacked. "To hell with it. Too late for that. They attacked us the first time they saw our faces."

Galamon removed his backpack, setting it on the ground alongside his greatsword. He quickly strung his bow and retrieved an arrow, nocking it. Seeing this, the vampires shifted on their feet, ready to move.

"Split them up," urged Argrave. No noise reached outside the ward. "I'll stun one with lightning magic, and Anneliese, follow up with something that'll kill."

Galamon nodded, drawing back his bow. Stepping free of the ward, he released, and the arrow shot towards the one in the center. They cast a ward to block the arrow, but Galamon chose an Ebonice arrowhead. Their low-rank ward shattered, and the three scattered. Argrave sent out the D-rank spell [Writhing Lightning] towards the one that split from the group. The vampire reacted quickly, trying to form a ward, but even its supernatural speed could not contest the fastest elemental magic. The [Writhing Lightning] struck the ground, travelling to the vampire's legs and causing her to stumble.

Argrave saw Anneliese's hand glow in his peripheries, and soon enough the powerful boom of thunder echoed out—the C-rank lightning spell [Skysunder]. A white bolt struck the vampire, and she was cast to the ground, smoke rising from her waist where she had been struck. Argrave followed up, casting the same spell Anneliese just had. Argrave lowered his hand, watching the vampire spasm, only for an arrow to fly by and pierce her head, ending all struggles.

“Gods!” one of them shouted. “Damn it all! Just break through! Rush! Rush!” he insisted, urging his fellow towards them.

They strafed through shelves and crates, heading towards their position. Galamon set down his bow and drew his dagger, waiting. Argrave waited nervously, stepping back behind Galamon. He held his hands out, and a C-rank spell matrix manifested. A blue eel sprung from his hand, dancing about within the ward—the C-rank spell, [Electric Eel]. It waited for Argrave’s direction as he conjured more.

The two vampires broke out from the shelves, rushing towards them. One conjured a D-rank blood magic spell, and his wrist split open, a knife forming in his hand from his own blood. Galamon grabbed a crate and threw it into his path with one hand while retreating back behind the ward, but the vampire nimbly dodged it, thrusting his dagger through the magic barrier. After some strain, the C-rank ward shattered. Galamon advanced, catching the hand that held the dagger of blood. Galamon thrust his dagger at the vampire’s neck, but it was caught, and the two struggled.

The other vampire rushed forward, but Argrave had been devoting his attention towards that possibility. One of the [Electric Eels] struck out towards the it, but the vampire ducked back behind the shelves. While Galamon grappled with the first vampire, the second tipped over one of the shelves towards the two of them.

Galamon ducked low and disentangled himself, shoving the vampire towards the falling shelf while stepping back nimbly. The shelf struck the first vampire, and the one who had pushed it tried to rush past Galamon. The elf held out an arm to stop him but failed.

Anneliese grabbed a crate and slid it into the vampire’s path. He slowed for a second, and then eventually leapt forth, jumping right over it. Anneliese had been expecting this, evidently—she ducked low, spell matrix forming as he descended. Unable to change his path, the C-rank spell [Wargfire] rushed from her hand and slammed into the vampire. She fell forward, narrowly avoiding a ball of fire.

Argrave stepped around the crate and held his hand out, and all of the [Electric Eels] he’d conjured swarmed down, meeting the vampire all at once in a grand display of light. The vampire spasmed and writhed in agony, and Argrave watched, hesitant to use more magic. Eventually, its movements became slower and less intense, and Argrave dared a glance back towards Galamon.

Galamon and the last vampire faced each other. The vampire clearly wanted to rush past, but Galamon waited patiently, refusing to advance. Eventually its patience broke first, and he lunged at Galamon, preparing to grapple. Galamon stepped and thrust his foot out, slamming its knee. The vampire howled in pain. Galamon caught it by its shoulder and jammed his dagger into its neck. It grasped at his arm, but he ruthlessly tore the dagger upwards. It died in a most gruesome manner.

Breathing heavily, heart beating quickly, Argrave kept alternating his gaze between the ball of flame and Galamon. The entire exchange had taken no longer than two minutes, perhaps, but it had felt far more stressful than their entire trek through the Low Way.

“Christ,” Argrave said, throat dry. “Are we safe?”

Galamon said nothing, cautiously examining every bit of the room. After an insufferably long period, he nodded.

Argrave let off a variety of curses, leaning against the wall. As he began to calm, he felt vomit rise in his throat as the smell of burnt flesh invaded his senses once more. He breathed slowly, trying to calm himself. He saw Anneliese still on the ground and offered his hand to help her up. She accepted his help and stood, and after gathering herself, moved to extinguish the flame.

“No diplomacy,” Argrave heaved out a long sigh.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 90: Poor Timing

“They were more experienced with this life than I am,” Galamon stated, before pushing up a shelf loaded with rocks in front of an iron door. The thing could not have been light, but he pushed it very casually. With both the enchanted crown from the elven tomb and his vampirism, his raw strength was something to marvel at.

After the battle had finished, the three of them elected to find another place to seek refuge. Argrave thought it might be a bad idea as they might run into more of the vampires, yet Galamon persuaded Argrave when he mentioned some might come seeking the source of the sound. Lightning-based spells were not quiet. They had decided to barricade the doors for the night, leaving room enough only for air.

Certainly, it would be difficult to survive an assault against every vampire within Nodremaid. That said, there was a tenuous balance of power in Nodremaid between the Stonepetal Sentinels, the Guardians, and the vampires. The three were always wary of the other—neither of the two sentient groups would risk such an overt move for what might be a trap by the other.

“You overpowered them pretty easily,” Argrave responded to Galamon, feeling a bit guilty watching the elven vampire do all the work while he sat atop an overturned shelf. The presence of Anneliese, who was reading just beside him, assuaged that feeling somewhat. “Vampires grow in strength when they kill by feeding—they call it drinking the Lifeblood. Considering most of the blood they drink doesn’t come from that, they can’t be exceptionally powerful vampires.”

“Experience isn’t strength,” Galamon shook his head, dusting off his hands against each other. “And vampirism isn’t just a passive state. The beast, the curse within... some vampires suppress it, resist it—like me,” He tapped his chest, the gauntlet ringing out against the metal chest plate. “In return, we receive minimal benefits while largely retaining moral reasoning.”

“Others embrace it,” Galamon stepped forward towards Argrave until he stared down at him. “They court the curse within, unable or unwilling to resist it. They succumb to bloodlust, lose their sense of morality... but in return, they gain the power of the curse.” His gaze turned back to the door. “Back there... They stopped their heartbeat, ceased their breathing, eliminated all trace that they were alive... embraced undeath fully. I have to be more vigilant,” he scolded himself, voice low.

Argrave tilted his head, looking up at Galamon. “How do you do it?”

Galamon removed his helmet, and his matted white hair fell to his shoulders. “Do what?”

“You never sleep. You’re always vigilant, always watching, always ready. You never falter. Despite all that... I never hear you complain,” Argrave said. Anneliese looked up from her book, evidently intrigued by the line of questioning.

Galamon stepped away, turning his head. "...it's different than what you think."

"Help me understand," pressed Argrave.

"I don't get tired. I don't get headaches, or aches, or fatigue. I only grow... unsated," he raised his helmet, looking into the twin sockets. "There is but one need I must monitor."

Argrave leaned back, resting his elbow against the shelf to support himself. "If you're trying to turn me, you're doing a great job selling it."

Galamon's head snapped towards Argrave, and he took two quick steps forward. "The curse is not to be trivialized. The vampire's very existence is a scourge upon the living. Their life is sustained by misery and death. All of them deserve death," he said intensely. Argrave tensed.

"Yet before becoming a vampire, you campaigned at the head of Dras' army, killing tens of thousands of your own kind in warfare," Anneliese commented, closing her book. "Is that not an utmost display of this 'misery and death' you speak of?"

Argrave's face slacked at the unexpected contribution. Galamon turned his head towards her, brows furrowed.

"Do not misunderstand me. I am not admonishing you," she raised her hands innocently. "I am merely questioning if it is truly misery and death you have a problem with. You united Veiden alongside Dras. You even expressed that, if you had not become a vampire, you would have aided him in invading Berendar," Anneliese stared up at him.

"...that was different. It was for the greater good," he said, his back straightening. "For Veid. For the good of all Veidimen."

"Therein lies the true answer, I think," Anneliese said calmly. "You take issue with vampirism because Veid fashions vampires as an abomination before Her eyes, to be purged."

Galamon took a deep breath, and then turned away. He raised up the helmet once more, gazing into it. "Aye. I hate that which I am. I hate myself... and my cowardice."

"If you're a coward, I have to seriously reevaluate my own standing on the spectrum of bravery," Argrave rebutted incredulously.

"I am good at fighting because I fear death," he told Argrave, slightly shaking his head. "Fear spurs me towards martial perfection." Galamon hefted the helmet in his hand, and then looked back at the two of them. "And because I fear death, I violated the thing I was most proud of—my faith in Veid."

'Most proud of? You have a son, remember?' Argrave was tempted to say, but felt it was better left unsaid.

"You're right, Anneliese. The curse lies not in the hunger, the beast. The true curse is what it deprived me of. My homeland. My wife, my son. My friends. The Patriarchate that I helped create..." Galamon clenched his hand tight on his helmet. "There are nights when I think of what is behind me... and I think of what I did to stay alive that day. I just want the day to end." He looked to Argrave. "But sleep never comes. I am left alone with myself, who I hate."

Argrave said nothing. He wasn't sure there was something he could reasonably say to that.

"And yet... despite what has happened to me... Veid did not abandon me," Galamon said finally, tone lightening somewhat. "She gave me a path to atonement. Gerechtigkei. He Who Would Judge the World. A desperately pitched battle, and one that I must throw myself into fully."

Galamon walked up to Argrave. "Dras knew I was afraid of death... and he used that to secure victory, placing me in impossible situations time and time again. And now, another fool of the same nature has come along," Galamon said somewhat bitterly, white-eyed gaze locked on Argrave. "I will atone. I will prove myself before Veid. That is the truth of how I do not falter."

Argrave was a bit taken aback by the abrupt shift of the conversation's tone. His mind harkened back to his thoughts earlier this day.

"Even if..." he began, his voice shaking. He took a deep breath and began again. "Even if I'm not who you think I am? Even if all that nonsense about Erlebnis is made up?" His gaze moved back and forth between the two of them. "Because it is," he continued when neither spoke. "I'm no 'agent of Erlebnis.'"

In the silence after his confession, Argrave's heart was beating rapidly. Both stared at him, saying nothing. Galamon eventually broke the silence, asking, "At Mateth... you went to that shrine, communed with Him. What was that, then?"

"That was to receive the Blessing of Supersession. It was a business deal—nothing more, nothing less. Second time I'd had contact—and the last, if I have my way." Argrave spread his hands out. "I strung you two along with nonsense, acting like I had the world in the palm of my hand. Now we're here, and I've proven my incompetence."

Argrave's uneasiness spiraled further upwards in the silence that followed. Galamon stepped away.

"Even barring your punishment of me, the 'indentured servitude,' as you called it..." Galamon crossed his arms. "Not six months have passed since I was hired. I am still bound by contract. I would be here regardless."

"Wasn't exactly honest about the terms and conditions," Argrave shook his head.

"You wanted me to stay by your side and protect you and perform the occasional menial task. The fault lies with me for not inquiring more about who you were and what you intended to do."

Argrave found those words a little difficult to swallow. Eventually, he only nodded when no words came up to counter Galamon's words. He looked to Anneliese.

"What about you? You left your home, your family—terrible though they may be—to go off with someone who concocted a tale."

"It does no good to speak of this now," she shook her head. "We are here, now. What happens after can be settled once we make an 'after.'"

Argrave sat in the silence. "This doesn't bother either of you?"

"You had all but confirmed it," Anneliese shook her head. "And now you *have* confirmed it. But let me ask you this: do you intend to fight Gerechtigkeit?"

Argrave took her question in, examining it beyond a mere token confirmation. After a brief moment, he nodded. "I do."

"You have proven your knowledge is real time and time again. I will likely keep following even after you reveal its source, so long as you stick to that goal." She placed her hands on her knees neatly. "I have had my moments of doubt. I will not deny I considered leaving silently, one night. But the way you act... it is as though you are being chased." She paused, then smiled as though an amusing thought came to her. "In a way, you and Galamon are rather similar. Both of you struggle desperately because you fear death."

Argrave exhaled deeply. He felt like some of what was gnawing at his chest was fading.

"It is curious, though. You talk to people as if you know them, not merely knowing *of* them," she emphasized. "And you travel through dangerous places like you've been there before. I considered if you *had* been there before. But then... you balk at some things within them. Death. Killing. It is as though you have read about these places... or studied about them. To be frank, the notion that Erlebnis had planted this knowledge in your head held credence, given these discrepancies."

Argrave was taken aback by her insights. Once again, he confronted the difficulty of properly conveying what, exactly, had happened to him.

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak Anneliese interrupted.

"You did drag us into this. I am still deeply rattled by this place, both physically and mentally. I cannot say I hold no enmity—I am no saint. But there is a time and a place. I am exhausted. I wish to sleep. We can confront this squarely at another time."

With things phrased like that, Argrave felt foolish.

Galamon put his helmet back on. "She's right. You're too... *introspective*," he emphasized, "at pivotal times like these. Before Barden, in the Cavern of the Lily's Death... instead of thinking, you should just sleep. I will keep watch."

"Thanks," Argrave said blankly as the elven vampire turned and went to the door, sitting on the wall and closing his eyes.

He had to admit, he had not been expecting the conversation to proceed in this manner. Perhaps they might yell or simply leave. *Then again, maybe it wasn't that I was expecting it... it was that I wanted something like that to happen. A little bit of punishment for my failure.*

Argrave sighed. He felt deathly tired, but he wondered if sleep would even find him tonight.