

Jackal 91

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 91: Dependent Thought

Argrave awoke feeling refreshed. Sleep had come easier than he expected it to. At the very least, his body could sleep when he needed to.

All of that changed when he tried to move.

At once, his legs and back groaned, sore and achy from the intense yesterday. His shoulders felt bruised from the backpack, his feet still vaguely protested, and his thighs and calves were both taxed beyond compare. He tried to sit up, but even his core was sore.

"Jesus," he huffed while leaning up. He felt something stuck in his throat and coughed. His cough was wet and unpleasant, and after he'd finished hacking, he spent some time clearing his throat. He was only able to breathe normally again after he pounded his chest.

"You okay?" Anneliese asked.

Argrave looked up at her. She had a book in her lap as she leaned up against the wall. She looked a mess, just as Argrave felt—her long white hair was braided tightly, yet still dirtied and matted.

"I'm fine," Argrave waved his hand. "Just my throat, I think. Probably slept with my mouth open."

Anneliese nodded. "Rare for me to wake before you."

"Wish it would happen more often, frankly," Argrave said, rubbing his eyes. "Any notable occurrences, Galamon?" he raised his head, looking towards the doorway.

"Nothing I could hear. Gave up on the smelling. Useless here—the debased blood of the Guardians consumes that sense," he answered, returning to his usual brevity.

"Alright." Argrave raised himself to his feet, and a piece of a broken shelf that had stuck to his clothes fell off him, clattering against the stone. "Part of me wishes someone would just break down the door. Kill off some of the uncertainty, at the very least."

"It's tempting to think like that," Galamon stood. "Spent two days in a glacial cave, once, hiding out from enemies after things... went awry. Wanted nothing more than to do something stupid, force something to happen. You can't, though."

"I know," Argrave sighed. "Alright. We have quite a conundrum on our hands, the way I see it. Kept me up a long while, thinking about how I was going to pull my head free of this vice before it slammed shut."

"Given the circumstances... perhaps the aforementioned diplomacy with the vampires would be our best option," Anneliese posited. "I am not sure they know three of their own died at our hands."

Galamon looked ready to protest, but Argrave interjected himself before he could do so.

"I don't really care to find out what the vampires know," Argrave shook his head. "My overconfidence landed us in this situation in the first place. We left ourselves in the hands of a greater power, and this

greater power proved to be unreasonable. The same might happen again, and I doubt we'd have an easy go escaping from vampires."

Galamon nodded contentedly, and Anneliese looked to have no rebuttal. Argrave stepped away, placing his hand on the shelf blocking the door. He drummed his fingers on it, lost in thought. With a sudden realization, he frowned and turned around.

"I'm doing it again," he said in annoyance. "Planning on my own. Seeking no advice."

The two said nothing but did not meet Argrave's gaze. That, alone, told him that he was right in what he said.

"Alright. Let me lay down some things we might be able to use to force either side's hands..."

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A man wearing a crimson set of patchwork robes stared through a set of thick iron bars, one hand held against a bar for support. His face looked locked in a permanent scowl, and when coupled with his bald head, he strongly resembled a vulture. His eyes were cold and hazed, resembling a set one might find on a corpse.

The bars he stood before were each as thick as the man himself, and the metal shone with dancing light—enchantments. They were wide enough to accommodate entry. Though the area the man resided in was filthy, stained with blood and battered by debris, the area beyond the bars was pristine. It shone with golden light from chandeliers dangling from the rafters even now, illuminating a decadent library shrouded by a thick haze of dust.

The man reached a hand through the bars, and once it reached the halfway point, his fingers bent as though meeting an invisible wall. He kept pushing his hand forward until his fingers formed a fist, and then he pulled his hand back, punching. His skin shook, impacting against something invisible.

The man did not blink or breathe, staring at his hand. He raised a nail up, scratching at the barrier between the metal bars. Though his nails slid along what was blocking passage, no sound came, as though what he scratched was immaterial.

The faintest sound echoed out in the room, and the man quickly turned his head towards it. A necklace of stone roses dangled from his neck, numbering three.

"Who?" the man called out, voice almost a bestial growl.

"It's Vizer, Namara." Another slowly walked into the room, taking his place just behind Namara. He had a shrew-like look to him.

"What?" Namara questioned sharply, turning his head back to the bars before the library.

"A group of Stonepetal Sentinels have encamped out front the headquarters."

"Mmm..." Namara uttered, voice a low rasp. "Their reason?"

Vizer shook his head. "Unknown. They're watching the entrance. Their leader is Ossian."

"Ossian," Namara repeated. "The unpredictable one."

“Some people heard a noise,” Vizer said, walking up beside the bars. “Thunder, they said. Only a few heard it.”

“Where?” Namara questioned.

Vizer clasped his hands together. “Within. And neither Raid, Ardis, nor Gavin have returned.”

“No coincidence.” Namara said. He finally turned away from the metal bars, some vigor returned to his eyes. “Something’s in here with us. But that something... the Stonepetal Sentinels are looking for it.”

“None of the others know,” said Vizer. “We can move before they do.”

“And do what, exactly?” countered Namara, voice a disdainful snarl. “No. We need no complications. Send one of our own out, rouse the blood of some of the Guardians. Lure the creatures inside. Have them flood the upper levels. We’ll wipe away the dirt with a tide of flesh and blood.”

“...it may be difficult to emerge from hiding in a timely fashion,” Vizer countered, wringing his hands tightly. “If we lure Guardians, those things will settle inside the higher floors. They’ll need to be purged once more.”

“Centuries we’ve stayed, our numbers dwindling more and more as the years pass by. It’s intolerable.” Namara glanced at Vizer. “See it done. Use someone reliable—someone used to trekking in the Low Way. The Sentinel, the intruders... let them succumb.”

Vizer nodded obediently, then walked away. Namara turned back towards the metal bars, staring at the library beyond.

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“So, it’s decided,” Argrave nodded. He sat atop a crate, speaking to Anneliese and Galamon. “We’re headed into the heart of the vampire’s territory—the lower levels.”

“I don’t like it,” Galamon shook his head. “But I dislike this entire situation. It’s the best option.”

“And our first genuine group decision,” Argrave said with a positive spin. “Won’t exactly be easy to get inside.” Argrave reached into his back pocket and pulled free a medallion bearing an owl on the front. “Remember this? Gave one to you, Anneliese.”

Anneliese nodded. “I do. It is a badge signifying membership to the Order of the Gray Owl. It allows one inside the Tower of the Gray Owl or its subsidiary branches in various cities.”

“Glad you have an understanding,” Argrave stowed his badge away. “The important thing is that it links to your magic fingerprint. This tradition of using one’s magic signature... it wasn’t started by the Order of the Gray Owl.”

“So,” Anneliese mused, placing a finger on her chin. “...the lower levels require a badge of that sort, just the same as the Gray Owl.”

“Not quite,” Argrave raised a finger. “The Order of the Rose had a more primitive system. The doors themselves only open to those with a magical signature recognized by the Order of the Rose. All of the vampires are apprentices from the Order of the Rose—hence, they have access.”

“Then we need only capture a vampire alive,” Galamon crossed his arms.

“I suppose we *could*,” Argrave nodded. He had not been considering that as an option because it didn’t exist in the game—another bit of evidence towards his limited perspective, and another reason he was glad he had sought out his companion’s perspective. “Hell, that might be the better option. The way I had intended... You remember those screaming heads on a stake at Thorngorge Citadel?” Argrave pointed at the two of them.

“The ones we should not kill,” Galamon nodded.

“There’s this place called the Menagerie of Morbidity on the upper levels. Has a lot of creatures out on display—grandiose abominations displaying alleged ‘necromantic achievements.’ Most of them are... pretty disturbing,” he admitted, gaze lingering on Anneliese. “One of them is a screaming head made of a Wizard that used to belong to the Order of the Rose. His magical signature is fully intact. As is his cognition.”

Galamon frowned and looked towards Anneliese. “That sounds... a bit ridiculous,” he eventually said. Anneliese nodded in agreement.

When put to examination, Argrave supposed they had a good point. This screaming head was a key item the player needed to access more of the headquarters—the player needed a way to progress, after all. It was an item of convenience placed solely for the sake of the game. Such conveniences would not exist in common reality, surely—but then, this had become his reality, and most other things remained the same.

Argrave’s head spun as he tried to wrap his head around it. Realizing he let a silence hang in the air for far too long, he quickly said, “I mean, we can probably just try and capture one of the vampires, but I *think* this should work...”

“Not used to you lacking confidence,” Galamon noted. “Be plain. Do you think this is worth the risk?”

“Compared to the prospect of capturing a vampire alive, yeah,” Argrave shrugged. “You saw the way those three were. Almost frenzied, unreasonable, and still dangerous despite all of that.” Argrave tapped his finger against his leg, thinking. “But with the Menagerie, there’s Anneliese to consider—can’t imagine the sights will be easy on her, what with her empathic talents.”

Anneliese shook her head in quick protest. “Thank you for your consideration, Argrave, but I refuse to be a hindrance. Even still, I’d like to know what waits within this Menagerie of Morbidity before I make a decision.”

Argrave nodded in understanding, leaning back on the crate he sat on. “A lot of the things within are locked up, or they’ve already been killed. The rest... they’re imitations of grander life,” Argrave described as best he could. “Of the ones still alive... there’s a wyvern, a mammoth, various types of big cat...” Argrave tried counting, but he realized the list was growing quite long and waved his hand.

“Too many to list, but they’re all malformed, each and every creation corrupted. The magic used to create them was imperfect, and they’ve morphed over the years into terrible things. Of course, they’re locked away. I doubt there will be much trouble. Best yet, there’s edible things there. We can replenish our food supply, if only just.”

Argrave waited as they both thought over what he'd said. Capture a vampire, or head into a necromancer's zoo—neither seemed particularly fun options, but this was the hand they'd been dealt. He would be fine with either. As fine as he could be, at least.

"Considering the noise we made yesterday... it may be difficult to actually find a vampire, let alone capture alive," Anneliese posited. "Though I am not fond of saying this, I believe we should head into the Menagerie."

"Galamon?" Argrave gestured. "You're fine with this?"

"Aye," he nodded. "We should probably move quickly. No telling how things will proceed."

"Right," Argrave agreed, lowering himself down from atop the crate he sat on. "Let's get going."

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Chapter 92: Menagerie of Morbidity

Galamon had his hands on the handles of a turn wheel. As he turned it, a heavy iron gate rose upwards, the sound of chains echoing out into the spacious central lobby. Argrave knelt low, trying to peer into the opening that appeared to little effect—the place beyond was dark. Argrave gave up and turned around, peering out down to the first floor of the headquarters of the Order of the Rose. He felt exposed in the open place, having grown used to the constancy of the stone walls in the room they'd slept.

"There," Galamon finished with a grunt, looking up at the iron gate which hung suspended.

Argrave turned around. "Nothing... lurking out there, right?"

Galamon took his hands off the wheel and moved to look around. After ten or so seconds, he nodded. "Nothing near. But still... be cautious. Don't want you freezing up as you did last time if I missed something."

"Nor do I," Argrave agreed, stepping forth. The magic light he'd conjured to light the way followed with him, illuminating some beyond. Anneliese evidently felt the light was insufficient, for she conjured a spell of much grander light. A ball travelled forth from her hand, dispelling the darkness.

The Menagerie of Morbidity lived up to the 'morbidity' part of its name at once. Compared to the lobby, where one might see the occasional body of a Guardian or the ivory stalks left behind by the destroyed flesh plants that illuminated the area, this place was quite intense.

Despite being a bit ominous, the entrance was quite a stunning sight. The skeletal remains of a dragon hung down from the railings of the second floor of the Menagerie, cracked and decayed but nonetheless glorious. A tree with red, oak-like leaves grew out from its left eye socket. Dozens of other skeletons surrounded the dragon's corpse. Some bore rotten crimson robes and were decidedly humanoid. Others consisted only of a skull and two arms protruding from where the ears might've been—the remains of some Guardians of the Low Way.

The place was wrecked far more so than the other areas of the Low Way. The tile was cracked, both from battle and from growth. Moss covered most of the floor beyond the entrance, ranging in color from purple to blue to red. Trees with red leaves filled up much of the place, at times so dense it was

difficult to tell they were inside a building. Their roots disturbed the stone, making the path uneven and awkward. Some of them had white berries growing from their branches. The fruits had rings on the bottom, making them look a bit like eyes from a distance.

"This is why I didn't eat," Argrave said, stepping up slowly and pulling a berry from a tree. He put it in his mouth and chewed. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but it actually tasted quite pleasant. Then again, after the day he'd had yesterday, anything would likely taste pleasant.

"Are you sure that...?" Anneliese trailed off when Argrave swallowed.

"Pretty good, actually. Kind of like... grapefruit, I guess, but less tangy." Argrave pulled a few more off.

Anneliese watched with obvious concern. "I do not know what grapefruit is." When Argrave swallowed another, she quickly said, "Maybe you should not eat so many."

"It's safe, don't worry," Argrave assured. Argrave held his hands out, the white fruits balanced atop his bony palm. "Try some. Every bit helps. Besides, we don't want to cut into our rations too deeply."

"I..." Anneliese said hesitantly, staring at the berries. "I think I will stick to our preserved meat."

"Do not be frivolous, Argrave," Galamon said. "The gate. I think it would be best to leave it open, even if it might attract attention."

Argrave considered that. "Let's break it down. Even if someone discovers it, which is unlikely, who says they're to assume it's us? Better to leave the possibility of speedy exit open, in my estimation," Argrave nodded.

Both agreed with his assessment of the situation, then spent their time examining the surroundings.

"Seems a straightforward path," Galamon noted.

"For now, it is," Argrave nodded, peering out into the crimson forest beyond. "It opens up into a grander area later—much more open."

"Do you have an idea why there are so many of the Guardians of the Low Way dead here?" Anneliese questioned, noticing the abundance of their corpses laying about.

"Because the Guardians and the things within the Menagerie aren't exactly allies." Argrave pushed one with his toe. "This place... uncomfortably crowded, a lot of places to hide," Argrave looked ahead. "We should probably be more cautious than normal."

Galamon stepped ahead without a word, proceeding in silence. Argrave followed just after him, and Anneliese took the rear. This place was much more difficult to traverse than even Nodremaid. The growth of moss and plants made the strain of walking less on the back and feet, but the uneven terrain made watching one's step paramount—twisting an ankle would be less terrible than on Earth because of the presence of healing magic, but Argrave still did not wish to use magic for something that was ostensibly easily avoidable.

Argrave and his companions walked through the red forest in single file. Though the berries had only vaguely resembled eyes from the entrance, inside the forest, Argrave got the chilly feeling that a thousand gazes were on him at once. Argrave tried eating more of the berries to dispel that feeling, but

the taste was ruined when he perceived them as eyeballs and he found them a little more difficult to swallow.

They passed by many stone cells with the corpses of creatures within. It was difficult to perceive what exactly they were. The things within the Menagerie of Morbidity had been made of human parts. Because of the imperfect spell used in their creation, they slowly morphed back into the shape they had been molded from. They would see the body of a tiger, for instance, yet the head had been morphed back into an arm or leg. Even as bone, it was a disturbing sight.

Sound started to echo out across the crimson forest of the Menagerie, and eventually, the stone cells housed the still-living. A great black bull huffed at them as they passed by, the horns on its head morphed into two skeletal arms that moved with an apparent will of their own. The creature approached the steel bars that held it, and the two arms reached out, bony fingers grasping the bars as any human prisoner might. It unsettled Argrave more than he cared to admit, and he did not feel at ease walking by it. He checked behind him at times to be sure Anneliese was coping, and she seemed stable enough.

Sounds and smells grew more intense as they proceeded. Ape-like noises, barking, yelping—it was enough that each and every step was ever more uncertain. The smell of rot made Argrave nauseous. The hallway they had been travelling on opened, and the forest of red trees thinned, opening into a large room. Cages were placed equidistantly throughout the grand room, holding up the place like pillars.

Though many malformed animals made noises from within their cages, the centerpiece drew Argrave's attention at once. A wyvern lay within. Though it was normally proportioned, where it might've had scales, veiny skin covered instead. Uneven patches of hair grew at random portions, with varying colors and lengths. Cuts and scratches marred its body, many of them leaking pus. Seeing it now, he was certain it was the strongest smell in the room. Argrave grabbed at his throat, feeling like something was rising. Fortunately, he managed to suppress it.

Galamon kneeled, casting his eyes about the room to be sure nothing was amiss. A dog-like animal of indeterminable species barked at them, and Argrave felt like every animal locked in this room was watching them.

Argrave leaned on Galamon's shoulder. "Maybe we don't need to go so slow," he suggested, only half in jest.

"Don't see anything out of sorts, but... hard to hear. Hard to smell," Galamon reported.

"Then...?" Argrave pressed.

"Then we proceed. Cautiously." Galamon looked up at him, white eyes shining within his helmet.

"Where do we head next?"

"That hallway over there," Argrave pointed out. "Right side. We follow it until the end. Whether we weave through the cages or follow along the wall... I'll leave it to you."

Galamon nodded, rising to his feet. "Along the wall."

The elven vampire stepped forward. The animals watched them as they passed. They passed by the monkeys. Their tails had turned into human arms, which made their movements awkward and jerky.

They screeched horribly as the three of them passed. The sight that made Argrave most uneasy, though, was an empty cage. Its bars had split like something had burst out from the cage.

Though moving through the area was unbearable, it passed quickly and without escalation. They entered the second hallway, moving along to the end of the line. This place was much more open than the entryway and largely free of obscuring vegetation, which assuaged some of Argrave's fears. This place was the personnel's branch of the Menagerie, if Argrave recalled correctly.

"End's not too far. Third on the left," Argrave eventually broke the silence.

Galamon nodded, and Anneliese let out a sigh of relief. They proceeded upwards, and Argrave stopped them at the door. It was made of iron and largely intact, though spots near the doorknob had rusted.

"Alright. Let me do the talking," he whispered.

"Talking?" Anneliese repeated, confused. "Is someone in there?"

"Don't be loud," Argrave said, lowering his hand as though urging her to lower her volume. "I told you that the head we're looking for retained its cognition, right? And the ability to use magic?"

"You said it retained its magic signature, not its ability to use magic..!" she whispered back, a bit louder.

"I'm sorry, alright?" Argrave apologized. "It's not that big of a threat, honest. I didn't consider it because it's not worthy of consideration."

She stared at him with mouth agape like he was a fool.

"Come on. No use dwelling on this," he tried to dismiss. "Let's just get ready."

Anneliese looked at the door, face taut, while Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek. "Alright. Now's a good time to test out the B-rank wards conjured by our rings, I suppose. I'll use mine when we pass through the door."

"Galamon," Argrave gestured towards the doorknob.

The elf reached a hesitant hand out and turned the doorknob slowly. He made sure Argrave was prepared with the ring, and then swung the door open. With will alone, Argrave conjured the B-rank ward before the door had even left his vision. A semi-visible golden shield filled his vision at once. He had expected to see a room beyond it—instead, a blinding flash of light filled his vision as flames hurtled towards them.

Argrave could not help but jump back. The golden B-rank ward stayed strong, though, and the flames hurtled upwards. The fire battered against the ceiling, floor, and walls. They continued for a great length of time, and then slowly began to diminish. Once they had faded, what was left beyond was a scorched mess of a room. In the center of it, untouched by anything, stood a stake. This stake had a head atop it.

"You bastards had a trick, I see," the head said.

"Nice to meet you," Argrave said, stepping forth through his ward despite the earlier display of power. He remained ready to jump back at a moment's notice. "We got off on the wrong foot, I think, but we have much to discuss."

The head squinted.

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Chapter 93: Heads and Tails

The severed head stared at them warily from its position atop a stake. Despite the utterly destroyed room around it, where every wall had been scorched black from fire and other spells, both the stake and the head were unblemished. They were shielded by a sheening ward that Argrave knew was relatively low-ranking.

The head itself had quite an ordinary appearance, once one looked past the 'disembodied' part. It seemed young, with mostly smooth white skin and short brown hair. His expression had a general air of arrogance and defensiveness, though perhaps that came from the situation it was in. His eyes were black and gold, like most other creatures born of the Order of the Rose.

"You..." the head's brown eyes moved up and down, sizing Argrave up. "Show me your teeth."

Argrave complied, pulling back his gums. After a moment, he let his lips fall back into place. "There. Nice and pearly white, none of them sharper than they need to be."

"Then who are you?" the head asked. "Why are you here? Are those... elves?"

"I am Argrave," he placed a hand to his chest. "And who are you?"

"I'm..." its eyes rolled back into its head. It stayed silent for a long while, and Argrave shifted on his feet patiently. "...that's who!" it said suddenly, eyes drawn back to attention. "And you... you're..." his gaze flitted back between Anneliese and Argrave. "Both of you are wearing the same thing. A uniform. You're part of a group," it said accusingly.

Argrave was taken aback for a moment, and he spared a glance at Anneliese. Indeed, just as Argrave did, she wore gray leather gear covered by a duster.

"You're part of a group exploring the grand city of Nodremaid. I get it..." it licked its lips. "You're pillagers, come to wrench free the knowledge of the late great Order of the Rose," it spat angrily. "You're no different from the bloodlappers. You're—"

"Shut up for a minute," Argrave interrupted, holding a finger out. "You can't even remember your name. Do you even know your own situation?"

"Of course I can remember my name!" it shouted out. "I'm..." its eyes rolled back into its head again.

"And your arms, your legs... hell, your whole body," Argrave spoke to it despite its trance-like state. "Where is it all? Think about it. Break free of your mental constraints. Remember who you were."

Its eyes twitched, its face scrunched up, and its lower lip began to spasm.

"Think long and hard," Argrave said insistently, stepping further past his ward. "Who were you? What did you do? Why are you here?"

It opened its eyes again, its face scrunched up in fear as it stared at Argrave with bloodshot eyes. Blood started to trickle down its face like tears.

"Your breathing, your heartbeat... you can't feel them, can you? You're not paralyzed. They're just not there," Argrave said smoothly, as though trying to hypnotize.

The head started to spasm and twitch as it gazed up at Argrave. Galamon tried to stop Argrave from advancing further, but he shrugged off the elf's grip.

"I'll say it again," Argrave said, standing just before the head. "Who were you?"

The head ground its teeth together, veritably growling at Argrave.

"You weren't always just a head on a stake," Argrave said conclusively.

The head's eyes widened, and all its movements stopped. Then, its face sagged, as though it had fallen asleep. The ward surrounding it dissipated, the magic shattering like glass. Argrave held his hand to his chest and let out a sigh of relief.

"Nerve-wracking," he muttered to himself.

Argrave dispelled the B-rank ward so that Anneliese and Galamon could enter the room. Anneliese stepped forward cautiously, arms crossed. "Is it... over? What happened to it? I saw immeasurable distress, and then... nothing."

"It's breaking free of the magic that kept it servile," Argrave explained. "It... no, *he* should wake up in a few minutes. I would advise plugging your ears when it does so."

Argrave was quite relieved that had worked. He had recited what the player said to the head in-game. It had worked out in Veiden when he talked to Dras, and now it worked out once again. To be frank, he wasn't entirely sure his memory of the dialogue was spot-on, but he got the gist of it right, and it worked out.

"Would... something like this be possible for others?" Anneliese inquired.

Perhaps it was Argrave's imagination, but he detected some hopefulness in her tone. He felt the answer was 'no,' but he gave the truth.

"I don't know," Argrave shook his head. He stared at her amber eyes as she turned away, quietly nodding and accepting his information. "How are you handling this place?"

She looked at him and gave a faint smile that had some bitterness beneath it. "Let us say simply I will be glad to put it behind us."

Argrave nodded. "You and me both."

Galamon shut the iron door. Argrave used the time that the severed head was inanimate to settle his frayed nerves and catch his breath. It was strangely hard to breathe, and his chest felt tight. It was probably because of where they were, he reasoned—even with all the foliage in Nodremaid, it did not change the fact that they were underground.

Anneliese, once more, took the time to read her B-rank spellbook. Her diligence had been especially high in recent days—Argrave assumed there was a spell that caught her interest. He kept his eye on the head on a stake. When a few minutes had passed, it stirred, and Argrave was the first to greet it.

"Hey, you. You're finally awake," Argrave greeted, standing just in front of it.

The newly and truly awakened head looked up at Argrave. It blinked for a few moments. Without so much as a word of warning, it let out a deafening scream. Argrave had been well-prepared, and had his hands already placed over his ears. Anneliese heeded his warning and had done the same. Galamon, though, took a step back and frowned in annoyance.

He screamed for a very long while—he had no lungs, after all, and his voice born of magic could last near forever. Argrave might've casted a ward to muffle him, but that might've earned his ire, and the iron door muffled the sound well enough that nothing outside would come to investigate. After a long while, its abject terror settled into a panic-ridden mess of curses, obscenities, and general confusion.

When the head became aware that there were three people in the room with it, it sought out answers. Argrave spent a long while trying to console it, offering calming words while trying his very best to ignore the oddity of the scenario.

"Hooh..." it breathed out. "Gods damn it all. That bastard Macheid... he got me. He got me, gods damn it all," it said, face scrunched up as though it were about to cry. "So... who are you people? What in the gods' name do I do next?"

"Considering that everyone you've ever known is dead, the Order of the Rose is entirely defunct, and you haven't left this place in, oh, six hundred years?" Argrave guessed drolly. "I think it's about time we get you out of this place, for your health if nothing else."

The head looked overwhelmed.

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"Ossian!" a knight shook the man he mentioned, and the Master Sentinel was immediately roused.

"What's happened?" Ossian said immediately, already awake. He sat up from the cold stone floor, rising to his feet quite adeptly despite the plate mail armor he wore. "Report," he commanded.

"There's a huge swarm of Guardians headed this way. Biggest I've ever seen," the man stood with Ossian, walking towards the doorway and exiting into the city of Nodremaid.

Ossian followed, and then stepped outside. The knight pointed off to the distance.

The Guardians of the Low Way stormed through the city like monkeys, leaping from building to branch adeptly. Barring the noise of their metal weapons scraping against the stone of the city, their approach was soundless.

"Gods," Ossian breathed out. "How was this missed?!" he demanded, stepping forward. "Gather everyone," he commanded swiftly.

"They were two separate groups, sir, and moving away from us, chasing something. They converged, and—"

"I told you to pay attention for anything odd," Ossian said angrily. "The fact that they were chasing anything at all was an oddity. Gather everyone," he repeated, grabbing the knight's arm and pushing him away.

Everyone moved frantically, waking those that were sleeping and retrieving those that were on watch. Before long, Ossian scanned the group, and seeing everyone was there, began giving commands.

"We have to move quickly. The group of Guardians is too large to avoid completely. We go into the headquarters of the Order of the Rose."

"Sir," one of the female spellcasters protested. "We should hole up in a nearby building, prepare fortifications and traps," she recommended.

"Not enough people to resist that wave," Ossian shook his head quickly. "No arguments. Spaces are confined there, but there's still room to move. Even if the vampires are there, they are enemies to the Guardians just as much as we are. Now, let's move," he repeated, shouting.

Ossian was the first to move, pushing past and heading down a flight of stairs that led to the headquarters. The others obediently followed, even the woman who disagreed. All knew well enough that to disobey orders in the Low Way meant to potentially cause the deaths of all.

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Argrave watched as many of the Stonepetal Sentinels swarmed into the entrance. He, Galamon, and Anneliese were all on the second story. Argrave held the severed head like a staff, and now he used it to support himself as he kneeled.

They had very nearly walked down the stairs, but Galamon heard something coming and moved them to a safer location where they could watch without being seen. Argrave and Anneliese had dispelled their lighting spells, but the spellcasters in the Sentinel's company lit the place up with their own.

"They're being chased," Galamon commented. "A swarm of guardians. We should move back inside the Menagerie, lower the gate. It should be sufficient to ward them."

"Who are those people?" the head atop the stake in Argrave's grip asked. "Friends of yours?"

"No, they—" Argrave cut himself off. "I suppose they *could* be."

"You are not thinking of...?" Anneliese looked at Argrave.

"I am thinking of it," Argrave nodded. "I find people are much more amenable to suggestion when they're in a desperate situation. We can help them, lead them into the Menagerie. We win them to our side, everything goes back to the way it should have." He looked back at Galamon and Anneliese. "Thoughts?"

"Their leader... the one called Ossian, if I remember right," Galamon contributed as he watched. "Don't remember much hostility from him."

"They might grow suspicious, considering how fortunate this timing is for us," Anneliese reasoned. "And... once more, we surrender ourselves before power."

"Good points, both," Argrave nodded. "At... twenty, just about, I think I can take them if I use Erlebnis' power... but I wanted to save that. Won't be able to use the Blessing of Supersession for the rest of this venture if I do." He sighed. "I'm leaning towards helping them... but I won't do it unless you two give me the okay. Learned my lesson, I think."

“Gods... the headquarters of the Order of the Rose... reduced to this,” the head mused, looking about the ruined building.

Anneliese and Galamon both glanced at the head, then back at Argrave.

Galamon was the first to nod. “Help against the vampires will be important, even with Erlebnis at your back.”

“This scenario is different from what occurred in their camp,” Anneliese nodded, agreeing.

“Alright,” Argrave took a deep breath. “Guess I get a chance to salvage things,” he handed the stake over to Anneliese. “Probably best if they don’t see me holding a head,” he reasoned, rising to his feet. “Wish me luck,” he said, about to move to the balcony.

“Good luck,” said the head. He was the only one who did so.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 94: Butting Heads

Ossian stood at the doorway of the headquarters of the Order of the Rose, siphoning the last few members of his band inside the cold stone halls. He did not feel at ease being here, but the sight of the Guardians of the Low Way moving through the ruined city of Nodremaid made what little unease he had about the place negligible. Their escape had been speedy, so they had plenty of time before the abominations reached them.

“Ossian!” he heard a voice echo out across the stone halls, and his head turned quickly, thinking it was one of the people in his party.

Ossian’s misunderstanding was quickly corrected, though. Their very purpose for being here, Argrave of Blackgard, leaned out on the railings of the second floor, his face grimly illuminated from beneath by spell light from Ossian’s group of spellcasters.

“How in hell did you manage to get that many Guardians on your tail?” Argrave questioned.

Ossian stepped away from the doorway, wading through the crowd until he stood at the front of his group. He did not know what to say—he had not expected to meet Argrave in this manner, let alone at all.

“Guess it’s not important. Listen—you probably came here for shelter,” Argrave reasoned. “I know of a place big enough and secure enough that even that horde outside won’t be able to bother us. Despite all that’s transpired between us, I can take you there.”

“Where are your two menials?” Ossian looked about.

“Menials?” Argrave repeated, confused. “I don’t know what... oh,” he came to a realization. “My companions are nearby.” Ossian watched the man’s eyes, trying to see if they would betray their location, but Argrave’s gaze remained fixed ahead. “There’s no ambush, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I should trust you? You killed one of our own,” Ossian shouted out. “You marked yourself an enemy to the Stonepetal Sentinels.”

Argrave lowered his gaze. “I... I never wanted that to happen. We were just trying to enter the Low Way. Things were panicked, chaotic—you gathered men to attack me in my sleep, without any provocation whatsoever,” he accused.

“Not attack. To confine you,” Ossian shook his head, but did not rebut further. He had been against the idea from the beginning, but Alasdair took liberties that could not be retracted. “We don’t have time to waste for this. Everyone, let’s—”

“Just hold on,” Argrave interrupted. “I saw you coming. Could have avoided you, left you ignorant of my continued existence entirely. I don’t want that. I have no ill-will towards you or the Sentinels, despite what transpired. My stated goal remains my true goal—claiming the Unsullied Knife from the vampires. I’ve already got the key to entering the lower levels, where they reside.”

“You called it the Unbloodied Blade before,” Ossian noted quickly.

“Whatever,” Argrave shook his head. “If I’m right, the vampires have killed a lot more Sentinels than I ever have, and theirs were purposeful. After we deal with that Horde, we can put the vampires to the sword.”

The Master Sentinel shifted on his feet, sparing a glance back outside. “You’re taking a lot of liberties,” Ossian said harshly.

“I know, and it’s because I never wanted things to be like this. I have a lot of respect for each and every one of you. What happened—it’s gutting,” Argrave said, placing his hand near his chest. “Give me the chance to right my wrong. Let me help you.”

“We should move, sir,” one of the knights said, grabbing Ossian’s shoulder.

Ossian looked down at the ground, lost in deliberation. *We outnumber them, but they’ve had plenty of time to prepare for our arrival. Could be walking into a trap. The horde behind us—could be something Argrave forced to happen. But how? Would he be working with the vampires?* Ossian dismissed the idea. *No, that’s ridiculous.*

The Master Sentinel looked up at Argrave, trying to discern his motivations. Beyond eliminating enemies, Argrave had little reason to see them dead. Indeed, things only started to deteriorate once Alasdair moved against him. That said, his intent to use them as a cudgel against the vampires was quite obvious. He had stated as much, though in nicer terms.

Is it so bad to be used, as long as things get done? The vampires have plagued the Low Way for centuries. You could put an end to that. Be a damned hero, Ossian’s vying heart spoke.

Ossian broke free from the knight’s grip on his shoulder and asked Argrave, “Where is this holdout?”

Argrave smiled. “Up here. There’s a big iron gate, about a foot thick, operated by a turn wheel. Come up the stairs, follow me.”

#####

Galamon lowered the large gate to the Menagerie of Morbidity, and it let out a loud sound when it met the stone, dust jumping up into the air. The party of Stonepetal Sentinels kept a cautious distance from Argrave’s group. The hostility was all but tangible between them.

"This place is largely safe. I can't be sure there aren't some creatures roaming about within—this place is a Menagerie after all," Argrave said, paying little attention to the tense atmosphere. "But that iron door right there can surely hold back any Guardians. Even if they're smart enough to try the turn wheel, it's an easy enough task to keep the gate from moving."

"So *these* are my descendants?" the head, still on its stake, spoke from Anneliese's hands. "What do they call themselves?"

Ossian looked to Anneliese, who held the head.

"The Stonepetal Sentinels," Anneliese answered.

"Oh, that's rich," the head said amusedly. "I remember them. They were the border guard for the northern part of the Low Way—considering it was Vasquer territory and safe as a chick in a coop, it was where they sent the rejects and useless ones."

Ossian's head turned back to Argrave, some of his men bristling behind him. "What is that thing? Why is it alive?"

"It's not alive, technically," Argrave said. "It's—"

"I am Garm, youngest ever High Wizard of the Order of the Rose," he introduced himself loudly. "Now, I am a head on a wooden stake."

Argrave nodded, stepping up to Anneliese. "Adapting awfully quickly, I see."

"I have to," Garm said, raising his eyes to look at Argrave. "Considering how long I was in there, your coming is the only opportunity I might get to escape this place. I have to be adaptable. Can't exactly walk, in case you haven't noticed. Can't even point a hand to emphasize that."

Argrave pursed his lips, thinking. "Garm..." he set his hand on Garm's brown hair, turning back to Ossian, "...is our key into the lower levels of the headquarters—and in turn, where all of the vampires reside. He can get us into the inner levels of the headquarters, where actual members of the Order of the Rose reside."

Garm looked very annoyed at Argrave's touch but could not exactly shake his hand off.

All of the Sentinels stood near the iron gate, facing Argrave and the three of them. Recognizing the rising tension, Argrave took his hand off Garm and faced them. They were greatly outnumbered, but Argrave did not feel fear. Even still, he kept the B-rank warding enchantment in his ring at the ready and kept the spellcasters in his vision.

"Tell me," Argrave stepped forward. "Which way is the wind going to blow? Even if you've agreed to come here, now that we're standing in front of each other, a lot of things must be running through your head."

"You tell me, mind-reader," Ossian crossed his arms.

Argrave nodded at the jab, thinking his next words very carefully. "What's transpired between us... I can say I never wanted it to happen, that I have nothing but respect for you... and you might believe me. Might not," Argrave reasoned. "But I can say for sure that neither of us really want to fight right now."

Coming to swords in a place like the Low Way... it's one of the Stonepetal Sentinels least favorite things, if I know your group well enough. Why?"

Ossian said nothing, so Argrave continued.

"It's because down here, the true enemy—the enemy to us all—is the Low Way itself." Argrave pointed to the floor. "Disunity ends in death. A group divided is easy prey to a predator."

"You aren't part of our unit," a female spellcaster said. "You are the enemy."

"Can nothing be put to bed? Had I not done what I did, I'd be dead, or worse yet, bound in chains while your people did..." Argrave threw up his hands. "I don't know what you'd have done. I can say for certain I probably wouldn't have liked it."

"You were suspicious," Ossian said back. "You knew too much about things. You travel with elves."

"That excuses things?" Argrave questioned.

"Wasn't my call," Ossian retorted back. "Alasdair did it, without seeking approval from the other Master Sentinels."

"I didn't bring you here to cast blame, to point fingers. The whole situation was just an unfortunate tragedy, and one I'd prefer never happened. But you're here now. I didn't set a trap. I let you into this place that has food for weeks, a place that's completely safe from the Guardians outside... lot of big risks on my part. We're only three," Argrave waved between everyone in his group.

"I'm not a person, you see," Garm added. "I don't count."

"He's not," Argrave agreed, deflating the head's sarcasm. "I won't act like I came here for some sightseeing or another such benign reason. I have a purpose. You know that purpose—the Unsullied Knife. That said, we can help each other."

Ossian stared up at Argrave, unblinking. Eventually, he turned his head away. "I have to confer with my people. Give me some time."

"Sure," Argrave agreed, though he did not feel entirely comfortable doing so. Persuading Ossian would be much simpler than winning the entire group over to his side, and he wasn't certain things would go in his favor after their conference.

Anneliese, Galamon, and Argrave put some distance between them and the group of Stonepetal Sentinels. Once they were far enough away not to be overheard, Argrave spoke.

"Garm," Argrave said. "You said you were a High Wizard once, right?"

"Indeed. Youngest in history. Promising future," he said. "Jealousy put an end to that... a tragic tale of woe, dating—"

Argrave interrupted, "Can you discern how much magic their spellcasters have?"

Garm didn't miss a beat in answering. "They have one B-rank, at best. The rest are all nothing."

Argrave looked down at Garm. "'Nothing' to you might be 'something' to me."

“Hmm... the other three are probably C-rank. Mid, I’d suppose.” Silence stretched out, and Garm examined the other group. “The Stonepetal Sentinels—once vagabonds and lackwits, now forming the last bastion of the Order... they’re a dim vestige of even dimmer glory. What a sad commentary.”

“Okay,” Argrave nodded. “I think I can deal with them, should it come to that.”

Saying that dredged up some uncomfortable nervousness. It would be stranger if he was eager to fight them, he supposed, but he did not enjoy the feeling.

After a long time of uneasiness, Ossian broke off from the group, walking up to Argrave. “We can agree to cease hostilities, at least until this horde is gone.” Ossian glanced back to his group. “As for cooperating further... I think we’ll need more time to decide that. That said, most of us are tired. We’d like to set up camp.”

“Sure. Not like I own the floor,” Argrave shrugged, then pointed to a relatively flat spot. “The entrance is probably best. This place... was a Menagerie, once. Some creatures roam deeper in. We didn’t encounter any, but—”

“Spare me the advice,” Ossian held out a gauntleted hand. “We’ll decide on our own where to sleep.”

Facing such a distinct reminder of the lack of trust between the two of them, Argrave said nothing for a time. “Alright. Sleep well, I guess. The berries are edible.” Argrave pointed to a tree. “I can eat some first, if you don’t trust me.”

Ossian turned and walked away, leaving Argrave feeling dissatisfied and uneasy.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 95: Moving Hearts of Stone

The first day of cohabitation with the Stonepetal Sentinels proved to be tense.

The horde of Guardians of the Low Way reached the great iron door, eventually—the sounds of their bodies and metal weapons bumping up against the gate and testing it echoed throughout the Menagerie, adding to the grimness of the place a great deal. Galamon had wedged a large rock beneath the turn wheel, preventing it from turning to allow entry. Even still, the creatures tested it, obviously aware that it was the mechanism to open the door—that alone was terrifying enough.

Argrave had wished to spend the time endearing some of the Sentinels to himself, but that proved a difficult task. The Sentinels were very clearly wary of him and his companions, and that alone established a strong obstacle in obtaining something important in conversation—naturalness.

If he approached them in the heart of their camp and flattered them or otherwise tried to sway them, his intent would be obvious and the opposite effect would be achieved. Argrave believed that though people might say they don’t like brown-nosers, that isn’t necessarily true—they just don’t like overt, shameless flattery, especially when the intent behind it is obviously selfish.

Bearing that in mind, Argrave gave the Stonepetal Sentinels and Ossian ample space. He could not deny the powerlessness he felt in this situation was extremely nerve-wracking, but he was confident in his assessment that any attempt to persuade them might be an active detriment. Argrave and his

companions were outsiders and murderers, in their eyes—he did not wish to mark himself as two-faced to boot.

Even still... Argrave tapped his boot against the ground rapidly, sitting at attention on a large root of a crimson-leaved tree. “Hate sitting around like this.” Anneliese lifted her head from her book at Argrave’s words. “We’re wasting time sitting about for some people that might be our enemies. What a terrible situation.”

“Mmm, yes,” Garm agreed, standing upright on his stake jammed in the ground a fair distance away. “At least you have the luxury of standing. Of sitting, even. I can do neither. I just have to wait for someone to pick me up, carry me about, like some kind of... man-baby. An intelligent mind trapped in a useless husk.”

“Perhaps you will grow to be ambulatory, too, like a baby,” Argrave said as he caressed his forehead to dispel a headache. “Just don’t like being on other’s time.”

“The Sentinels are weary. Even if they intended to support us, they would need to rest today. They experienced the same journey we endured, and some of them spent the night on watch,” Anneliese turned her gaze towards their camp.

“Today?” Argrave repeated that word. “I don’t know if it’s night or day. I certainly can’t sleep, not with all these people nearby... and that banging,” Argrave gestured towards the door. “Nothing can ever go smoothly, can it?”

“The vampires are as trapped as we are. The Guardians are enemies to all, not just us. It would not surprise me if the vampires orchestrated this, in some attempt to clear their hunting grounds of enemies,” Anneliese outlined, her calmness returned in the relative quietude and safety of the Menagerie.

“You’re right,” Argrave shrugged and shook his head. He felt something in his chest and coughed harshly, spitting out an unpleasant glob of what looked to be snot off to the side. Argrave grimaced and turned away quickly, but then froze.

“They are trapped,” Argrave said out loud, looking to Anneliese. “Locked tight. They fight with the Guardians, just as we do,” he said slowly, as if in revelation.

“What are you thinking?” asked Anneliese, shutting her book.

“I’m thinking... I have an excuse to talk to Ossian.” Argrave stood. “And I think I have a way to turn this curse outside our door into a blessing. And it may just be the defining point I need to win the Sentinels over to my side. Allow me to explain,” Argrave beckoned Galamon and Anneliese closer.

#####

“You wanted to speak to me?” said Ossian, his hands held on his hips. He was not alone, but he was present, and that was enough for him. To be fair, Argrave was not alone, either—Anneliese and Galamon were just behind him, the former holding Garm. Argrave might’ve left Garm back at their camp, but he didn’t trust one of the Sentinels wouldn’t meddle with him as he rested there. Though the severed head wasn’t defenseless, it was better safe than sorry.

"I did," said Argrave, some of his confident spark returned to his voice. For the first time in a while, he felt that things were going right.

"So?" Ossian held his arms out. "Speak, then."

Argrave was somewhat dissatisfied by the brusque tone, but he began unaffected, "I've been doing some thinking. The common problem that unites us, right now, is the mass of Guardians just outside our door."

"And this revelation is what you call 'some thinking?'" Ossian said drolly. "I trust that's not all."

"Peripherally, though, we both want to deal with the vampires," Argrave carried on as though Ossian had not spoken at all. "And I've been thinking, you see, that the two would be best pitted against each other," Argrave said with a smile.

Ossian said nothing, so Argrave launched into an explanation.

"I have in my possession what the Sentinels have lacked for centuries—a key into the lower levels of the headquarters," Argrave pointed to Garm. "The vampires think that they're safe in the lower levels, because they're tightly warded by enchanted doors. I say we set the horde of Guardians against them. I say we open the doors to the lower levels and leave them open. We let the Guardians rush in, tear them apart."

"And how do you suppose that's possible?"

"The only issue in this plan is that we would need to leave safety," Argrave said. "I'm not suggesting that you guys go and do everything for me. I'd lead the charge outside, have no fear."

"Lead us into a trap, more like," a Sentinel at Ossian's side spoke.

"You have an awfully high opinion of my capability," Argrave noted amusedly. "Yes, I'm the master of the Low Way, capable of setting traps in every corner of this place to lure the unwitting paragons of justice like yourself to early graves," Argrave waved his hands about with grandiose sarcasm.

Ossian sighed and shook his head. "Traps don't need to be set by yourself. The point is—"

"Listen," Argrave interrupted. "You don't agree, I go alone. Simple as." Argrave shrugged. "I hope you're honorable enough, at least, to open the gate for our return."

"Hah. That would be worth watching, if only for the spectacle of your inevitable death," the same Sentinel beside Ossian commented.

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, frustrated by their obstinance. "The only reason I let you inside my little sanctuary here was because I was confident I could defend against all of you. A B-rank mage, a couple of C-ranks..." Argrave pointed them out, remembering Garm's insights. "I've got my own bag of tricks. Be it all twenty of you, or that horde banging on the door... I can handle it," he said calmly, careful to make his words sound like stated fact more than bravado.

Ossian snorted in disbelief but did not rise to challenge the statement. "If you're willing to come with, I don't see the problem with this idea of yours. The problem lies in that thing your menial is holding," Ossian pointed. "You say it opens the lower levels, yet I've never seen that."

"A fair point," Argrave admitted begrudgingly.

"To hell it is," Garm snarled out. Argrave stepped aside, giving the floor to the severed head. "Listen here, mutt descendent of mine," he ranted. "The doors to the lower levels of the headquarters only open to a magic signature registered with the Order of the Rose. Those vampires, bloodlappers and bastards though they may be, are indeed members of the Order of the Rose. They're mere apprentices, but they have access to the basic level.

"I, too, am a true scion of the Rose," Garm continued. "The doors will open for me. If you doubt me..." Garm's eyes opened and glowed, and then a burst of flame shot out towards Ossian. The Master Sentinel leapt back warily, but the flames stopped short of where he had been standing.

"Don't," Garm finished conclusively.

Argrave enjoyed the silence that followed, but the entire camp of Sentinels now watched their conversation warily. Argrave stepped forward, walking up to Ossian once more.

"Not sure if that suffices. Maybe you can quiz him on some things only a member of the Order of the Rose would know," Argrave suggested in jest.

"That thing should be put down," one of the Sentinels pointed at Garm. "Sentient or not, it can't be controlled, obviously."

"Like how you tried to put me down, because I couldn't be controlled?" Argrave questioned. "I don't understand why you feel the need for absolute control."

"Confine you, not put you down," Ossian corrected again, teeth clenched tight in irritation.

"The point stands," Argrave shrugged. "Don't get all pissy with me. I keep trying to help you, and you keep spurning me. We're at a crossroads, the way I see it. Distrust me, and continue fading as you are," Argrave pointed to them as he said so. "Trust me, and prosper once more, eliminating the biggest obstacle to your progress into the Low Way."

Ossian turned away, lost in thought.

#####

Galamon turned the turn wheel for the gate to the Menagerie, raising it upwards just slightly. Ossian crouched low, peering beyond into the darkness appearing in the door's small crack. Their entire party was silent, everyone listening carefully. Argrave had a spell at the forefront of his mind, ready to conjure [Skysunder] at a moment's notice to blast away any two-armed creatures that came scuttling beneath the iron gate.

Ossian held his arm out to stop people from advancing further, then held up two fingers. Argrave looked to Galamon, and surprisingly, the vampire nodded, confirming the Sentinel's sense. His observation did not have much time to be doubted, though—a hand shot out, grabbing the gate and trying to force it open.

The creature raised the door slightly, allowing sufficient time for another Guardian to slip through. Each of its eight black eyes darted around independently, looking for a target, before locking on the closest-- Ossian. The Master Sentinel stepped back, drawing his sword as he rose to his feet in one fluent motion.

Argrave elected not to cast, considering the sheer bulk of people nearby who could do the task without magic.

The creature swung its arm, and a flail attached to its hand whistled through the air. Ossian nimbly dodged with a backstep, then placed his foot on the flail's chain once it impacted with the ground. Another Sentinel stepped forward, stabbing the creature with a short spear. It grabbed at the spear for a moment before sagging limp with a soundless death. The hand holding the gate struggled to win against Galamon, who held the turn wheel patiently and kept the door suspended.

Ossian crouched and kicked the creature holding the door, then stood. Argrave heard the creature's hands slapping against the ground as it fled. Ossian waited for a time, then said to Galamon, "We can open it all the way. We waited for their numbers near the door to thin, and we were right to do so. None are near."

After Argrave nodded to confirm Ossian's order, Galamon raised the gate up.

"Right. Down the stairs, through the central hallway, then down the stairs to the right," Argrave outlined aloud, mostly for himself.

"You've said that plenty," Garm noted from Anneliese's hand. She held the head like a staff, though it was much too short to meet the ground.

"You said you'd lead the charge," Ossian turned back to Argrave.

One of the spellcasters stepped forward, conjuring a ball of light that illuminated much of the room. At once, Guardians on the walls and railings turned their heads, eyes locking onto their party.

"...so lead quickly," Ossian finished.

Argrave took a deep breath. Galamon stepped up beside Argrave, grabbing his shoulder.

"Be calm," he soothed. His deep, grating voice did not make it especially so.

"Easy to suggest, hard to enact," Argrave muttered. After another breath, he stepped out into the central lobby of the headquarters, a thousand black eyes watching him from every corner of the room.