

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 96: Death in his Breath

Ossian and Argrave did not enter the headquarters of the Order of the Rose without proper planning. What they intended to do was already established long beforehand, both offering some contributions based on experience.

For Ossian's part, he knew how the Guardians would attack. They had all the reckless abandon of a locust plague—they had numbers, and knew well how to take advantage of them. Despite this, they were not unintelligent in their attacks. They had weapons bolted to the backs of their hands, and they knew how to use them effectively. They would lurk in corners or hang off ledges, waiting for an opportunity to capitalize on a mistake or simply surprise an unwitting wanderer.

Argrave knew simply that being encircled would be the least ideal situation, and the rough path that they needed to take. Beyond that, he left the strategizing to Ossian. The man was competent, and he could be trusted to see their plan to fruition despite his lack of trust in them.

The key in this situation was simply this—a burst forth. They would need to move quickly, never allowing the creatures to obtain an advantageous position.

Argrave took the first step forward, Galamon just beside him, sandwiched between him and Anneliese. They moved in a steady jog, heading across the balcony of the second floor that overlooked the central lobby towards the stairs. The spellcasters working with the Sentinels strove to light the place as best they could, uncaring about the attention attracted—they wanted to attract attention, at least somewhat.

Galamon served as the protector, warding off stray attacks from Guardians lurking in places unseen. Anneliese and Argrave served as the wedge to open a gap. Whenever a group of Guardians would block their advance, they would need to use magic to dispel them forcibly. Despite their fierceness, the Guardians were light compared to humans—a sufficiently powerful spell would knock them away. Fire, lightning, and wind elemental magic danced through the air, sending the creatures flying.

Their initial rush from the Menagerie to the stairs proved to be no issue. Yet as the sounds of the elements echoed out across the stone building, fell noises returned—metal grating against stone, flesh slapping against the ground... all signs the Guardians heard their advance and already moved to stop it.

Progress slowed at the stairs. The Guardians climbed up the side, thrusting at the three of them through the railings like wolves nipping at the heels as a pack. The Sentinels, though, moved forward with unity, pushing back against the tide that rose up the stairs. With their parties grouped closer together, Argrave proceeded further once again, careful not to stumble on the stairs.

Once Argrave's feet stepped off the stairs and met the ground floor, he thought the anxiety might be relieved somewhat... but looking out across the room only stoked his unease ever higher. Despite the haste Argrave had endeavored to achieve, the creatures already pooled in the central lobby. Gleaming black and gold eyes moved towards them, so numerous they were uncountable.

“Gods be damned,” Ossian cursed, stepping up beside Argrave. “There’s too many. Cut our losses—we return to the Menagerie.”

“Fuck that,” Argrave disagreed, panic making his tongue crasser than normal. “I’ll carve a path.”

“What?!” Ossian said in disbelief.

“Didn’t want to use this at all,” Argrave shook his head. He gestured his hand backwards. “Don’t send anyone forward.”

Argrave triggered the Blessing of Supersession. It felt as though his whole being was being flooded, magic welling up from his chest like a spring freed from the rocks. Erratic thoughts about preserving his magic and minimizing his debt vanished to the wind, whisked away by the tornado of panic disturbing his guts. He stepped past Anneliese and Galamon, conjuring a B-rank ward with his enchanted ring to protect them from errant magic. With the central hallway in the distance in his mind, he held his hands out, spell matrixes forming.

White lightning, fiery wolves, spears of ice, and blades of pressurized wind danced out across the central lobby, sending debris and flesh every which way. The entire place became awash with spell light. The sheer sound, sight, and smell of it all consumed Argrave’s senses until nothing else occupied his thoughts. He sought out the creature’s black eyes as his targets, conjuring spells as an indiscriminate butcher. The sheer sense of power he felt in that moment combatted his anxiety, crushing it utterly.

He could feel the heat before him, as though he were standing before a blast furnace with hands outstretched. Every bolt of lightning that sounded out resounded in his chest like a giant drum. Spears of ice hurtled forth, meeting flesh or stone and shattering into a fine blue mist. The wind cut all it moved past, setting anything loose within the room in motion.

It was only once he felt a hand on his shoulder did Argrave remember himself. His ears rung, and he turned to see Anneliese mouthing words. As the ringing faded, he made sense of her words.

“...over. We have a path, Argrave.”

Argrave nodded, shaking. “Yeah. Yeah, right. Let’s...”

“What in the gods’ name are you?” Ossian spoke, looking out across the carnage.

Argrave clenched his fists, feeling the leather gloves soaked in sweat tight in his grip. He slowly gathered himself as the feeling of invincibility began to fade. *If these are C-rank spells... the carnage I could wreak at A-rank?* He briefly thought. Not even a minute had passed, and yet he had achieved this.

Realizing he left Ossian unanswered, he quickly said, “What am I? I’m just in a hurry. Let’s go, before more take their place. They are legion, after all.”

Argrave stepped out into the central lobby, passing the sight of carnage. A strange quiet had settled over the place. As he stepped into the sight of his attacks, he felt the damage he’d caused directly—the heat beneath his feet, the icy mist in the air, the still-spasming Guardians writhing with electricity...

The Blessing of Supersession lent Argrave’s advance a sense of urgency. He was the first to rush into the central hall. Before long he was joined by Galamon and Anneliese, who kept up easily on account of being more athletic than he was. Some Guardians stopped their advance. Argrave dispatched them,

using the C-rank lightning spell [Skysunder] with reckless abandon, uncaring of how deep he grew in debt to Erlebnis.

They reached the stairway that led down, and Argrave caught the wall just before it, pausing to catch his breath.

“Chest feels tight... think my cardio got worse, actually,” he huffed. He looked back, watching the armored Sentinels still rush to catch up to them. “Alright, Garm. If this doesn’t work...”

“Don’t let the thought enter your head,” Garm assured, breaking his silence from his place in Anneliese’s hands. Anneliese took the first few steps down the stairs. Argrave followed just behind, where ahead, he saw a stone door that shimmered with lights. It was circular and had no handles.

“You... have done your task,” Garm said as Anneliese stepped to the door. “I will do mine. Your presence, now, is... well, overpowering. The magic within you...” it muttered. “I can hardly bear to look at you. Just press my head to the door, sweetie,” he spoke to Anneliese.

Anneliese did so. At once, a black, flower-like pattern bloomed across the door. It slid to the side. Someone had been leaning against the other side, and they fell backwards. Galamon mercilessly dispatched the vampire before he had a chance to recover. He looked beyond, watching for more enemies.

Ossian stepped down the stairs, leading the other Stonepetal Sentinels. “Gods... it opened. The lower levels...I can’t believe...” he trailed off.

“You can’t believe, yet you came with us?” Garm questioned.

“We can celebrate at a later date. Did you forget the next part?” Argrave pressed, almost having recovered his breath. His inhalations still felt shallow, and he felt some measure of pain. He knew something was wrong but did not have time to address it.

“Right.” Ossian directed one of the spellcasters with his hand. The woman stepped forth, conjuring something, and a hunk of stone moved to block the door from sliding back in place. It would likely not be sufficient for long term, but it was only to prevent the door from moving long enough to allow the Guardians to enter.

Ossian stepped back up the stairs, watching the hallway beyond. “Plenty of Guardians coming, following the noise. We enter, lead them in, and go to this other exit you talked about.”

“Watch for falling vampires,” Argrave said glibly to disguise his own unease, then stepped into the lower levels of the headquarters of the Order of the Rose.

The lower levels had the same darkness common on the entry floor, yet here was different in a way Argrave found difficult to wrap his head around. Rather than simply being dark, it felt like light had not touched this place in a long while. It was mostly free of dust and dirt and had the same elaborate carvings as in this first floor. The hallway stretched on for a long time. Argrave hurried down it as fast as his labored body would allow.

Eventually, the hallway opened up into an open space. The room was massive, its ceiling stretching high into the air. It seemed split into halves—the front room was an administrative center, housing desks and

reception areas that had long ago been repurposed to the vampire's needs. The other half was blocked off by thick iron bars, and housed a grand library still illuminated by light even after the centuries since the Order's fall.

"S-SENTINELS!" a shout echoed out across the room, abject terror in the voice unbefitting the vampire which it came from.

"Go left. Ward off attacks—once the Guardians get in, they'll screen our escape, more or less," Argrave said to Ossian. Despite his position as the Master Sentinel of the group, he did not object to Argrave's directive, nodding in quiet agreement.

They went left. The vampire's home soon became a veritable hive of activity as the things moved to tackle the situation. Shouts similar to the one that first echoed out filled the place as people adapted to the unforeseen occurrence. Though some vampires tried to stop them from proceeding or generally assault them, the attacks were easily enough repelled.

Argrave dared a glance backwards once they were sufficiently far from where they'd first entered. He saw the first of the Guardians enter the lower levels. True to Argrave's prediction, they started to flood in great numbers, quickly emerging from the hallway. The vampires that had moved to deal with the Sentinels and Argrave's party were quickly confronted by a wave of Guardians.

Argrave whipped his head back ahead, laughing slightly. He held a hand to his chest once the pain he'd felt earlier reignited. Ahead, there was another hallway.

"This is the other exit," Argrave wheezed out.

"What?" Ossian said, having not heard him.

"The exit's there," Galamon finished for Argrave.

Some joy seeped into Ossian's tone as he said, "Gods... this... this is an unparalleled..."

Argrave broke away from the group, putting his hand against the wall to support himself. He coughed, each one setting the pain in his chest afire. At the final cough, he felt the tang of iron in his mouth, and he spat out blood. Argrave stared at the redness blankly, still short of breath.

Galamon grabbed Argrave's arm. "Veid..." he cursed. "Don't have time for this. I'll carry you."

Argrave lacked the breath to protest as Galamon sheathed his sword and lifted Argrave, throwing him over his shoulder. Ossian paused, looking back.

"What is he...?"

"Just move," Galamon pointed ahead. "Considering all he's done, it's only fair you take the bulk of the burden in the escape."

Ossian looked at Argrave, then nodded, moving ahead. They entered into the hallway, where a circular stone door identical in appearance to the one they'd entered through waited. Anneliese stepped past the Sentinels, opening the door with Garm once more. Beyond, the hallway lay empty.

“Alright. Things seem calm—the bulk of the Guardians followed us. They’ll be dealing with the vampires,” Ossian narrated. “We just head back into the Menagerie.”

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Chapter 97: Selling Air

Galamon set Argrave up against the wall, while the Sentinels behind them lowered the iron gate to the Menagerie. It collapsed against the stone, letting out a puff of dust that expanded out across the empty space. Everyone breathed heavily, catching their breath, yet above it all was a short, shallow breathing—Argrave’s.

Galamon knelt by Argrave. “You have a fever. I can smell the blood on your breath even still, along with... rot. An infection.”

Argrave touched his chest, saying nothing. His chest felt painfully tight, and he couldn’t inhale as much as he normally could. On the bright side, his enchanted leather gear had made Galamon’s pauldrons dig into his ribs less.

Ossian stepped forward, standing just before Argrave’s foot. “I thought you were experiencing some rebound from that display of magic you pulled out earlier, but it seems I was wrong.”

Argrave coughed a few times. “It’s gotta be... pneumonia... though that’s a symptom, not the illness... or is it a...? Can’t remember what it... is,” Argrave shook his head, then touched his chest. “Pain’s subsiding a bit.”

“Pneumonia?” Ossian repeated. “I don’t know about that. I know what you have, though. We call it Redlung—it’s caused by some of the plants in Nodremaid, though it doesn’t bother most people this severely. Coughing blood, pus, trouble breathing... I suspect the physical strain made it worse in this case. It affects mostly children or the elderly.” Ossian fixed some of his matted dark hair, having recently removed his helmet. “This case... it’s quite severe. Probably fatal.”

“Do you know how to treat it?” asked Anneliese, urgency evident in her tone. Garm stayed silent in her hands.

Ossian nodded. “The B-rank healing spell [Cure Disease] suffices.”

“And you have a B-rank mage,” Anneliese pointed at the woman in question. “If this is so common an issue, surely she knows the spell...”

“She does,” Ossian confirmed with a nod. He placed his hands on his hip, moving his sword further back on his belt.

None made any moves, standing around Argrave in silence. Anneliese pointed to the woman once more and said, “So, why are we letting him stay like this? Please, treat him!”

Ossian pursed his lips and stepped away from Argrave. “I can have him treated... but I have some conditions.” He turned his head back.

Argrave lifted his head up. “Oh, yeah?” he asked, some vigor returned to him. “Go on, then.”

"You would have to surrender that thing," Ossian pointed to Garm. "And moreover, you would have to submit yourself to the Stonepetal Sentinels for judgement. We would give you safe passage back to the surface... and use your deeds in revealing the vampire's location to us in this judgement," he said enthusiastically, as though lightening the blow of his words by pointing to a bright side.

"We would keep you under... house arrest, I suppose—not a prisoner, but a detainee. Thereafter, the three of you would be presided over by a council of all the Master Sentinels."

Argrave started to laugh. It broke off into a wet cough. After, he looked up grinning, blood on his teeth. "Can hear the gratitude in your voice. Real heartwarming."

"I would speak for you. I'm sure most of the other people here with me today would, as well," Ossian waved around, and his words were met with some nods—they didn't seem overly enthusiastic, though. "In the Sentinels, though, there are rules and orders that have to be followed, even by me. I can't simply give you favors for the sake of them."

"You're a bastard... after my own heart, heh," Argrave chuckled briefly. "Let's say, for the sake of argument, I don't want to be held in judgement by people who hate me. What would happen then?"

Ossian shifted on his feet. "...I would leave you untreated and return to the Sentinels. That's going to happen very shortly regardless of your choice. Though the Guardians collided with the vampires, this is an advantage that needs to be pressed. I'm going to return to the entrance of the Low Way and gather more of my brothers to finally wipe the vampire menace out of the Low Way—uproot them completely."

"Ossian... just leave him?" another Sentinel asked, stepping forth. "That's not right. We have them here—we outnumber them."

Galamon stood up, stepping forth until his towering presence was made known. "Try," he said simply. "After some of what you cretins have said, I'd relish the chance to prove why your numbers mean nothing."

"Easy, now," Ossian said, holding his hand out. "And you—" he turned back to the Sentinel that had spoken. "Attack Argrave or his companions, I'll kill you myself. Let's not escalate things without reason. I've made my stance known. Wouldn't sit right with me, returning help with hostility."

"Girl," Garm whispered. Anneliese, expression worried, looked down at Garm. "I would speak to you. Privately."

"What?" she questioned, then stared at Garm's face. He stared back at her, unspeaking. After a time, she nodded, and stepped away.

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Behind, the conversation continued tensely while Anneliese walked to a distance, planting Garm down in the ground. She was not eager to leave behind the two of them in front of the Sentinels, but she was relatively confident things were not yet at the point of coming to blows, simply judging from the states of the Sentinels.

"You're a snow elf, aren't you?" asked Garm, staring up at her.

"A Veidimen," she corrected. "'Snow elf' is what humans call us."

"And your traditions—honor, contracts, loyalty—they remain intact? Unchanged?"

Anneliese nodded. "They do. I still follow them."

"Good." Garm looked satisfied, though he was unable to nod. "I've been watching you. Watching all of you. I'm not ignorant of my position. I'm a tool—a useful one, but one that each and every one of you is willing and able to discard. What happens to me is beyond my hands... not that I have them, anyway." He closed his eyes. "That B-rank spell book you've been reading in the camp... it's the tome for that spell they mentioned. [Cure Disease]."

Anneliese crossed her arms, saying nothing. After a time, she nodded. "It was. I thought something like this might happen... only... it doesn't matter," she shook her head in defeat. "I wasn't able to learn it in time."

"Hmm," Garm grunted. "From what I have gathered, these Stonepetal Sentinels are not on the best of terms with your group. The idea of going with them is not ideal for precisely these reasons. The way things are shaping up, your friend will die if you do not. Coughing up blood, barely able to breathe, a high fever... ill omens."

"However," Garm continued, "These Stonepetal Sentinels, in comparison to your group, are much less ideal for me. I have been in a haze for so long, my thoughts not my own, and only now have I regained them. I am not one for giving up. I am destined for greatness. I always have been," Garm said with utter confidence. "Were I to be surrendered to the Sentinels, I would surely perish... or meet a worse fate."

"Argrave is more important than you," Anneliese said bluntly. "If it will save his life, I am sorry, but—"

"I know. You three have... a strong bond, I think, with him at the center of things... like some kind of sinewy glue. Hmm... Perhaps willowy might be the better word."

"What are you—"

"However, I am a High Wizard of the Order of the Rose," Garm continued loudly. "I long ago mastered A-rank magic. This limited husk prohibits me from using higher-ranked spells, yet the knowledge remains." Garm gazed up at Anneliese. "I can help you learn this B-rank spell. I know it—I've used it. I might even use it on Argrave, had I the capability—alas, I am but a head on a stake, and my capabilities are miniscule in comparison to what they used to be."

Anneliese took a deep breath and looked back towards the group. "I understand where this is going. You mentioned contracts, loyalty, at the beginning of this. What would you expect in return?" she looked at him. "Your freedom? Your safety?"

"I can't have freedom. Look at me," Garm's eyes rolled about in his head. "But yes, you are right. I want you to ensure my life. I want you to take me with you out of this hellish place and ensure my continued existence. I was great, once. I will be great, again. I need only the opportunity."

Anneliese looked down at Garm. "You merely want to travel with me?"

"I will ask for no more than my continued protection. I am in the position of weakness now. I have no delusions about this," Garm shut his eyes. "But as long as I continue to stay alive... there will be an

opportunity. Especially so with people as... intrepid, shall we say, as you three. There will come a time when you need my knowledge once more. And then, we will strike another deal."

Anneliese took a step away, lost in thought. Garm waited patiently, staring up at her. She turned her head back. "I cannot decide this alone, you realize. This is Argrave's life we speak of. I cannot be its arbiter—he must decide whether or not to risk things."

"Yet you are amenable to the idea?" Garm raised a brow.

"I am," she nodded. "I am at the cusp of advancement; I am sure of it. If your help is as good as you say, I believe I can overcome the barrier to reach B-rank. But as I said..."

"Then let us bring my idea to our patient," Garm said.

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"Go on. Get," Argrave pointed to the gate.

As soon as Anneliese had pitched the idea to Argrave, he was more than willing to give the Sentinels the boot. Anneliese was one of the fastest-progressing spellcasters in 'Heroes of Berendar,' and he fully trusted her capability to reach B-rank, especially with the help of a High Wizard. Anneliese was more than a little flabbergasted by his total confidence in her abilities.

"Without treatment..." Ossian cautioned, "...I am near certain you will die. Even in the best case scenario, your lungs will suffer significant scarring, and you will never be the same again."

"I've got my own bag of tricks, like I told you," Argrave said, still leaning on the wall. "Last time I ever decide to be nice to members of a paramilitary organization. I thought you were one of the decent ones, Ossian, but you were the biggest snake in the grass."

Ossian took a deep breath and sighed, but the people behind him seemed somewhat bothered by Argrave's words. "Fine. Don't understand how you can be so flippant with your own life, but... I'll honor my words. You've done a good service for the Sentinels. Even if you do not live... you will be remembered."

The Stonepetal Sentinels moved to the iron gate, one of their number moving the turn wheel.

"Hah. Right," Argrave laughed as the gate rose. They started to move outside, one by one. Ossian was the last to leave. He gave a quiet nod to Argrave, and then the iron gate lowered once more. Galamon walked forth and wedged the rock beneath the turn wheel, ensuring it would not open again.

"Hoo..." Argrave breathed. "Safety... relatively speaking."

"You made the right choice," said Garm, stabbed into the ground some distance away. "We'll have you on your feet in no time."

Argrave clenched his hands tight. "Yeah. Hope so. Can barely keep my eyes open. This hit me hard."

"...I'll prepare something comfortable," said Galamon, looking around.

"Right," Argrave said idly, leaning his head against the stone. "I'll be waiting." His whole body felt heavy. He felt a haze growing in his brain, and he slowly surrendered to it, drifting into darkness.

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Chapter 98: No Rest for the Wicked

Argrave grabbed Anneliese's wrist weakly. "When I die...you go see Orion. You'll need his help for the jester," he mumbled. "After, you should deal... with the war. I think. If you like Orion, help him. If you don't, help the rebels. You're a smart... cookie. You'll do it fine."

All while Argrave was talking, Anneliese was repeating his name time and time again. He didn't seem to hear it at all.

"Just remember to get Elenore on your side—she's the Bat," he continued, slurring. "After that... the steppes. Go there. The centaurs... and the elves.... You've gotta deal with the malfeasance... and the dryads. Side with the centaurs... they're better. Cooler."

Anneliese finally shook Argrave, and his bloodshot eyes came to focus on her, open wide in surprise. "Argrave. It is over. You have been treated. You are not dying."

He stared for a moment, mouth agape. He smacked his lips together, and his eyes rolled back into his head before coming back to attention. "That can't be right. I feel terrible."

"Just let him be," Garm spoke, causing Anneliese to turn her head back. "That spell drains a lot from the one subject to the disease—he'll probably need to eat and drink a lot before he's back to working order. Even then... his lungs probably have some scarring. Minor, though, and it should heal given time."

Anneliese lowered him back into the makeshift bed that Galamon had constructed. Argrave spoke, staring at Garm. "What are you... a doctor? An... anesthesiologist?" he spoke the word incredibly slowly, as though he could barely remember it. Once he laid back in his bed, he shifted. "Shitty hospital bed... I want to go home. The HOBwiki is nothing... without..."

Anneliese looked up at Galamon. "What is he talking about?"

"Doubt anyone could answer that." Galamon crossed his arms and shook his head. "He's delirious. Let him be. We should prepare some easily-chewable food for him—crush those berries, dice some of our rationed meat."

Anneliese leaned away from Argrave, letting out a deep sigh of relief that caused the stress to veritably drain from her face. Her eyes were sunken and bloodshot, with deep dark bags beneath them.

"I hope you won't forget our deal, sweetie, now that your little friend isn't one toe into the grave," Garm spoke from behind her.

Anneliese's expression tensed once more, and she looked back to Garm. "I will honor that arrangement. And... thank you for your tutelage."

"Don't expect more... unless I benefit, somehow." Garm smiled. "If you think that's selfish, realize you're speaking to someone worse off than a cripple."

She turned her head away and nodded, then rose to her feet. Galamon was staring at her.

"You should rest," he stated. "Hard to tell time here, but I estimate you've gone two days without sleep... your job is done, and now you must come back to form. I will take care of things from here. Nothing will disturb us."

"But you must be near devoid of blood—perhaps I should—"

"Sleep," he commanded. "Do not be as bad as him about taking care of yourself."

Anneliese nodded. "Wake me should anything happen. You said the Sentinels are still clearing out the lower levels of vampires—an unideal time to be found here."

"I know," Galamon said. "Bad for them, at least. After what we did, to be extorted like that..." Galamon clenched his fist, his gauntlets creaking against one another.

Anneliese held a hand out. "Please, do not dwell on it. Everything turned out fine."

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"So... a talking head, huh?" Argrave said. His voice was hoarse and speaking still hurt. His mind had gathered somewhat—enough for conversation, at the very least. "Most kids bring home a pet, it's something like a dog... or a cat, maybe, if you're lucky. But Anneliese... a head," Argrave outlined, then nodded his head as he let the words hang.

Anneliese let out a few small laughs through her nose.

It had taken some days for Argrave to recover enough to speak, and she seemed to be glad he was back to snuff. Galamon was off collecting some of those berries from the trees. Argrave and Anneliese sat near the wall, Argrave well-supported by a bed of cloth that Galamon had foraged from the Menagerie.

"You're pondering this now?" shot back Garm.

Argrave scratched his chin. "Didn't really have much room for thought when the idea was pitched. Anneliese takes the next step on the path of magic, it got me out of debt to the Sentinels... good enough for me." Argrave frowned. "How are we... going to bring you anywhere? Not exactly easy luggage. You pass through any city gates, the guards won't know how much to charge for the toll. Three and a quarter? And that's assuming they let us in."

"The mind makes the man. They'd charge for four," Garm said bitterly. "Yes, very funny. Mock a head on a stake. Do you mock amputees? Cripples? The mentally deficient? Are you merely a classless man, or has the standard of propriety in Vasquer dropped so low after my death?"

Argrave was a bit taken aback, and he frowned, genuinely considering Garm's situation. After a time, Argrave looked him in the eyes and nodded. "You're right. It's just... so ridiculous. Impossible to even think about."

"Try living it," Garm said poignantly. "Picture it. I can't turn my head. The only thing I can do is move what's on my face. If I think there's something behind me? All I can do is wait—maybe conjure a ward to block. Any itch, any sensation... I'm powerless. I have to be carried everywhere."

Argrave let his imagination wander as Garm set the scene and could not help but shudder. "You're right. It's terrible," Argrave raised his hands in surrender. "It's just not going to be easy to bring you anywhere."

I'd say we pull out the stake, wrap you up in a... a blanket, or something, but even that... what if brain falls out? Or... or..." Argrave shook his head, dispelling unpleasant thoughts.

"Why is it so strange?" Garm questioned.

"Are you being serious?" Argrave asked, genuinely unsure.

"Lots of Wizards walk about with their necromantic creations. I knew this man... he had—"

"Necromancy is illegal, now," Argrave said plainly, finally realizing the culture gap. "After the Order of the Rose fell, their creations started going out of control, and... well, things have been extremely unpleasant for everyone involved. You've seen this place," Argrave waved his hands around. "Every ruin of the Order of the Rose is like this."

"Everywhere?" Garm narrowed his eyes. "That doesn't make sense. Unless they all vanished overnight, something like this... makes no sense," Garm repeated, flabbergasted.

Anneliese looked over at Argrave, curious for his answer. Argrave looked between them, then raised his arms up. "Why are you looking at me? I don't have *all* the answers."

Garm closed his eyes, looking disappointed, and Anneliese nodded as though it was the natural course of things.

"I can tell you about the last thing that I know the Order did collectively, though," Argrave said, sitting a little straighter.

Garm opened his eyes, and Anneliese also straightened her posture, both listening intently.

"The last recorded meeting of the Order of the Rose was called by its last Grandmaster," Argrave began. "This was when the southern tribes were invading the Low Way. He called together all of the High Wizards of the Order to the Low Way, in a gathering now known as the 'Night of Withering.'" Argrave's gaze switched between Anneliese and Garm.

"No one knows the purpose of the meeting, or what actually happened in it... but that night, when the southern tribes made it deep into the Low Way, trying to push into Vasquer... what awaited them was a river of blood. Everything in the Low Way was submerged in a great tide of blood. Some drowned—others were torn to bits in the flood, cut apart by debris carried by the tide."

"Had to be something Grandmaster Astran did. He was a master of blood magic and necromancy, both," Garm contributed.

Argrave shrugged. "No one knows what happened. Some people say the Grandmaster and the High Wizards both gave their flesh to wash away the invaders with blood strengthened by their own magic. Others say they were a victim of their own project and died in the flood just as the southern tribes did. But... there aren't any witnesses." Argrave finished.

"I... can't picture the Wizards of the Order sacrificing themselves like that to stop a mere invasion," Garm looked down. "I don't..."

"We have to move again... tomorrow," Argrave looked to the door of the Menagerie.

“What?” Anneliese questioned, surprised. “You are still unwell.”

“Galamon mentioned the Sentinels moved to clear out the vampires,” Argrave said, gaze distant. “They can’t get their hands on the Unsullied Knife. They’ll take it back to their fortress. We can’t hope to match them there.” He looked back to Anneliese. “You think I want to get up and move around? I feel like death itself. This conversation’s killing me, but I like talking too much.”

Anneliese sighed, rubbing her forehead. “I’m... if you think there’s no other choice.” She shook her head. “Promise me you won’t overexert yourself.”

“I mean... it’s a little beyond my—”

“Just promise,” she insisted.

Argrave met her eyes. He found himself unable to say ‘no,’ and so he nodded quietly.

“I think the Sentinels and I will have to enjoy another conversation,” Argrave said, tightening his hand into a fist. “This time, though... this time, I’ll be the one stepping on their neck.”

#####

“Look at this,” Alasdair spread his arms out. “All the knowledge of the Order of the Rose, within eyesight. The vampires stared at this for years, unable to move past... unable to claim it.” Alasdair reached a hand forward and tapped between the thick iron bars thrice, where the metal gauntlets met with the invisible barrier. “And unable to ruin it, naturally.”

“The important bit is that the vampires are wiped out, don’t you think? It took four days, and a lot of lives, but... it’s finally done, barring two or three that luckily managed to escape,” Ossian said, stepping up beside Alasdair. “This victory is a lot more important than some ancient library we can’t touch.”

“And if we could touch it?” Alasdair turned his head back.

Ossian laughed. “You see, this is why I didn’t want you to come. You say a bunch of stupid stuff all the time. The vampires have been here for centuries—if it was as simple as that, this place wouldn’t be undisturbed as it is.”

Alasdair inhaled sharply, then looked back to the library. “Maybe so. But you did something very stupid. You left that murderer roam free. I intend to correct that.”

“Are you serious?” Ossian tilted his head. “He’s the reason we made it here to begin with, and you’re going to ‘correct that?’”

“That head he has,” Alasdair looked back. “If it’s the key to these doors, it might be the key to this library. Argrave said the Wayward Thorns were mere Apprentices in the Order of the Rose, but that head... it was a High Wizard, no? There has to be something to that. Even if it can’t get rid of this barrier... it definitely knows how to break it.”

“Gods... you’re being serious. The man hands us the biggest boon to our knightly order in centuries on a silver platter, and you want to make his life harder than it already is—if, indeed, he’s even alive?”

Alasdair stepped up to Ossian. “What happened to your bravado, Ossian? You chased after him with the intent to kill, and then you find him and make nice? If Claude were here, I’d petition to have you stripped of your rank.” He pressed a gauntleted finger against Ossian’s chest.

“You do this—go to the Menagerie—I won’t stand for it,” Ossian swatted Alasdair’s hand away. “And I won’t let you do it secretly during the night, either. All I did, I did for the Sentinels’ honor. You, though... I’ve got no idea what you’re thinking.”

“You want to start a mutiny, Ossian?” Alasdair tilted his head.

“It’s no mutiny. You’re not my leader,” Ossian said loudly and clearly. “This is a joint expedition, for the purpose of wiping out the vampires. Nothing more,” he emphasized.

“Fellas, no need to argue over me,” echoed out a hoarse voice.

The two Master Sentinels turned their heads to the side, where three figures walking beneath a ball of light slowly stepped out of the darkness and into the lower levels. Alasdair raised his fingers to his mouth, and despite the gauntlets, sounded out a perfect whistle. At once, all of the Sentinels that had been idle came to attention, facing towards the new arrivals.

“Gods... Argrave?” Ossian said, brows furrowed in confusion and surprise both.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 99: Night of Withering

Argrave stared out, once again, into Nodremaid. The bleak and inconstant red light coming from the ceiling seemed a salve for the constant darkness they had been subject to inside the Menagerie. Argrave’s party had come here only after Galamon had done significant scouting. Ossian had returned to the fortress in front of the Low Way some days ago, and returned with a second party, numbering near forty—amongst them was Alasdair.

“Do you know a very interesting principle about water?” Argrave quizzed Anneliese, staring out into the distance.

“Could you ask a vaguer question?” Anneliese shot back.

“Water always runs downhill,” Argrave looked at Anneliese, brushing her sarcasm aside.

“...I think that is true of most liquids,” she said after a time.

“Very good,” Argrave turned his head away. “Just checking to be sure you knew.”

She breathed out lightly in some amusement, then pressed, “Why are you bringing this up?”

“The canals,” Argrave raised a finger, pointing at them. “They have sluices. They’re part of the path that I need to take to get the Crimson Wellspring—divert the water right, you get a dry path you can take to get up to it. But then... I got to thinking. We opened the lower levels, didn’t we?”

“...oh,” she nodded, understanding things.

"These Stonepetal Sentinels... they're real nasty people. I was thinking real hard, running things through my head I might say to win them over to my side... and maybe I could," Argrave looked up at the ceiling. "But these people... I think I got them wrong from the start."

"How so?" asked Galamon.

"They're cowards," Argrave said, looking at Galamon. "Like you, apparently."

Galamon frowned. "I didn't mean that I—"

"Don't get mad," Argrave looked back to the canals. "I just mean... they live in fear of the outside, and they live in fear of what's in here. They don't trust anything... because they're scared." Argrave sighed, then frowned when he felt some pain in his chest.

"Fear keeps people alive," Garm rebuked.

"Just let me make my point," Argrave shook his head. "You can't reason with these people. Hardly even worth it to try. And... well, I'm damn tired of acting nice to people who couldn't spare but a single spell for my welfare. The scraping and the bowing, the false flattery... it has its uses, but I think I've been relying on it too much."

"So you intend to flood the lower levels, kill them?" Anneliese asked.

"I don't think that's possible. Despite its current state, this city was well-made. Even if the canals overflow, a drainage system will correct things quickly enough." Argrave looked around. "I just need to... well, I've said it. I need to scare them. I know that's possible. I intend to turn their caution against them. Especially Alasdair's."

"What do you mean?" Galamon pressed.

"That one wants to be leader of the Sentinels, no matter what. He needs a good achievement. Wiping out the vampires... that was mostly Ossian's thing, and he's young and bold. I imagine Alasdair sees him as his chief competition to replace their missing leader, Claude. As such..." Argrave looked at Garm. "I imagine he'll want to get into the library. And quickly."

"Why are you looking at me?" Garm asked concernedly. "I can't open the library. It was well-managed by select Order members. Now that they're dead... well, I can't imagine anyone can get in, unless they destroy the enchantments entirely. Near impossible to do, you know."

"Alasdair doesn't know what you know. He probably thinks you're invaluable. If you're absent, he won't act against us as easily. He wants you above all, I suspect. You're another card in my hand," he gestured towards Garm.

"I want a royal flush if I'm betting against the Sentinels this time." Argrave looked to his companions, and all looked confused by the expression. "Er... I mean, I want things heavily weighted in my favor," he elaborated.

Garm sighed. "I wish people with a sense of self-preservation had found me." He stared up at Argrave. "I won't do anything dangerous. Anneliese, tell him."

"You want dangerous? I imagine Alasdair will try doubly hard to have us killed if you're present," Argrave ruffled Garm's hair. "You stay near the final sluice, and you raise it to start and stop the flooding after a little bit. You'll be safe, don't worry."

"...fine," Garm eventually agreed. "Don't forget, though—this is a favor."

"Yeah, sure," Argrave waved his hand dismissively. "I go in. I act bold, I act unafraid—make it seem like I'm in control. After some happenings, some well-placed words, everyone falls into place. So... any objections to this plan, you two?"

"You should elaborate a bit more," urged Anneliese. "For clarity."

"Alright," Argrave nodded. "From the beginning, then..."

#####

Argrave stood before a group of numerous Sentinels once again, with Alasdair at their head. Though the setting was entirely different, it brought back some memories. Last time things began like this, they ended very poorly. Argrave was a bit more confident things wouldn't end up the same way.

Of course, he didn't come without a way out. He had been very cautious before approaching—Galamon had confirmed their count, the Sentinels numbering thirty-six, and Garm had confirmed there were no mages beyond B-rank. Should things go sour, Galamon was instructed to pick Argrave up and run away. Unflattering, perhaps, but Argrave was confident they could get away easily enough. Indeed, their enemies might not even give chase, considering their paranoia of traps and snares.

Guess they're right to fear a trap. Not like they can escape it now, though, Argrave thought, using that to assuage his anxiety.

"Interesting conversation you two were having," Argrave spoke at a fair volume, his voice ragged and rough. He sounded like a chain-smoker when he spoke loudly, but Garm assured him that would change in a few days. His limbs felt weak, taking deep breaths was still painful, and Argrave could not exert himself, but he had no choice but to be here.

With things as they were, Argrave knew he couldn't expect a warm reception. Despite the many days taken for his recovery, he still felt terrible. But the Unsullied Knife would still be here, and Argrave would much rather get it now before the Stonepetal Sentinels could take it back to the entrance of the Low Way.

With things having progressed as they had, Argrave had only two options. His first option: he could get the Unsullied Knife now by dealing with a group of weary, cautious Stonepetal Sentinels who had already seen the power he possessed. They were, further, ignorant of his Blessing of Supersession's limitations.

The second option was to let them have the Unsullied Knife and get it from their fortress later... in the heart of their power, where near two hundred of them would be waiting. In addition, he knew they had at least two A-rank spellcasters at that fort—Jean and Kaja.

Obviously, confronting them here held more appeal. The preparations he had made further sealed that deal.

Ossian took his hand off the pommel of his sword. "You cured the Redlung? How?"

"I had to unhinge my jaw like a snake, open real wide... then I stuck my hand deep, past my throat and into my lungs... and pulled the disease out, piece by piece," Argrave emulated what he described, then stepped forward, continuing in his hoarse voice, "It took southern grit and a sword-swallower's finesse, but I managed. And here I stand. My heart's-a-beating, my soul's-a-singing."

Alasdair held his hand out and shouted, "Keep your distance."

"Say 'please,' maybe I'll consider it," Argrave said, but he did come to a stop. He looked about casually as though he didn't care about the armored entourage before him. The place had been filled by the corpses of vampires, Sentinels, and Guardians. It was gruesome enough that it might've bothered Argrave a great deal... but he was starting to grow used to these sights.

"Nice work in here. I would say 'Couldn't have done it better myself,' but... well." He looked to Alasdair. "I think you saw the central lobby on your way in."

It was very difficult to try and intimidate a room full of knights wearing enchanted armor who were also flanked by spellcasters at the same or higher rank than himself. Argrave was happy enough to have gotten through the sentence without stumbling over his words.

Part of him expected to be laughed at in unison by the whole group like some sort of comedy sketch, but instead, a long silence settled throughout the lower levels of the headquarters. The shining lights of the library beyond the iron bars grimly illuminated the place.

"...why are you here?" Ossian eventually asked, one of few of the Stonepetal Sentinels that did not seem to positively bristle at Argrave's presence.

"I told you from the beginning, and my purpose hasn't changed. I'm here to reclaim my family's heirloom." Argrave shook his head as though disappointed. "Things could have gone easy for the both of us. I could have taken you here, we could have wiped out the vampires together... yet for reasons beyond me, you decided to move against us as we slept."

"But!" Argrave spread his arms wide. "We're here now, having achieved what I initially wanted, despite some... significant setbacks. I had to preserve myself, and despite that, I still gave you what you wanted most. I think it would be best for all of us..." Argrave's throat failed, and his voice faded away. He paused to take a drink of water. "...to put the past behind us."

His words seemed to dissolve the tension somewhat. Alasdair stared at Argrave unflinchingly. He seemed disappointed--likely due to Garm's absence. "I can't trust you. You were dishonest from the beginning. House Blackgard doesn't even exist," Alasdair posited.

"That's what it was?" Argrave raised a brow in surprise. "I see. Guess I shouldn't have... well, it doesn't matter. You want honesty from me?"

No answer came, so Argrave continued. "Alright. I'll give you honesty. I am Argrave of Vasquer, son of King Felipe III."

"Don't toy with me," Alasdair said, stepping forward.

"I'm not," Argrave said coldly, pausing to allow his lungs to rest. It was starting to hurt to speak. "Everyone should know what their king looks like—a giant of a man, as tall as me, with hair as black as night and eyes a cold, steely gray. Perhaps this light doesn't show those features well enough," Argrave adjusted his position so the light from the library fell on his face.

A grim silence settled over as they took in his features.

"If you're a prince, you'd have an entourage of royal knights," Alasdair countered.

"They are performing certain tasks for me," Argrave shook his head. "And it is hard to travel quietly with so many knights."

Alasdair took a deep breath, thinking. Ossian asked, "Why not say this from the beginning?"

"Yes, because it would be very prudent for a prince to roam about using his name carelessly when he's in the heart of the territory of an enemy rebellion," Argrave mocked sarcastically. "Though... with things as they are, I suppose you have a point—things would have gone easier had I been honest from the beginning."

Argrave put a hand to his chest. "I came here on behalf of my father to retrieve the Unbloodied Blade. Our family founded the Order of the Rose, and the artifact belongs to us, by rights. What use he has for it, I don't know... but being a prince has its responsibilities."

"This is nonsense. You make up things to suit your needs, and you lie again—even using the king's name—to bend us to your will," Alasdair sliced a hand through the air.

Galamon tapped Argrave's shoulder—that was the cue. Argrave had stalled long enough for the water to come.

"Alright," Argrave nodded with a smile. "You don't trust me, that's fine. How about I prove it?"

"Prove it?" Alasdair repeated. "There's no way I can think of," he shook his head.

"You remember the Night of Withering?" Argrave questioned. "Well, stupid question. Of course you don't remember it. But you've probably read about it."

Alasdair's face hardened. "What are you talking about?"

"No one knows the cause of the Night of Withering, or so it's said. The only thing people know is that a tide of blood washed away the southern invaders. There's speculation, of course, but no one knows the real answer," Argrave spoke, stalling for time. When he started to hear rushing water, he sped things along.

"Well, that's not true," Argrave shook his head. "The royal family caused the Night of Withering, flooding the Low Way with a river of blood, killing both the southern invaders and the Order of the Rose."

The rushing of water became louder, crashing against the stone walls and echoing into the room. The Stonepetal Sentinels all shifted uneasily. Argrave stepped forward, raising his hands in the air.

“Let me lay things out clearly for you,” Argrave spoke louder, voice rising above the rushing water. “If you refuse me... I will prove my descent. These walls will become awash with blood once more, and all within this place will be lost. Just as it was near seven hundred years before... if Vasquer cannot claim this place, none shall.”

By this point, red water started to push past Argrave’s feet and into the room beyond. The swell soon rose further yet, battering at his calves. His gray leather duster blocked debris carried by the overflow.

“So, Stonepetal Sentinels,” Argrave continued. “Make your choice.”

“Argrave!” Ossian shouted out, stepping back. “We agree! We’ll put things behind us!” he shouted in panic.

Argrave was a bit taken aback. He hadn’t expected an answer to come so quickly. He remained quiet as the tide grew larger yet, approaching his knees. Had the water been moving quickly, it would have been impossible to stay standing. *What is Garm doing? I didn’t want this much!*

“I’m unconvinced,” Argrave returned, trying to earn some more time for the tide to slow.

“Gods be damned!” Ossian cursed. “Alasdair, just give it up!” he shook the other Master Sentinel.

Alasdair stepped back deeper into the lower levels, stepping away from the water. He looked shaken, and most of the other Sentinels seemed equally shocked by the occurrence.

“I...” Alasdair began but trailed off.

Argrave faltered a little, and Galamon put his hand on Argrave’s shoulder to stop him from being knocked over by the tide.

“Alright!” shouted Alasdair. “We’ll hinder you no more!”

Argrave accepted the words in silence. As if divinely ordained, the rush of water coming from behind started to slow, and the red water spread out across the lower levels, battering against the walls. It was quite a messy sight, for the blood and gore caused by recent conflicts had all been stirred by the water.

“I’m glad we came to an agreement,” Argrave smiled, a ray of light from the library beyond falling onto his grin.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 100: Unsullied Knife

Argrave stepped through a pool of dark red water, the sound of the sloshing echoing out across the lower levels. The Sentinels were near, but they gave the three of them a cautious distance. The disgusting wetness at Argrave’s feet made his skin crawl, but he had to bear with it. There was a sense of urgency to his step that spurred his feet forward, yet the persistent aching in his chest made him check his speed.

Despite Argrave’s grand show of faux power in causing the canals to overflow, what he had created was, in effect, a scarecrow. Upon seeing the ridiculous, people were far more amenable to suggestion. Bloodred water flooding the lower levels coupled with Argrave’s leading words—his solution had

worked for now, but if the Sentinels were to examine things closer, they would see Argrave's construction was of straw and wood, not ancient royal heritage as he posited.

"Are you sure the scalpel will be where you lead us?" questioned Anneliese quietly.

"No," returned Argrave happily. "Might be things have deviated. The scalpel may have been moved. If that's the case, we will be... in an unfavorable position."

"Deviated," Anneliese repeated. "Interesting word. It implies a set course."

Argrave looked at Anneliese. "You know another interesting word? Deviant. Stop making me out to be one. And stop being one yourself, while we're at it."

Anneliese laughed quietly, and Argrave felt some his tension dispel with their light banter. He took a deep breath, wincing when his lungs ached, and soldiered on.

"Some of the Sentinels are watching us," Galamon noted. "They were assigned to do so by Alasdair. The remainder are giving us a decent distance."

Argrave nodded, directing his companion, "Keep me posted."

As they proceeded further into the lower levels of the Order's headquarters, the water level slowly dissipated until the only sound echoing out was the squishing of their wet boots against the stone. They kept a respectable pace, heading into the right hallway. Argrave's spell light illuminated the path ahead.

After proceeding down the hallway for a time, an opening to the side revealed stairs descending lower yet. Argrave took them, keeping a steady pace and ensuring he kept his hand on the handrail. He wanted to rush, but his feet were heavy with water and he didn't want to strain himself.

The sights down the stairs were untouched by the water. The fresh corpses of Guardians, vampires, and Sentinels littered the place. Argrave did his best to ignore them and press on.

"Has to be at the farthest point, doesn't it..." Argrave muttered to himself.

The rooms they passed by had once been places of study, but years being the sole home of the vampires in the Low Way had made those origins almost unrecognizable. There were strange paintings on the walls, with a crudeness likened to what one might see in Neanderthalic cave paintings. They were very obviously made of blood. Some were calendars, while others were strange depictions of people and the sceneries of the Low Way.

In the game, they had merely been undetailed textures. Now, though, some of the paintings were unimaginably detailed, as though made by an artist who'd had hundreds of years to perfect the craft—and indeed, some of the vampires may have been creating these crude paintings for a time as long as that. But despite the quality of the art, something could be seen beneath each painting—a strange sense of twisted savagery. It reminded Argrave of an exhibit he had seen once: artwork made by the mentally ill. Regardless of what was conveyed by the paintings, knowing who had made it twisted his perception.

Beyond that, other oddities filled the halls—sculptures, woodcarvings, artwork all and innumerable in count. Each were hobbies taken up by the vampires to pass the centuries. They were all wrong in some varied ways. Faces on sculptures were twisted, for instance. They were alien in the sense that they didn't seem to be made to appeal to human emotions.

Argrave noticed, though, that Galamon's eyes lingered on many of the pieces for an especially long time. Perhaps there was something intrinsic to the art that appealed to the vampiric condition. Regardless, Argrave was glad when they turned a corner, and he saw the door he was looking for just ahead.

Argrave prodded Galamon, pointing to the door. "That's our destination."

"...Right," the elf responded after an unusually long pause. He had to tear his gaze away from a statue. He moved forward hastily, grabbing the door and pulling it open. He looked around for adversaries, then motioned Argrave in.

Argrave entered the room, spell light illuminating the place. The scene was not familiar. There was an altar in the center, but it had been overturned by three bodies—a vampire grappling with two Guardians. All three seemed to have died together. One of the Guardians had been torn in three and scattered, while the other impaled the vampire through the head with a spear. Remnants of spells lingered in the room, frost most prominently.

"No..." Argrave said despairingly, walking towards the overturned altar. He saw a glass display case with a velvet cushion that had been splayed out across the room. He kneeled down, picking up the box and looking about. "Come on... where?"

Argrave looked through the glass, searching for a white knife. Behind him, Anneliese noticed something, and bent down to pick it up. She raised it into the air.

"Argrave," she spoke.

He turned when his name was called. Anneliese held a white scalpel in two fingers, its blade no larger than Argrave's thumbnail. It shone with red inscriptions, like glistening rubies embedded in elaborate weaving patterns.

"Haha!" Argrave said excitedly, stepping forward. He held one hand out, and Anneliese gingerly handed the thing over.

"Be careful. I can... feel it," she cautioned in a quiet murmur.

Argrave looked her in the eyes, then delicately took the scalpel. And indeed, she was right—he felt a resonance coming from the blade, like the repulsion from a magnet near another magnet. In this case, though, the scalpel seemed to reject everything that was not itself.

"The Unsullied Knife," Argrave said, taking a deep breath. Despite the pain in his chest, he felt a rising triumph. "Now... we can finally start getting the hell out of here." He clenched the handle tight.

#####

An innkeeper cleaned a wooden flagon far too thoroughly, scrubbing it clean with a washcloth as he stared up at the roof. His face was cautious and tense, as though whatever lay on the second floor made him greatly uneasy. There was a rhythmic tapping sounding out, and each time it came a little bit of dust sprinkled out into the empty first floor.

The innkeeper could not know, of course, that the man in his room was not merely some well-armored entourage. The heir to the throne of Vasquer had gone through great lengths to remain in Elbraille

without drawing attention. No—the innkeeper merely knew that there was a very angry, and very dangerous person on his second floor.

Induen of Vasquer held his head in one hand as he sat at a table. His royal knight escort stood before him, silent, as he tapped his foot against the floor. They were tense, as though expecting punishment.

“My accursed brother,” he said, nodding his head. “He’s the reason I’m still here, doing what I am... and I had to learn this secondhand?” Induen lifted his head up. “None of you were able to find out this information? No one knew that my half-brother,” Induen tapped his chest, “brokered the alliance between Jast and Parbon?”

None of the royal knights said anything, standing silently with heads lowered and arms behind their backs.

Induen nodded, tapping his fingers against the table. “Wasn’t Orion. Wasn’t any of my other half-brothers—Levin, Magnus, none of them, no.” Induen wagged his finger. “No... it was the half-dead bamboo shoot. The weak-willed one. The weak-bodied one. About as strong as a twig.”

Induen laughed and shook his head, feeling as though the entire situation was ridiculous. “That’s my sworn enemy,” the prince’s laughter grew to a crescendo, and then Induen continued grimly, “He’s dedicated himself to setting the road ahead of me aflame,” Induen nodded, gaze distant.

“Should have strangled him there, right in Mateth.” Induen raised his hands up, emulating what he described. “Choke him ‘til those beady eyes pop out of his head... fed him to rats...” Induen closed his eyes and took deep breaths, evidently trying to calm himself.

After a long time had passed, Induen turned his head over to the knights. “Severin. Take off your helmet, step up,” he gestured with his hand, then rose to his feet.

The knight in question stepped out cautiously, removing his helmet slowly. He was an older man—a grizzled veteran, with a scar across his face. Induen walked up, towering before the man.

“Is there anything you want to say to me?” the prince waved his hand between himself and the knight.

“My... my prince,” the knight said, unable to meet Induen’s gaze. “I-I’m not sure...”

Induen raised a hand up and grabbed the knight’s face, pushing the man’s cheeks together ungracefully like he was a small child being punished by his parents. “Enough of this tiptoeing around. I know you work for my sister. I thought it was cute, her little spying mission... and you never hindered me, so I kept you around. Now... it’s different. She knew about this. She could have reached out, but she didn’t.”

Severin raised his hands up, clearly wanting to grab Induen’s wrist but unwilling to touch the prince’s body without permission.

Induen raised his other hand and pointed it at Severin’s face. “Right now, I’ve got the temptation to go and find that bastard and smash his face into ten thousand pieces, like I should have done months ago.”

The prince released his grip and pushed Severin away in one motion. The knight staggered, then moved his cheeks about, dispelling the feeling.

“But I won’t. I’ve got the urge... and I won’t. My business here in Elbraille is just starting. I can’t afford to leave.” Induen placed his hand on Severin’s shoulder. “But here’s the point to remember. I want satisfaction. I want my sister... to deliver my retribution. I’ll set aside my impulses, my urges, if she can prove to me that it’s worth my time.”

Severin looked up at Induen and slowly nodded.

“So, next time you go to your little secret meeting, or deliver your secret letters...” Induen tapped Severin’s chestplate thrice. “You get this to her. I expect some good results. Elsewise, well...” Induen trailed off, and then stepped away. “I’ll have to reevaluate the role of her advice.”

Induen stepped to the window, peering out into Elbraille. Despite the night, the city was well-lit by expensive magic lamps that showed smooth cobblestone roads.

“But I’ll put this behind me, for now. If Duke Marauch is unwilling to support me... then his Dukedom will rot from within, and another will take his place. I will not let what is mine be taken from me,” Induen said, teeth clenched. “Least of all by any brother of mine. My mother died giving birth to me. I killed her,” Induen turned back to Severin. “And I can kill my kin again. Tell my sister that.”