

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 15: Supersession

“Someone is following you,” Galamon informed Argrave as they walked side-by-side out of the gates of Mateth.

“Really?” Argrave asked, surprised. He was tempted to look back, but that might give things away. “I suppose Prince Induen took a greater interest in me than I thought he would.”

“Doubtful. He’s an amateur, and rather young.”

“He?” Argrave repeated, getting a hunch. “Describe him.”

“Tall for a human. Shorter than us. Well-built. Dark red hair. White clothes—expensive, somewhat worn.” Galamon listed off monotonously.

“Damn it,” Argrave complained. “Really? And he’s alone?”

Galamon grunted in confirmation.

“How annoying. Just... scare him away,” Argrave commanded in exasperation. “Like a stray dog. No violence, preferably. I’ll take the time to clean myself off.”

Galamon turned on his heel and walked away without so much as a confirmation. Argrave moved onto the beach in his absence. He conjured some water with simple F-rank magic and cleaned some of the blood off his handkerchief, wiping what spots of red remained on his gear and body and draining them into the ocean. Responding to the blood, something swam up to shore. Argrave backed away warily, but then started smiling.

It was a small school of Irontooth Piranhas. As their name suggested, they were vicious predators. In the game, they appeared whenever the player swam too far from the shore, killing them instantly. They kept the player locked on the continent of Berendar. It was one of the reminders that the game was a game—few and far between in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ where immersion was a top priority.

But this isn’t a game anymore. I could buy a boat ticket, sail from the continent, leave this nightmare behind. Let the continent fall into disarray. Why is this my problem? Why should I step forward to deal with these things?

Argrave felt a lump in his throat. *Almost vomited from seeing my own blood. Almost cried from getting punched. The future holds a lot of that—taking hits and giving them. I talk nonsense about killing druids. I've never even killed an animal. I'm no hero. What the hell am I doing?*

It was difficult to appreciate how good life was in the 21st century until one was deprived of its basic liberties. Cruelty and tyranny were relics of a bygone era for many people living well in first-world countries. He had a warm bed, cheap food, and trivial concerns. He missed that. Argrave blinked quicker, holding back tears—a fact which only made him angrier at himself.

“It’s done.” Galamon’s deep, grating voice drew Argrave out from his depressive haze.

Argrave quickly slapped the wet handkerchief on his face to hide his embarrassment. The water was cold, and it sharpened his mind back to the task at hand. He wiped his face down thoroughly until he felt that his thoughts were in check.

“Alright. Good.” Argrave straightened his back and smoothed his wet hair. “Now, I have to go communicate with an ancient god. I implore that you restrain yourself in the event of seeing strange, inhuman creatures and other such generally terrifying monstrosities. They are my business partners.”

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If Galamon had merely been considering that his self-confidence had landed him in an unfavorable contract, that consideration had turned into certainty. He kept an unsteady hand on the pommel of his Ebonice axe as he watched Argrave converse with an emissary of Erlebnis.

The Veidimen knew of Erlebnis and had a moniker for him: ‘Hand Reaching from the Abyss.’

An abyss was bottomless and unknowable; it told of unending offerings. At the same time, all it took was a mere stumble, or perhaps the push or pull of a hand, and one would be forever lost within its depths. Erlebnis was an equitable god, true enough, but he was not kind.

Galamon made it a point to rarely ask the details of the contracts that he took. It was part of his faith. The Veidimen’s chief goddess and namesake, Veid, governed justice and contracts and guided the Veidimen through the world. To surrender oneself to the flow of the world was considered a way of atoning for sins.

Despite Galamon developing vampirism, he fled execution. He was afraid of death. It left him with an indelible guilt, though. He had made his peace with his blasphemy by taking whatever contracts found their way to him—surrendering into Veid's hands.

Though Galamon did not ask questions, he learned much about his employer in a brief time. They were related to Vasquer's prince somehow. Galamon used this to explain why Argrave knew so much about everything around him—royalty had vast information networks. But seeing this sight, Galamon saw that he was wrong.

Argrave could only be a mortal agent of Erlebnis.

Unexplained and uncanny knowledge on near everything around him, clear direction and purpose, and direct communication with one of the ancient god's emissaries... what else could it be but a god's agent of change, a mortal hand to morph the world?

But Galamon was not at all swayed to break contract. Veid guided all Veidimen, sinners or no. That She had guided him here only affirmed his faith. If this task should be his atonement for fearing death, let it be so. He refused to accept that his fate was to die a vampire. His life could not be so brief, so meaningless.

Contrary to Galamon's thoughts, Argrave was just as uncertain as—if not more so—than his snow elf companion.

The emissary he was speaking to was different than the one he spoke with last time. His proportions resembled a T-rex: giant legs, and two tiny, baby-like arms. The voice was identical to the previous, but Argrave was not sure if that was more or less unnerving.

"I'm either in for an unpleasant interrogation or a lovely treat. Which is it?" Argrave inquired, staring at its undulating eyes.

"Neither. A blessing from our lord Erlebnis cannot be called either of what you spoke of. It is an utmost privilege for any mortal to be given the Blessing of Supersession, and even greater still for it to be of highest quality."

Argrave nodded. "If you're saying that, then I suppose that means things went well. Oril Valar is in the Bermuda Triangle, and the Viirtulfyr is returned to its rightful owner."

"Is that a question? If so, it has a price."

"No, it's not," Argrave shook his head. "His fate hardly concerns me. I came to receive my half of the trade, and then we will part."

The emissary held one of its stubby arms to the side. “Indeed. Come to our lord Erlebnis’ shrine, then.”

The emissary trudged away. Argrave could feel its giant feet shake the ground as it walked up the stairs carved into the tree’s roots. He followed behind, keeping a fair distance away. It moved to the side of the shrine, towering over Argrave. The same stone shrine awaited him, those melting eyes seeming to stare into his soul. The reddish mercury portal on its mouth moved soundlessly.

“Offer obeisance,” the emissary commanded. Argrave looked at it for a second, confused. “Bow,” it explained further.

“I know what it means,” said Argrave, lying through his teeth. Argrave slowly dropped to his knees and bowed before the statue. When he straightened his back, he kept his eyes fixed on the portal. He had seen what happens when one receive a blessing from Erlebnis, but he still felt a great deal of caution.

A large arm reached out from the portal, directly towards Argrave’s head. It was difficult to suppress his base instinct to dodge. He felt nothing touch his head, but the arm most certainly moved towards him—into him, likely, moving through his cranium like some kind of ghost.

He felt a searing feeling throughout his body—not pain, per se. It was somewhat frightening, yet concurrently oddly refreshing. It felt as though he’d just taken a drink of icy water, and he could feel it moving through his entire body.

Then, as though his frequency had been adjusted, he felt a distinct connection to something. It was like being amidst an ocean, except that ocean was also flowing through him. The feeling was so overwhelming, yet at the same time, completely empowering, as though he could summon the seas to flatten the continent.

This is Erlebnis’ magic. The power of a god, springing from within me.

Once Argrave made that realization, the feeling disappeared, and Argrave fell backwards, breathing quickly. He’d nearly tumbled down the stairs. There was new knowledge in his head—knowledge of the Blessing of Supersession. It felt so complete he did not even feel the desire to test his newfound ability.

“The transaction is finished,” the emissary said quietly, uncaring of Argrave’s condition. “We will return to the side of our lord Erlebnis.”

Once those words passed, rather than crawl back into the portal on the statue’s mouth, the emissary simply vanished as though it never was. Sound returned to the forest.

Argrave took some time to calm himself and do some introspection. He fumbled into his breast pocket to retrieve the bronze hand mirror and examined his stats.

He stashed away the mirror, reflecting. Even with this power, he could still only use D-ranked spells. Blood magic, the strongest magic he had at his disposal, still required vitality to function. Though he could certainly deal a massive amount of damage in the five-minute period of the Blessing of Supersession, until he reached C-rank, many opponents were still far beyond him.

High-ranked wizards, for instance, could conjure wards that would utterly invalidate all of his petty D-ranked spells. High-tier warriors generally outfitted themselves in gear warded against lesser magic and ranged attacks.

Argrave came to his feet, carefully stepping down the stairs. Galamon waited there, appearing as calm as ever.

“That was a pleasant vis-à-vis,” said Argrave drolly. “Productive.”

Galamon did not respond, and Argrave could only see the man’s mouth on account of his Viking-like helmet. The Veidimen mercenary was well-known among players for being unshakable. Argrave felt glad he had hired the elf, though he felt some guilt that he’d left so many details out.

Argrave dismissed his thoughts. “With this out of the way, our next few days will be a lot less hectic... for you, at least. I intend to hole up in study and perform menial errands in preparation for our druid-hunt. Oh, and if Nikoletta pulls through, an auction. What fun.”

With a heel turn, Argrave started to move away from the shrine. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he thought he heard a sigh of relief from his snow elf companion.