

Jackal 106

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 106: And the March Goes On

"What do you think?"

Anneliese stared at Galamon, her arms crossed expectantly. Galamon turned around, looking to where Argrave had gone briefly to take care of nature's call.

"Doesn't matter. I didn't need answers. I had already resolved to follow him," Galamon shook his head.

"But I want to know what you think," Anneliese insisted.

Galamon ground his teeth together, saying nothing as the wind blew across the desert. "I'm reminded of when I was young, and I questioned the meaning of life and the validity of Veid's teachings. I'm wrought with the same sort of... existential ponderance."

"So you believe Argrave?" she queried.

His white eyes turned to her. "You do," he noted. "That is sufficient for me. You're a reliable gauge for lies and deception. I've come to know that."

She nodded. "I know, at least, he believes what he says. His knowledge, too, is without question. As for what he revealed to us..." she knelt down, her hair falling to the sand. "It challenges many of my preconceptions about the world. I have many questions to ask."

"What do you mean, 'he believes what he says?'" Galamon looked down at her.

Anneliese looked up at Galamon, rising back to her feet. "He, himself, knows nothing of what actually happened to him. This... this other world that he described to us..." she rubbed her hands together.

"Maybe it is real. But the gods work incomprehensibly. If the gods did indeed meddle, why would they place him in a shackled body? Much is uncertain."

"It'll never be certain. Myself... I believe it is Veid's will," Galamon nodded.

"I hate uncertainty. I hate being ignorant," Anneliese shook her head. "Though it may be beyond my ken to know now, it must not always be so. When the threat of Gerechtigkeid does not loom... I think it would be fun to pursue the answer to his question. For now, I will continue on at his side. Now that he has finally cracked, perhaps I can finally learn something genuine about him. He is quite a dodgy one, refusing to answer questions about himself—who he was before. I have to change that. It will come with time."

"Hah." Galamon laughed, scratching his chin.

Anneliese gazed up at him, head tilted in curiosity. "You're feeling... nostalgic?"

Galamon's mirth ceased when his emotions were so accurately placed. He shook his head as though dismissing his emotions. "It is nothing. Merely reminded of my youth."

"How so?"

“Unimportant. Just something you said reminded me of what she... well, never mind.” Galamon closed his eyes. “Want some advice on people like him? How to open his shell?”

Her eyes grew eager. “You have some?”

“Be patient. Be present,” Galamon disclosed, opening his eyes and gazing out into the distance. “He keeps his thoughts, his doubts, close. Hates to display them outwardly.”

“I know that,” she nodded. “It’s why he jokes, makes light of himself.”

“One day, he’ll hit a wall,” Galamon crossed his arms. “That’ll be your chance.”

“To get some honesty from him?”

“And more,” Galamon smiled faintly.

“Is this what you’ve been trying?”

Galamon’s smile quickly turned into a frown. “No. This is a tactic for you.” Anneliese looked perplexed, and Galamon uncrossed his arms, continuing, “At the very least, it is reassuring that Argrave has done this before.”

Anneliese raised a brow. “Can it be considered the same?”

Galamon looked to her. “There is a difference between a fresh recruit who has done nothing, and one who has spent hours beating a training dummy. At the very least, the latter has a feel for what must be done.”

“Possibly. I think not many could do what Argrave has done, thus far,” Anneliese posited.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Galamon responded indecisively. “He is definitely... uniquely equipped for the path he’s on.”

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Argrave crested the top of a black dune of sand, placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath. He conjured and drank water, appreciating the moisture amidst the incredibly dry air.

Galamon was already waiting at the top, staring out across the land. Argrave wore something different than yesterday: his set of black leather he had purchased from the craftswoman at Jast. It was lighter and much more breathable than the fur-lined gray set he’d worn. The few pieces of metal on it were brass, faded so as not to reflect light. It was made to cover his body much better, too, preventing the coarse black sand from entering into his boots or any crevices.

Above all, Argrave was clean again. He was getting better about tolerating uncleanliness, yet he did appreciate removing the blood and dirt-stained gray leather outfit that had traversed the entire Low Way without much washing.

Anneliese caught up with Argrave, stabbing Garm into the sand. “...I believed it was ridiculous to bring black leather to a desert,” Anneliese confided, only barely out of breath. “Yet it is not as scorching as I imagined, and this is pleasant. Like the hottest summer day in Veiden. The clothes breathe well yet keep me warm.” She pulled at her sleeves.

Argrave considered this as he stared down at the black sand, hunched over breathless. The night and dawn both had been somewhat chilly, yet during the day, a pleasant temperature prevailed—maybe only because it was on the cusp of winter, granted.

That said, the Burnt Desert was not without its issues—the sand was heavy and abrasive, making walking more difficult than Argrave expected. The air was incredibly dry. In addition, the ground could grow very hot at times. Fortunately, they had not yet encountered a sandstorm.

“...I would come here during the winter, at times,” Garm said idly.

Argrave glanced at him, still catching his breath, and then rose to his feet. He conjured water in his hands, drinking it quickly.

Quite frankly, Argrave didn’t know what to make of the severed head that they had taken from the Low Way of the Rose. It was true that Garm had likely saved Argrave’s life—that said, he did not exactly hide his intents, he was extremely pessimistic, but above all...

Argrave knew nothing about Garm.

Garm had been a key item to unlock the lower levels—beyond the initial encounter, one did not engage with him further. He, like hundreds of other key items, languished in the player’s inventory, never to be thought about again. Yet now he was here. Anneliese had sworn to protect the thing, though she had made it clear that the other members of the party would take precedence over his life. The deal had seemed incredibly obvious at the time, yet as things proceeded... Argrave was not entirely sure he could trust Garm at all.

“Never been more grateful for magic,” Argrave spoke, dismissing his thoughts for now. “Things get too hot? You can cool yourself down. Thirsty? Conjure water. Sandstorm? Ward it off. All the dangers of this place are shooed away by one mage.”

“Yet it cannot stay exhaustion,” noted Anneliese.

“Yeah,” Argrave agreed idly. “My point is—magic is the best tool for this place. It’s the supreme power. You catch what I mean?” he looked to Anneliese.

“I...” Anneliese paused, head tilted in thought. “Oh,” she nodded as the answer came to her. “You mentioned a faction has an iron grip over this region. Do you mean to say that they are mages?”

“In a sense. People have baseline needs. If you control those needs, you control the populace. And mages can do that, here. At least... they have,” Argrave amended, realizing this situation could be applicable elsewhere. “A lot of unscrupulous people abound here, willing and able to do whatever they need to get power.”

“Who?” questioned Garm.

“There’s no centralized power, but they’re all part of the same faction, more or less—the Vessels of Fellhorn, the god of floods and rain. These Vessels are probably the only surviving group still worshipping an ancient god.”

"You're kidding," said Garm. Argrave turned to look at him. "The Vessels of Fellhorn... they were a minor group. The Order of the Rose employed their aid in making the canals of the Low Way. They're masters of water—nothing more."

"Weren't you listening?" Argrave questioned. "Yeah, they *are* masters of water. People need to drink water to live, you realize. It's only natural their prominence would increase in this place," Argrave waved his hands around. "Couple that with some ruthless practices, and things progress as you might expect."

"You want to drink water? That's fine, they say: as long as you submit to us, we'll give it to you. For a small group, that's unsustainable, largely—any wandering mage can do the same. But while you've been... indisposed," Argrave waved to Garm awkwardly, "They've been growing in prominence. From a position of power, they can control all the water in a given region. Any mage that disagrees? They're hunted and killed. Non-mages submit to the Vessels, or they die of thirst. The Vessels make sure of that. Oases, wells, springs—they dry up. Only the water in Fellhorn's domain persists."

"Sounds... effective, I suppose," said Galamon with a nod.

"Might be. But most figureheads in the Vessels are nothing more than regional despots, reveling in the luxury brought by their authority rather than using it for progress." Argrave shook his head. "Like this, the savage southern tribes are brought to heel—the southron elves, the barbaric cannibals that battled against House Parbon since the House existed, reduced to little more than thralls because they lack options. Vasquer's greatest threat for centuries extinguished by attrition, eroded from within."

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm getting worked up for nothing. I'm not—we're not here to take a stance. When it comes to fighting Gerechtigkeits it serves no benefit to get involved here. Lot of death, lot of misery... and at the end of it all, very little that would aid in the fight against Gerechtigkeits."

"I see. All that said... are you expecting trouble?" Anneliese queried.

"The Vessels won't cause trouble for travelers like us, even if we are mages. Bothering wanderers might disrupt their peace. As long as we don't make trouble, there'll be none—no giving water to the thirsty, things like that." Argrave smiled. "Coincidentally, I do have to make some. So... yes, I am expecting trouble. But not much. Only enough to get what I need."

Anneliese crossed her arms. "I do hope you will inform us before acting."

"Of course. I've learned my lesson," Argrave said seriously. "Now that my cat's out of the bag, so to speak, I'll tell you two everything... without reservation."

He pushed the thoughts aside, finally ready to move again. In the far distance, movement caught Argrave's eye. He saw what looked like a black ball rolling downhill. The familiar sight made him smile. It was an armadillo-like creature, near the size of a boar, that supposedly hunted the bugs native to the Burnt Desert. To conserve energy, it rolled down the dunes.

"A cyrello," Argrave pointed with his finger. "Cute little thing."

"It should suffice," Galamon nodded, shaking some sand out of his gauntlets.

"Suffice?"

Galamon looked at Argrave. “We won’t make it to this town you spoke of. I can see the tower in the distance... but we aren’t travelling fast enough.” The rolling creature came to a stop, the black mammal emerging from its ball and starting to move up another dune in a slow waddle. “That cyrello creature should suffice for tonight’s food.”

Argrave’s smile quickly faded, but he didn’t exactly protest.

“The alternative is bugs,” Galamon said coldly, observing Argrave’s expression.

“I didn’t say anything,” Argrave raised his hands.

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Chapter 107: Sullied Marble

Argrave’s boots met something other than sand for the first time in a long while. The ground beneath his feet was still black, though it resembled baked clay more than sand, and some sparse few plants sprouted from cracks in the soil. They were yellow or gray, though, all dead and decaying. The air was dry to the point Argrave wished to keep his mouth shut constantly.

Ahead, the vast dunes of sand began to fade away, if only for a brief bit. The first bit of civilization entered into sight: a giant wall of black clay. It was smooth and strong, standing about thirty feet tall. Argrave could just barely see the leaf of a palm tree poking over the walls—though, instead of green, it was black and purple.

“Maybe we can get a wyvern while we’re here, spare me an awful return hike,” Argrave placed his hand on his back. “Whatever. We made it. This place is called Delphasium,” Argrave turned around to his two companions.

Galamon held Garm, this time, though they had worked out a disguise for the severed head. He had been stuck in the back of Galamon’s pack and wore the elf’s helmet—it was far too large, but it hid his existence in a mostly convincing manner. A cloth, too, covered his head, so even peering beyond would reveal only cloth. To an onlooker, it probably seemed as though the elven warrior had removed his helmet and mounted it on his backpack.

“They rear wyverns here?” Anneliese questioned.

“Not here, no,” Argrave looked back to Delphasium. “The southern tribes that still rear wyverns live further south, where great mountains surround the desert. They’re the last bastion against the Vessels of Fellhorn, persisting off a spring in the mountains. Dangerous place. We’ll go near there... but we have no reason to enter the mountains. Ostensibly.”

“Ostensibly,” Anneliese repeated, as though asking him to explain himself.

“It would... be nice to have one,” Argrave said musingly. “You heard about Mateth, I’m sure.”

Even Anneliese could not hide that the idea intrigued her, but Galamon put his hand on Argrave’s shoulder.

“Look,” he pointed out.

Argrave followed his finger. Far away, there was a great black cloud visibly writhing despite the distance. It was no thundercloud. And even Argrave could tell that it was heading towards them, not away from them.

“Our first sandstorm. At least we didn’t leave the Low Way into this. Well, let’s jump into the water, so to speak—to Delphasium,” Argrave said positively. He pulled his duster’s hood down, shaking some sand out of it, then started walking towards the wall of black clay in the distance.

When they neared the wall, a smell that Argrave had been glad to leave behind in the Low Way entered his nostrils: death and decay. Fortunately, it was not an all-encompassing smell, but rather one originating from a place in particular. There was a dead body leaning against the walls. The dark-skinned body was male and unhealthily thin, ribs and bones poking out against the flesh as though trying to escape. His was not the only corpse.

There were other people taking shelter near the walls. Numbering near fifty, they were unmoving, each and all incredibly skinny. Argrave had thought *he* looked far too gaunt, but these people’s sunken faces and exposed bony frames were uncomfortable merely to look at. Their loose woolen clothing seemed all the looser on their thin bodies. Their dark skin was lined with deformed tattoos, the ink’s shapes distorted by their starvation. They huddled underneath cloth canopies held up by wooden stakes.

Rats tried to get at the corpses, yet the people would ward them off with weak rebuttals. The rats stayed near, waiting in the shade, waiting for an opportunity. Elsewhere, a group of four ate something—as Argrave grew nearer, he saw it to be one of the rodents. Nothing was wasted—they drank its blood for moisture, and they ate all of its bits, even gnawing on the bone with their brittle teeth. Most striking was the lack of greed: all of the people divided the rat’s parts in equal portions, prioritizing the youngest.

These people stayed still, staring from the shade as Argrave and his companions passed. None seemed to expect or want something from them, and despite their state, there was a proud warning in their gazes. Their eyes were the color of gold: bright, sharp and brilliant. Though they lacked the strength to bury the dead man, they seemed insistent to defend him from the rats, both for sustenance and for the sake of the fallen. Anneliese watched them with intense curiosity, and they held her gaze, watching as she passed.

Once they were far away, Anneliese stepped up beside Argrave.

“Those are the southern tribals,” Anneliese stated.

Argrave interpreted it as a question in part, and so confirmed, “Yes. The Vessels won’t kill them outright. Against their faith, or some such excuse. Instead, they ward them from the town. The guards throw rats over the walls, directly into their camps. Enough to sustain them, but not enough for them to really *live*. They want to break them—have them submit to thralldom, like those within the city.”

“I see.” Anneliese nodded. “Do the southron elves share their skin tone?”

“Darker, actually,” Argrave answered. “We won’t see much of them, I suspect. They’re all but wiped out.”

"I had wished to speak to my distant kin. Disappointing," she said, sparing one last glance at the people they'd passed.

"Try not to dwell on those people," Argrave advised. "Even if we could help them, they are few. Gerechtigheit will kill all. Picture that, if it helps."

Anneliese turned away. She could not meet his eyes, but she nodded. Argrave hoped what he said was enough. His words certainly felt empty, even to him.

They followed along the outside of the walls, Argrave leading them towards an entrance to the town that he knew of. Eventually, they saw an established path—though partially buried beneath black sand, the stone road was largely well-maintained.

Six people stood at the gate, guarding the entrance casually. Doubtless they were more numerous to prevent the southern tribals outside from trying to sneak or force their way in. They wore loose-fitting dark gray clothes with chain mail for armor. They wore traces of purple at points, purely for decoration—sashes, tassels, the like. Their helmets were simple domes with a spike on the center, yet they wore masks to protect their face from the sand.

Argrave saw their weapons—two knives on their belt, plus a spear in hand—and once again lamented that he had not paid off his debt to Erlebnis. He had completely exhausted his supply of liquid magic from the Amaranthine Heart, yet he suspected there would still be two or three days before he regained his ability to use the Blessing.

Seeing Argrave and his company approaching, the guards came to attention. Galamon placed himself ahead of Argrave, ever the diligent guard. His presence was large enough that the guards looked visibly nervous—doubtless Anneliese and Argrave's tall stature amplified that effect.

They gathered in front of the gate, and seeing their movement, Argrave stopped Galamon.

"Hold," one stepped forward, using the spear as a walking stick. "State your business."

"Just travelling, looking to stay within the town. I was told there was plenty of inns here at Delphasium," Argrave stepped up beside Galamon.

The guard stared up at Argrave, expression mostly indiscernible behind his white mask. His eyes were suspicious, though, and he asked, "Travelling where?"

"Deep south. Argent. Visiting an old friend," Argrave supplied.

"Some friendship, to travel so far over the Burnt Desert," the guard noted, his suspicions somewhat abated by Argrave's knowledge of a city deep within the desert. "You come from the north?"

"Not Vasquer, if that's what you're asking," Argrave shook his head, knowing well the hostility between those in the Burnt Desert and Vasquer. "We came from further north, where the land is frozen most of the year. It's why we're so pale. Also why we came during the winter—suspect we'd melt in the hottest time of the year."

The guard let out a wheezing laugh at that. "Alright." He nodded. "You can enter. No tolls here, not for travelers. You know our laws?"

“Pay the taxes. No violence, no theft, and no using magic within the city... unless you’re associated with the Vessels of Fellhorn. And lastly... don’t give water to outsiders.”

The guard nodded. “Merchants will check for this mark on the back of your hand.” He raised his hand up, revealing a blue cross with four x’s on the tips. There was something mystical about the tattoo—it shimmered like sapphire lake water on the man’s backhand. “Since you don’t have them, you’ll have to pay the taxes.”

“Got it,” Argrave nodded. The tattoo marked a person as a citizen sworn to a Vessel. They doubled as constant monitors, ensuring those that broke the laws could not do so secretly.

The man lowered his hand, gaze moving from between Galamon and Anneliese. “Northern elves, hmm? Rumor has it they sacked a city in Vasquer.”

“I’ve heard the same,” Argrave nodded. “Didn’t confirm it, though.”

The guard’s gaze lingered on them. “Make sure they cause no trouble,” he finally warned, stepping aside.

They passed by the guards, Argrave leading them ahead. Most of their attention stayed on Galamon. Argrave felt a little nervous, wondering if any would be able to see Garm, but he didn’t dare let that show in his actions or expression.

They passed beneath the black clay walls of Delphasium, entering into the town beyond. No comment was made about the helmet hiding a severed head on Galamon’s back, and so they entered into the oasis town without issue. The change in scenery was dramatic.

The outside had been a desolate wasteland of blackness, utterly devoid of flora, yet within the walls was a drastic change. The buildings and streets were all made of a clean white rock reminiscent of marble. Black plants lined the walkways, reminiscent of agave or aloe vera, while palm trees with black leaves bearing bright purple fruits filled vast orchards. Though plants black in color were most abundant, extremely bright crops persisted everywhere—reds, purples, yellows, and blues. There were peppers, olives, wildflowers, and other such hardy desert plants.

Though the streets were not exceptionally busy, they were still somewhat crowded. The people wore multicolored loose-fitting robes and were adorned with plentiful jewelry. The denizens of the Burnt Desert were disparate from the pale people of Vasquer, skin tone ranging from a light tan color to a dark brown. Their hair was dark, and much of it was bound with golden ornaments bearing bright jewelry or silken cloth with bright dye.

Argrave, Anneliese, and Galamon could not stick out more if they tried. They were ridiculously tall, pale, and majority elven—Argrave had grown used to being watched, lumbering stick that he was, but it redoubled in this place. People openly spoke of them, pointing as they passed. It was a wonder they were not stopped by random people on the street. Perhaps only Galamon’s intimidating presence spared them that.

Yet Argrave walked by, trying his best to ignore things. Eventually, they came to the central square. There, a great marble sculpture stood tall, depicting a naked woman holding a horn overflowing with

fruit. Two spouts of water rose beside her. It was a depiction of Fellhorn—not the god itself, but of its harvest.

Argrave paused at the fountain, watching the water spray the central square wantonly. His mind involuntarily conjured images of the southern tribals outside the walls. He had known what to expect coming here, but seeing it in person was a different experience entirely.

He bit his lip, mindful not to express his disapproval visually lest he gain the ire of the watching crowd. He turned to Galamon. “The place—it’s this way. It’ll be a bit more expensive because we’re using Vasquer coins, but I think we should be able to pass by the night.” He pointed to both of them. “Now, something to note—don’t let people touch your skin easily. If a Vessel of Fellhorn has skin contact, they can do a hell of a lot of damage in seconds. Shake hands, your hand will shrivel in seconds.”

Both nodded seriously.

“That sandstorm—think it’s going to occupy the south,” Galamon commented, staring beyond the walls. “I’m told they can last days.”

Argrave followed his gaze. If he had been playing ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ a sandstorm simply meant that his vision would be obscured—in reality, though, travelling during a sandstorm was all but a death sentence.

“We worry about that tomorrow. I need to wash the taste of that cyrello out of my mouth,” said Argrave, stepping away from the water fountain. “You can try spicy food, Anneliese. This will be entertaining,” he said with a smile.

Anneliese raised a curious brow. “You must tell me of the food of the place you come from,” she began, following him.

The three ventured deeper into the oasis town. Near the fountain, a well-dressed man watched them leave. His gaze lingered for a long while, and then he turned, heading for a palatial estate in the distance.

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Chapter 108: The Unexpected

Elias opened a set of thick stone doors, stepping into a cold hall. His father sat there at his desk. At Elias’ entry, he set down a dagger.

“Father,” Elias greeted a bit stiffly.

Margrave Reinhardt stared at his son. He said nothing for an uncomfortably long period, and Elias felt the need to squirm. He managed to stay still, though only with his best effort.

“Where is your fiancée?” the Margrave asked.

“I... introduced her to Rose,” Elias stepped forward. “I figured she should know my sister if she is to be... a part of the family. They seemed to be getting along when you called me,” he said optimistically. “Both enjoy books. The two are similar, I think. Ridia is near as sweet as Rose.”

The Margrave nodded. “I’m glad there is some affection forming between the two of you.”

Elias hung his head. "...I'm sorry. I know I should have—"

"Don't apologize. You did well," Reinhardt interrupted.

Elias raised his head back up, red eyes wide.

"You made a decisive choice as a leader to earn a benefit, and to protect your people. This is something that I wanted you to learn, and you learned it." Reinhardt spread his arms out. "The fact that you ignored my authority doesn't matter, because you considered the people first."

"Well, I... Argrave is the one who made this happen," Elias deflected, his promise of not mentioning Argrave vanishing when blame turned into praise. "He was the smart one. He saw what would happen and made it a reality. I just... was led around."

"That one seems to be the sole force for change in this family," Reinhardt looked away. "It doesn't matter." Reinhardt grabbed the dagger on his desk, tossing it aside. He retrieved a paper, handing it to Elias. "This came not hours ago."

Elias took two steps forward, retrieving the paper. He oriented it to read it properly, then furrowed his brows. After a time, he rose his head. "Elbraille declared its support of our cause?"

Margrave Reinhardt nodded.

Elias smiled. "That's... that's great!"

"That boy you brought, Stain..." Reinhardt continued, not sharing his son's jubilation. "He tells me of some things. He's been... he said he was 'keeping his ears on the beating heart of the underworld.' I didn't know what he meant, but he elaborated that he was keeping track of rumors." Reinhardt sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what he's saying half the time."

"He's a good one at heart, even if he does like to do some... less than reputable things. He didn't have a good chi—"

"Let me finish," Reinhardt held out his big hand. "Despite this letter... Stain says a lot of people are talking about unrest in Elbraille. He says people claim someone is stirring the people against the lord, bringing to light certain injustices. Unjust taxes, corrupt guards, malfeasance by those near the Duke..."

"That's... is that true? These incidents, that is," Elias questioned.

"I'm not saying Duke Marauch is a saint—far from it—but we need his support in the war, and someone is moving against him, trying to oust him from power."

Elias stepped away, thinking, then turned back and nodded seriously. "What do we do about it?"

Reinhardt leaned back in the chair, his brawny frame completely hiding the backrest. He sighed for a long, long while. "I don't know."

Elias was taken aback, as though he'd never heard his father say that.

"But we need to figure it out," the Margrave said. "Tomorrow, I'll call together some advisors I trust. We'll discuss this, decide how to act. Personally, I think that you and Stain should go there and maintain order. Doubtless the Duke will welcome it."

"If someone is trying to undermine the Duke, it's definitely going to be a supporter of Vasquer," Elias said. "It would be dangerous to go there."

"I will keep that in mind, should this come to pass," the Margrave shook his head. "But this person, or group of persons, evidently lacks the strength for an outright coup."

"I see," Elias nodded.

Reinhardt pointed at Elias. "Tomorrow, I want you up early. Come to me, here. We'll talk more then. For now... ensure your fiancée is comfortable here." Reinhardt leaned forward once more, picking up the dagger he'd set aside and examining it.

"Thank you, father," Elias said, lowering his head slightly. He turned and opened the stone door, stepping out. As he made to leave, he stopped.

Elias turned, grabbing the stone door. "Argrave told me something at the Tower of the Gray Owl."

Reinhardt kept the dagger in hand, looking up coldly towards his son. "And?"

"He said there was a... salamander. On the hills of Vysenn," Elias proceeded carefully.

"Is this pertinent?" the Margrave questioned.

"Argrave seemed to be under the impression this salamander might hold some secret in healing Rose." Elias took his hand off the stone door and stepped back into the room. "I looked into this... and, well, some of it holds true. There are barbarians in Vysenn, known for their regenerative abilities. These salamanders, too..."

The Margrave turned his ruby eyes away from his son. "If you think it has merit... look into it further."

"Thank you, father," Elias said once more, a little more excitement on his tone. He left and shut the door quickly.

The Margrave dropped the dagger, and it clattered against the desk. "This boy... maybe I need to meet him once more." Reinhardt rubbed his forehead, clearly torn.

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Argrave sat on a table outside in the chilly air of the dawn, warming himself up beneath the sun's beams. Anneliese sat adjacent to him. The inn they'd stayed at had goat for breakfast—the cost had been exorbitant, but Argrave did not lack money even still. Though Argrave might've found the prospect of a new type of meat unappealing, for the first time in a long while, the meat was seasoned—rock salt, peppers, and other such things to give it flavor.

"Those people outside..." Anneliese spoke, gaze distant.

"Still thinking about that?" Argrave questioned. "I told you, it does nothing for us to get involved. Even if we could change things—something that'd take years—it does nothing for the bigger picture. We, alone, should fight an entire region's religion, fix an entire region's problems? I feel guilty too, but I'd feel guiltier if I had to watch Gerechtigheit kill each and every living thing alive because we spent our time tackling something beyond our capability."

She nodded, refocusing her gaze on Argrave. "Why do they refuse to submit to the Vessels?"

"Revoked liberties, delegated tasks, forced non-violence, forced worship of Fellhorn, and long-standing hatred," Argrave summarized quickly. "They refuse to surrender their cultural traditions."

"Yet life here does not seem so bad," Anneliese looked around. "If they would simply submit, then..."

"Because this is a trading town, sustained largely by farming," Argrave summarized. "Beyond forced labor in the fields, we can't see much injustice. Elsewhere... mining settlements, plantations... we'll see the worst of the place soon enough." Argrave tapped his finger on the table. "Unless you can think of an alternative I'm missing, feeling guilty will just distract us."

"Okay," she said with a resigned sigh. "It is difficult to suppress guilt when people starve outside the walls. And you would eat things like this constantly?" Anneliese spoke, leaning in close to Argrave.

"Well, yeah. But come on," Argrave pointed to her. "You had salted meat in Veiden. It was sea salt, granted, but it's not much different."

"We salt our food for preservation, not for taste," she countered. "Yet hearing you describe your home, I suppose I can understand why you detest being dirty so much."

Argrave tapped his fingers on the table. It still felt a bit awkward to speak of his home so openly, and he somewhat loathed the feelings of homesickness that would swell whenever he confronted it. "I was an outlier, even there," Argrave shook his head.

"What do you miss most?" she asked, placing her arms on the table.

"Music," Argrave answered without missing a beat. "I... there were so many instruments, it's difficult to even begin to list them all. Millenia of cultural traditions and developments were distilled into countless types of music, each and all wonderful and unique. And above all, music wasn't something reserved for special occasions—parties, festivals, what have you. Anyone could listen to music, anywhere. We have electricity to thank for that."

Anneliese's stared up at his face, bright-eyed. She opened her mouth to speak but Galamon stepped up to them, still wearing his backpack with Garm on it. The elven vampire removed the pack, setting it beside the table, and then sat down.

"Galamon, you're back," Argrave greeted.

"Sandstorm's still raging, and it shows no signs of subsiding," Galamon reported as he settled himself. "Roads are blocked—no travel to or from the town. Even the merchants refuse to go."

Argrave sighed. "Damn it all." He looked at Garm, encased in Galamon's helmet. "How are you, Garm?"

"Fine, I suppose. This one has the steadiest step—the least shaking. And he's the tallest, so I can see more," came his muffled voice. "I'm satisfied with this arrangement."

"You tell me if you think of anything long-term for disguises." Argrave tapped his chest. "Or whoever. I suppose they can transmit it to me."

"I like the helmet," Garm said. "Feels safe, I suppose. Craft something around the stake, turn it into a walking stick, encase me in a decorative helmet... that might work."

"Something to consider," Argrave nodded. "Just difficult finding a craftsman that's trustworthy," Argrave scratched his lip, trying to conjure names.

"As I said, this seems to suffice for now," Garm concluded.

Argrave nodded, letting the silence stretch out. "Guess we have more time to do nothing. It's more than a little welcome, after what happened in the Low Way, but I feel like I'm wasting time." Argrave leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "What should we do? Beyond waiting out the storm, of course."

"Ideally..." Galamon looked around, eyeing the passersby. "We should secure a place with a caravan. It'll be slower moving, but should a sandstorm hit in the middle of the road, we'll have plenty of supply and a good navigator. We'll also have a safer place to take shelter without draining your magic."

"Sounds reasonable," Argrave agreed. "But it'll be difficult to get anyone to agree to that. People around here... they don't seem especially trusting," Argrave waved his hands about.

Even sitting, they were still watched. People didn't bother them overtly, necessarily, but there was an inherent caution of them that marked them as outsiders.

Galamon leaned back in the chair, and it creaked against his weight. "True," he conceded. "You don't have any ideas on that front? Something sweet to worm your way onto the back of a luxury carriage?"

"Decided to ease on the genius plans, at least until they're needed." Argrave tapped his temple. "Let the juices ferment in my head. When they're needed... boom." He emulated his head exploding. "It'll go as perfectly as Jast. Trust me on this one."

Anneliese laughed and lowered her head into her arms, slouching. Her hair fell over her face, and she moved it aside to stare at Argrave with one amber eye.

"I am glad to see you regained some confidence lost in the Low Way," she said.

Argrave raised a brow, only realizing that fact when she mentioned it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Galamon straighten, turning on his chair. Argrave followed his gaze, and then caught sight of four white-robed guardsmen approaching them. Their leader held a piece of paper, while the other four bore only knives.

Galamon stood, turning, while Argrave remained sitting casually.

The guards came up to Argrave's party. The one bearing paper stepped forth, bowing slightly.

"Gentlemen. Madam," he bowed to each in turn. "We come on behalf of Mistress Tatia of Delphasium." He held out the piece of paper, holding it above his head as he bowed. It was a small roll, bound by a purple sash.

Argrave gestured towards Galamon to take the paper. The elven vampire took it gingerly, being sure not to crush it.

“Why?” asked Argrave.

The man’s back straightened. “Mistress Tatia is curious about your party of three and wishes for you to join her for a feast tonight in her palace, in hopes you might share stories of the northern lands. Little news passes beyond the Lionsun Castle.”

Argrave bit his lip, thinking his response carefully. “Say, purely hypothetical, we can’t make it. What happens?”

“The Mistress would be quite sad, but I am sure she would understand,” the man said, expression indiscernible beneath his cloth mask. “Thank you for your time, gentlemen, madam.” He bowed once more, and then stepped away.

Argrave raised a brow, turning to look at Anneliese as the guards walked away.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 109: Lure of the Fellhorn

Argrave shut the door to their room, taking a breath before turning around. The rolled-up piece of paper that had been delivered to them sat in the center of a table, each of them hovering about it as though it was something dangerous that needed to be watched.

After glancing between his two companions, who remained silent, he stepped up to the paper. He removed the purple sash, unrolling the paper gingerly with his gloves. He read through it.

“Huh.” He lowered it. “It really is just an invitation. Thought there’d be more, maybe. Secret message, a death threat, something...”

“Do you know the sender?” Anneliese asked.

“Sure,” Argrave nodded. He placed one hand to his chin as he recounted, “This Mistress Tatia is a mage, relatively stable and pacific, yet quite... detached and inhuman.” Argrave looked up and added, “Just like most of the Vessels, come to think of it.”

“And her rank?” Anneliese pressed further.

“Not applicable,” Argrave shook his head. “Their source of power isn’t magic. They’re associated with Fellhorn. ‘Vessel’ isn’t a metaphor—they’re conduits for Fellhorn’s aspects. They’re capable of taking and expunging waters in oceanic proportions, and with far more freedom than most magic offers. Each Vessel is an oasis in and of themselves, each with variable capacities.”

“Then perhaps mage is not the best term,” Anneliese posited.

Galamon held out a hand. “All that matters—we can refuse this without consequence?”

“I mean... reasonably, yes,” Argrave said, holding his hands out. “But we wouldn’t earn any friends. If I learned anything from Jast, having Elaine as an ally was helpful in ways I hadn’t even predicted. And with the sandstorm, traveling is impossible anyway.”

Galamon crossed his arms, looking completely neutral at the prospect. Anneliese, though, shook her head.

“Provided there are no ulterior motives, no other forces at work...” Anneliese looked to Argrave, who confirmed this with a relatively confident nod. “If there are no others involved, we were clearly invited as a spectacle—a passing amusement, just as we were for most of the people in this... Delphasium.”

“Is that really problematic?” Argrave questioned. “I can trust that they won’t force us to do anything: Mistress Tatia won’t do anything to threaten her peace. A few laughs, a few jeers... and it isn’t as though we can’t embarrass them in turn.”

Anneliese crossed her arms. “I know what I saw. And those that this Mistress Tatia thinks less of are sitting outside the walls, no food or drink.”

Argrave nodded. “I see your point. But... harsh as it is to say, those people refuse to bend... and so they break.” Argrave held his hands out as though it were a pity and shook his head. “I’m willing to be flexible to get what I need—I’ll work in the system instead of struggling to exist without it. So, unless either of you two disagree, I think we have no reason to refuse.”

Both stood around, considering his words without making any final decisions.

“Come now,” Argrave encouraged. “We have little else to do besides wait out the storm, reading books. We’ll have plenty of that to do in the times leading up to the feast, and plenty more to do after.”

“Okay,” Anneliese nodded, and Galamon soon joined her in the gesture.

“Then it’s settled. Let’s—”

“And what of me?” Garm asked. “You don’t intend to bring me with, I hope.”

Argrave looked down at him. “That’s a good point.”

“You’d forgotten about me,” Garm accused.

“No,” Argrave insisted, lying. “I just think that you would be best suited to staying here, watching over our things.”

Garm closed his eyes. “I... could you make it so I can see outside, at least?” he looked up at Argrave. “I do not wish to endure the monotony of staring at a wall, or a cloth blanket, for hours unending. Let me see people.”

He seemed pitiable in that moment, and so Argrave nodded.

#####

Argrave had cleaned up his black leather gear as best he could, and the three of them walked to the palatial estate of Mistress Tatia. The rest of the city was quite decadent and grand, like a pearl amidst the desert, yet her estate was doubly so—giant, made of marble, and with a grand tower looming behind it, standing as a beacon for travelers. Its fence and gate were made of gold, it seemed, though perhaps it was a cheaper metal made in imitation. Argrave was no expert.

The city of Delphasium looked especially beautiful in the night. The moonlight reflected off the marble walkways, giving one the impression they were walking on resplendent pearls. It was a little chilly, but Argrave’s leather more than sufficed for heat.

“Where do they get all of this rock?” Anneliese questioned.

The question caught Argrave off guard. “I don’t... it’s imported, if I remember right, from quarries further south. More tributaries to the Vessels, I suppose.”

“Quite an ordeal, to haul rocks across the desert,” she noted.

“Anything for a drink, I guess,” Argrave looked around.

Anneliese crossed her arms. “I worry for Garm, sometimes.”

“What?” Argrave said at once, incredulously. “Why? Worried someone will break in? That... could be a problem, certainly...”

“No, not in that way.” She waved her hand at him. “He acts like he has come to terms with what has happened to him, but I do not believe he has,” she mused, walking towards the gates.

“He hides it pretty well, then,” Argrave commented cynically.

“He was crying,” Galamon cut in.

Argrave turned to look at him. “When?”

Galamon did not look from the gate ahead as he said, “When you two were enjoying the food this morning. Goat meat, I think it was.”

Argrave could not help but widen his eyes in surprise, while Anneliese nodded, her point affirmed.

“Good lord. That is pretty depressing,” Argrave admitted.

“You wish to speak of winning allies...” Anneliese looked at Argrave, shrugging. “Garm would be a good place to start.”

Argrave pointed a finger at her. “He refused, even after we were amply honest with him. He’s made his position on this matter very clear—if he’s going to do anything to help us, he has to receive something in return.”

“I do not know you to take things personally like that,” Anneliese refuted. “And I cannot think that, alone, is why you dislike him. It takes much for you to dislike someone. The Sentinels are the only I can think of.”

“Dislike him?” Argrave repeated. “Why would you...” he trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. “Well, fine. Sure. I don’t exactly trust that he has my back. You both can’t deny he doesn’t exude trustworthiness. If he had legs, I’m sure he’d already have scurried off elsewhere.”

Neither responded to that, and they came ever closer to the gate of Mistress Tatia’s estate. Argrave stepped ahead, stopping them both.

“Why do you think I dislike him, then?” he asked Anneliese.

She seemed hesitant to answer. After Argrave’s unflinching gaze, she eventually relented, saying, “Two reasons. One—you have told us you know absolutely nothing about him, and that disquiets you. Two—you see yourself reflected in him.”

Argrave's mouth fell open for a moment, then he laughed. "What, we've got a long, thin stick where there should be a body?" Argrave questioned. "What do you mean by that, exactly? What do the two of us have in common? He and Galamon have more in common—they both watch other people eat, unable to do so themselves. As for the crying..." Argrave trailed off, catching a fierce glare from Galamon.

Anneliese continued, saying, "Just as you, he awoke in a world familiar to him, yet entirely unfamiliar to him, with limited capabilities coupled with an array of useful, even unique knowledge. The situations are different, yet similar. Certainly enough to draw comparison," she gestured towards Argrave, imploring him to consider what she said.

Argrave bit his lips, trying to think of something to say in retaliation. He paused, brows furrowing.

Huh. I'm not trying to consider her point, just trying to think of something to retaliate with.

That alone was evidence enough that she might have a point, and so Argrave lowered his head, rubbing his forehead bitterly. "Hell of a bomb to drop on me just before we enter a place where I have to use my head."

She laughed lightly. "That... is a good point. I apologize. I simply felt it needed to be said." She lowered her head to lock eyes with him and then continued mischievously, "Besides, I have found that you work well in stressful situations."

"That right?" Argrave lifted his head back up and smiled. "Well, I'm also good at refusing to think about things. I'll just hide away this uncomfortable realization for now." He turned on his heel, walking towards Mistress Tatia's palace.

Anneliese smiled and followed behind. Galamon paused for a moment, watching the two of them. He shook his head and moved to catch up.

They came to the presently open golden gates, where two guardsmen waited. Argrave had expected to be stopped, but the people standing there gave them nods.

"The Mistress told us to expect you. Please—enter. You are expected," the guard gestured politely.

"Should I hold onto this?" Argrave held out the paper he'd been given.

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten." The guard took it from his hands. "Enjoy."

Argrave nodded and stepped into the Mistress' estate. Though the entire city of Delphasium was not lacking for decadence, this place seemed to be a state beyond. The lit lamps were made of gold, and the walkways were all adorned with vivacious and green life, thriving and beautiful. Purple cloth hung from windows and pillars, though they bore no banner.

Their party continued on slowly. Argrave found it a little difficult to appreciate the scenery, considering what he had seen outside the walls of Delphasium. He saw a few white-robed people walking about, though there was something off about their skin—Argrave recognized them as Vessels, though he could not get a sufficient glimpse to judge their appearance fully. Evidently Galamon had, for his eyes followed them as they passed.

"They smell of... nothing," he said in concern.

“They probably smell like water,” Argrave commentated quietly. “These people wouldn’t have any of the functions to generate the smells—no oils, no sweats, no tears. They’ve transcended a physical form.”

Galamon looked back, gesturing for Argrave to continue. They carried on, heading towards an open entryway, where purple cloth fell down. People pushed it aside and moved to and from. As they neared, the sounds of revelry started to become apparent.

“About... thirty or so,” Galamon spoke to Argrave.

“Manageable, I think,” Argrave nodded. “Remember what I said earlier. Allow no one to touch your skin,” Argrave warned, stepping forth to push aside the purple cloth serving as the doorway.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 110: Empty Vessels

The first thing that Argrave noticed when entering the palatial estate of Mistress Tatia was neither a sound, nor a sight, nor a smell. Instead, it was a sensation.

The air around them felt incredibly dry.

It was strange, then, that the second thing he processed was the presence of rushing water.

Argrave stepped past the purple cloth blocking the entrance, staring into the room. Arrayed before him was a decadent marble table inlaid with gold at the corners. It was low set, falling just short of Argrave’s knees. The top of it had been covered with purple felt. In each corner of the room, there were small waterfalls pouring from golden horns into small pools.

People sat around the table, though instead of in chairs, they sat atop mounds of pillows in very casual positions. As Argrave entered, most of them came to attention, sitting straighter and casting curious glances at the newly arrived three. They all wore very bright and catching colors. Argrave recognized them to be Vessels.

Each and every Vessel had a strange, almost aquatic quality to their dark skin. It glistened as though fresh out of a pool, yet not a drop of liquid could be seen anywhere on them. Their hair had a silken quality to it, almost oily, and it seemed to move about, spurred by an unfelt wind.

Argrave recognized some. Most prominently, he recognized the woman at the head of the table—Mistress Tatia. She rested amidst a pile of red and gold pillows, wearing a purple dress studded with gemstones. The dress was loose and exposed much of her dark olive skin. She was a robust woman—not fat, exactly, but certainly fleshy.

Argrave locked eyes with her, and she sat up amidst her pillows. She raised both hands in the air. Her actions had a sort of flowing grace to them, each moving to the next without ceasing.

“Greetings, wanderers from the distant north!” she greeted, her voice smooth and pleasant. “My invitation, it seems, was well-received. I am pleased to see you elected to dine with us.”

Argrave stepped forward, allowing room for Anneliese and Galamon to follow him in. Their eyes wandered around the room while the Vessels sitting watched them.

Placing a hand to his chest, Argrave lowered his head a little. "Thank you for welcoming us into your home, Mistress Tatia." Argrave returned her greeting.

She beamed, showing perfect white teeth. She gestured towards an empty mound of pillows beside her. "Please, come and sit. You and your companions have been arranged a place at the seat of honor. What may we call you?"

"I am Argrave, and these two are Galamon and Anneliese," he introduced as he took slow, steady steps into the room, somewhat overwhelmed by the sense of hospitality all were projecting. The sense of consideration and kindness was intense enough to feel feigned. Argrave possessed knowledge enough of these people's characters to believe he was safe, but recent events had proven he was not all-knowing.

"Most suspected our invitation would be rebuffed," a Vessel spoke—a man with a clean-shaven face. "It is not often that northerners pass through here. The people of the north fear this place—a land of barbarians and heat, nothing more... or so the people of Vasquer think. But we have quelled things, don't you agree?"

"I made it here without issue," Argrave replied, finally making it to the end of the table. Mistress Tatia fluidly gestured for them to sit, and Argrave lowered himself into the pillows. He found that the closer he grew to the Vessels, the moister the air became, as though they were isolated in a bubble of wetness.

"My chefs are still preparing our meal," Tatia explained as Argrave looked about. "And tell me, gentleman Argrave, how does this town of mine treat you?"

Argrave shrugged while nodding. "Having marble beneath my feet is like walking on clouds compared to that heavy black sand outside the walls. And the food's been nice. Part of the reason I was swayed to come, in fact."

"And the two northern elves?" Tatia smiled, turning to Galamon and Anneliese as if prompting them for their answer.

Galamon crossed his arms and nodded, while Anneliese added, "This place cannot have been easy to build, isolated as it is."

Mistress Tatia sunk back into her pillows and placed a hand on the top of her chest. "Indeed. My predecessor spent his life completing this place, passing away at 212." She nodded as if in peace. "It is a shame you had to see it sullied by the presence of the tribals. My guards told me you passed by them," she gestured.

"We did," said Argrave quickly, hoping to move on.

"There is something I was curious about... regarding the tribals," Anneliese questioned, leaning forth and moving some pillows aside.

Argrave looked to her, hoping to warn her away from asking an offensive question, but she stared at Mistress Tatia undaunted.

"Please, I'd be happy to answer your questions," Mistress Tatia beckoned with a smile.

"Why starve and deprive the southern tribals instead of killing them outright?" she tilted her head.

Argrave straightened his back and scratched the top of his lip, casting a miffed glance at Anneliese. She did not seem to lack confidence in her question, though.

"Ah. I suspect it may be difficult for a foreigner to understand," Mistress Tatia nodded.

"The eternal downpour of Fellhorn rains only water, never blood," a Vessel spoke zealously. "If they are to die, let them die in the cool embrace of Fellhorn... or at their own hand, in a pool of misery. Either way, His eternal rain will someday welcome them into His Vessels."

"Indeed," Mistress Tatia pointed to the one who'd spoken. "Though the southern tribals waged war unending, we Vessels are but humble servants of Fellhorn. He is the unceasing rain and the constant flood. His will is our will. Ours is a different conquest—a conquest of the mind. And of faith."

Mistress Tatia held out her hand, and the skin on her palm seemed to liquify before bursting up into the air in a steady spout. It was but a small show of the power of a Vessel, no more than a party trick, but it served to illustrate their power. They embodied the water, taking it in and expelling it at will. Though, perhaps 'at will' was incorrect—it was at the will of their god, Fellhorn. Their power was, in many ways, similar to Argrave's Blessing of Supersession vested in him by Erlebnis.

"Each and every living person can be made a follower. Some of these followers will eventually give birth to Vessels. Like this, we bring a peace to this land—that is but one aspect of the great eternal rain of Fellhorn we hope to bring to this desolate land." The waterspout coming from her hand rose, and then she closed her hand and it dissipated.

Argrave digested those words in silence. They were convincing, almost noble. Had Argrave only seen Delphasium, he might've even agreed with them entirely. But the rest of the Burnt Desert was not the same as this place. Argrave looked at Anneliese, grateful at least that she did not seem especially moved.

"Well," Argrave said, settling back into the pillows now that things had resolved themselves without aggravating their hosts. "I am thankful for both your generous invitation and the beautiful sights within Delphasium."

"The pleasure is ours," Mistress Tatia returned.

"If you worry for your safety, fear not the tribals," one man spoke from the corner of the table. "Their numbers dwindle by the day. Rats feast upon their corpses, and they feast upon the rats, growing diseased from it. They drink blood for sustenance... All of this hardship merely because they refuse to recognize Him, submit to Him."

"Indeed," a woman agreed. "Fellhorn renders all equal beneath him. The hardships of an uncivilized life—theft, violence, blasphemy... all transgressors are Drained, and society is at peace."

"Drained?" repeated Galamon.

"It is Fellhorn's gift," a man explained. "The transgressor has violated Fellhorn's laws, and in doing so, they must surrender all within themselves to a Vessel. We Vessels absorb their souls, offering them to our lord Fellhorn. In return, He vests more of His power upon us. Like this, Fellhorn's eternal rain spreads, and we Vessels grow to accommodate more of His blessing."

Argrave scratched the back of his neck to hide his expression while Mistress Tatia hurriedly added, "Let us not speak of grim things just before a meal."

As if summoned by her words, people walked through the purple cloth marking the doorway to the room. They held silver trays of food, and the Vessels clamored happily when the servants came into view.

As the servants continued to lay decadent meals before each and every person present at the table, Mistress Tatia spoke to Argrave.

"Argrave, was it?" Tatia asked, and when Argrave nodded, she continued, "Now that we have told you of our home, I wish to hear of yours, if it pleases you."

Argrave rubbed his gloved hands together. "Do you want to hear of Veiden, land of the snow elves, or the lands north of Vasquer?"

Mistress Tatia mused, leaning forth as food was placed before her. "You passed through Vasquer, did you not?" she questioned. "Because, truly, what is occurring there at present intrigues me the most. Tumult can spread beyond borders."

"There's a civil war," Argrave stated plainly. "House Parbon intends to combat the royal House Vasquer. Their spheres of influence largely constitute the south and the north, respectively."

"Tell me more," Mistress Tatia urged.

#####

"This was an enlightening conversation," Mistress Tatia said, placing her fork down on the table.

"Glad I could help," Argrave returned, having left much of his grand steak unfinished. It had tasted delicious, but it was far too large for someone like him.

"Perhaps this is the time to forge a relationship with House Parbon. Doubtless they will be amenable to the people that have quelled the southern barbarian menace that has plagued their Margravate for centuries."

"I cannot be the judge of that," Argrave shook his head.

"Well, I am pleased that you came to my palace," Mistress Tatia smiled. "I am told you had intended to go to Argent."

"Yes, but at present, a sandstorm blocks the road south," Argrave clicked his tongue. "Unfortunate thing, that."

"Indeed it is," Mistress Tatia sympathized. "There seem to be many more of those, lately, for reasons I cannot begin to surmise."

Perhaps it's because things have dried up to a ridiculous point, Argrave wished to say, but wisely refrained.

Argrave paused for a bit, and then discreetly added, "We had intended to travel with a merchant caravan, but many proved unreceptive to outsiders..."

Mistress Tatia raised a brow. "Truly? Now that is a sad thing, indeed. Perhaps I can help out some on that front," she suggested.

Argrave smiled. *Now, those words taste much better than the meal I just ate...*

#####

"That was a little too tense for my tastes," Argrave mused, stretching as they walked down the path.

"Those people..." Anneliese looked back at the golden gate.

"Not exactly paragons, I know," Argrave finished, stopping to speak to her.

Anneliese turned her head back to Argrave. "What you say is true, but I refer to their deadened emotions. They experience less of everything—joy, happiness, rage, sorrow. It is all muted."

"Drowned out," Argrave posited. "It's why I called them inhuman. They aren't called 'Vessels' because they're full. They're called so because they're empty."

"Are they powerful?" Galamon questioned.

"Yeah," Argrave said. "Hard to quantify or qualify as it is standard magic. That little trick she demonstrated, spouting water—it can propel fast enough to tear off limbs, and travel for miles. The stronger ones can, anyway. And every moment they touch you, they can Drain you. Steal every bit of liquid inside you. It's so painful that it's difficult to stop once it's started... or so went the lore. Never experienced it." Argrave shook his head. "Never hope to."

"Is it prudent to accept a favor from that woman?" Anneliese questioned.

"Being friendly with these people is for the best," Argrave nodded, resuming their walk back to the inn.

"We have to use whatever we can against Gerechtigheit. Don't forget this."