

Jackal 111

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 111: An Arid Goodbye

Argrave blinked open his eyes, staring up at the white ceiling above. He took a deep breath. His lungs felt back to working order, finally. He started to move and found his body happy to obey. He sat up, his head clear and everything in working order. He touched his chest, putting on a pondering expression.

Anneliese looked at him from where she sat at a table, reading a book. "You slept well," she remarked.

Argrave ran his hand over his face. "Yeah... I guess I did. I feel pretty good, actually." He turned to look at her. "Had a dream. Went to this barbecue place I always used to go to. You were there. Then it got weird," Argrave shook his head.

"And you felt this was worth sharing?" Garm remarked.

Argrave turned his gaze to him. He had many choice retorts in mind, but what Anneliese had told him yesterday still stuck with him. He clasped his hands together and asked cheerily, "How are you doing, Garm?"

Garm could not move, but Argrave veritably saw him shrink away. "I'm... fine," he responded awkwardly.

"That's good. Sorry we couldn't take you with last night," he apologized. "I hope you understand why, at least."

"...it's fine," he dismissed, closing his eyes so as not to look at Argrave. "Bunch of people eating, smacking their lips—wouldn't want to be there, anyway."

"Even still," Argrave shook his head, then stood, setting aside the woolen blanket and grabbing his duster off a chair. "Where's—"

The door opened, and Galamon ducked through.

"Speak of the devil," Argrave said, throwing his duster on quickly.

"The sandstorm has cleared," Galamon reported, and then slammed the door especially loudly.

Argrave furrowed his brows. "That's good news, no? Something wrong?"

"...nothing," he answered after a time.

Argrave looked to Anneliese, who returned his glance with an unspoken confirmation that something was indeed wrong.

"Right," Argrave continued. "Well... we should find that merchant Tatia referred me to... his name was Titus, I believe."

Anneliese shut her book, then came to her feet. "I shall get my things together."

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Though Argrave didn't wish to press Galamon as to what was bothering him, believing it might have something to do with his vampirism, Argrave found later that they did not need to ask.

When they made it to the central square, Argrave noticed there was a particularly large crowd around there. His first instinct was to avoid it, but curiosity drove him to see what they were gathering around. When he grew close alongside Anneliese and Galamon, he found it easy to look over the crowd of people ahead.

Chairs had been arranged in a circle around the fountain statue depicting Fellhorn. Argrave saw strange dark lumps on them but couldn't immediately recognize what they were. They were many, numbering near fifty. He stared for a while, failing to discern what they might be. Gradually, though, he made sense of it.

They were corpses.

They looked like husks, in truth—the skin had become so dry it cracked at every point, curling inwards to reveal what lay within. Their mouths had not a hint of saliva, and they had shrunk so small that they could not weigh more than fifty pounds, even the largest of them. The flesh fell away at points, revealing petrified organs or bone. Wind carried bits of them away as little more than dust.

It smelled of nothing. Argrave supposed that without liquids in them, it had no reason to smell of anything. It was a vaguely disconcerting sight, but Argrave had been through the Low Way, and was not as fazed as badly as he might've been months ago.

He looked to Galamon, understanding what had made the elven vampire bothered so.

"They were executing them, earlier," Galamon said. "I see, now, why you warned us against touching others' skin."

Argrave said nothing, turning his head back. He intended to look for only a bit longer and then move on, but he spotted someone standing by the chairs, and they locked eyes.

Mistress Tatia smiled when she saw Argrave and moved forward. The crowd parted for her, and she came to stand before Argrave.

"Hello!" she greeted happily. "A pleasant surprise, seeing you again."

Her tone was jarring in the wake of the husks on the chairs, but Argrave managed to return her greeting, saying, "Yes, hello, Mistress Tatia."

"Titus will depart soon, I suspect. He sells much of the dye we use for clothes, so we interact on occasion," she noted, touching her purple dress. "You were on your way to meet him, I suspect?"

"That's right," Argrave answered quietly with a nod. He looked past her. "What happened here?"

"This?" she looked around, as though it wasn't immediately obvious what he was referring to. "Ah. The jails were beginning to grow full. I decided to clear them out, stop procrastinating. A terrible habit of mine, you see," Tatia laughed lightly.

"What did these people do?" Argrave questioned.

"You should know it well," Mistress Tatia returned. "Some stole, some used magic within the city, some committed violence, some refused to pay their taxes, some dared to blaspheme against our Fellhorn... yet most tried to provide subsistence to those outside the city... the tribals. Many convert falsely, and then try to subvert our authority." She placed a hand on her hip and turned around.

"When we welcome someone into our cities, we Vessels..." she strode up to someone in a crowd and tore them from the crowd—a red-robed woman. "...make them take Fellhorn unto themselves." She pulled back the person's sleeve, revealing a cross with four x's on the tips etched in a strange, shimmering blue ink. It looked like the person had sapphires in their skin, almost, but Argrave knew it was magic.

Mistress Tatia released the person, who quickly cradled her wrist and returned to the crowd. "We know when they transgress. Yet if they are not reminded of this... they think we do not." She stepped back up to Argrave. "Everyone needs a reminder, wouldn't you agree?"

Argrave bit his lip for a second, not answering. Then, he slowly nodded. "I think I understand."

"Good," she nodded. "When you return from Argent, I would love to host you once more. Your stories were quite fascinating."

"Maybe so," Argrave responded in non-committal language.

"I look forward to it," she beamed, blue eyes shimmering against the dawn light. "Good luck on your journey. Welcome to the Burnt Desert—and please, make the most of your time here."

Mistress Tatia walked away.

Argrave swallowed his saliva, especially conscious of the fact he had spit to swallow as he stared at those husks. He turned back to Anneliese and Galamon, and said, "Come on. Let's get going."

#####

Argrave sat atop a velvet cushion, a book in his hand. He couldn't read it, though. He simply stared out across the dunes of black sand, watching the road pass them by. Their caravan was hauled by four dark brown camels over the sole stone road of the Burnt Desert. They wouldn't be able to ride this thing the whole way, but it would take them far enough.

"Comfortable caravan," Argrave noted, turning away from the black sand.

Galamon nodded. Anneliese stayed silent, staring out.

"Look. I think their message was pretty clear," Argrave looked back out across the dunes. "Might've been for her citizens, but doubtless Tatia sought to give that message to us, too."

"Indeed," Anneliese agreed. "Fall in line, obey, and we will be treated fairly, even luxuriously. Transgress but slightly, and no mercy will be shown."

"And can you do that? Both of you?" Argrave sought to confirm.

"Yes," Galamon answered without hesitating.

Anneliese did not answer so quickly.

Garm, though, added, "I have no sympathy for any of them. They're fools, unable to accept they've lost, unable to embrace the winners. The terms are fair, if merciless. Break no laws. Submit to Fellhorn. End of story."

Argrave glanced at Garm, acknowledging the point of his cynicism. "Well, be that as it may, I can't imagine I'd like to live under these people. Delphasium is probably the best among them to live. The deeper we go, the worse it'll get."

"It would be difficult to remove them from power. They are deeply entrenched, supported by legions of people, and are possessed of a strange magic beyond magic." Anneliese tapped her finger against her temple as she thought. "And at the end of it, we receive the gratitude of a people who refuse to ask for help, who refuse to ask for aid. I cannot suspect they would express their gratitude easily... nor are they in a position to do so. Indeed, the Vessels may be more likely to offer aid against Gerechtigkeits than any of the southern tribals."

Argrave furrowed his brows, not expecting this sort of talk from Anneliese.

"I see why you want to stay out of this," Anneliese looked to Argrave. "And I think that it's the smart thing to do. We should stay this course. Once you become Black Blooded, we will leave this place."

"I'm... pleased you agree," Argrave said uneasily.

"But I am not especially fond of it," she said, voice distant. "I liked it here. There is an austere beauty to these dunes. I dislike seeing it ruled by those who could not care about its future, its people."

"Yeah." Argrave replied with one nod. "But part of me... wonders if I'm losing a bit of the big picture."

"How so?" Anneliese came back to attention.

"We are incapable of changing things here," Argrave said plainly. "This isn't a people struggling against the Vessels. The Vessels have already won. They control the Burnt Desert. There is no 'other faction.'" Argrave took a breath and exhaled. "And yet... well, who is to say we can't foster a seed of resistance? Who's to say this won't happen at Argent? I did mention I had to cause a little trouble, after all."

Anneliese tilted her head. "You mean to say... someday, when the world has settled, we will return. And with a different intent in mind?"

Argrave smiled. "Could be."

"Then I shall hold you to that, Argrave," she stared at him. "I shall hold my tongue and enjoy of this place what I can."

"Mmm, yes, you're all saints," mocked Garm. "Save the poor, downtrodden tribals. Protect them from themselves. Please," he scoffed. "The world doesn't run like that."

Argrave turned to him. "And how does it run?" he patiently indulged.

"It runs on selfishness. Everyone's self-serving. If the roles were reversed, these southern tribals would be trampling on the Vessels like dogs."

Argrave laughed. "Great theory... but funnily enough, the Vessels came to power because the southern tribals welcomed them with open arms. Over the years, though, the Vessels grew in number and monopolized the resources, subverting tribes with their own towns and cities."

Garm looked up at Argrave. "All that proves is that selflessness just gets you nothing but misery."

"I suppose I'll have to find out," Argrave mused, his mood undampened by Garm's unrelenting pessimism.

"It'll be too late for you by the time you find out," Garm said bitterly.

Argrave looked at the severed head. "You sound miffed. You want to look out the window?" he questioned.

"What?" Garm looked at Argrave incredulously. "And let me be spotted?"

"C'mon," insisted Argrave. "It's gotta be boring, staring at a velvet cushion all day. Here."

"What are you—" Garm trailed off as Argrave picked him up and positioned him just right to see the outside.

"There," Argrave finished.

"This isn't necessary," Garm said monotonously. "It's unnecessary, in fact."

"Sure, sure," Argrave agreed. He looked to Anneliese, retrieving one of his books off the floor. He smiled at her. She returned it. They both looked down at their books, and the ride passed by in silence.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 112: Ensnared

A fire crackled, sending smoke up into the night sky. For the first time in a long while, Argrave sat before a man-made campfire instead of one born of magic. The flame was contained in a bowl of some sort that seemed to be resistant to heat and kept aflame by chopped logs. Above it, goat meat sizzled, dripping fatty grease into the fire which would let out a cascade of sparks.

Argrave and Anneliese sat near, each using the campfire to read. Galamon had his back turned to the flame, watching out into the fading light of dusk. His helmet was off, disguising Garm from sight atop Galamon's backpack. Across from them sat Titus, the leader of the merchant caravan.

Titus was taller than most, just shy of Anneliese's height, and had a body clearly adjusted to physical labor. He had golden eyes and dark skin, marking him as a former tribal. Argrave found that, in the three days they had been journeying, he wore only extravagant red and gold clothing. He displayed the mark of Fellhorn, leaving the blue cross on his backhand exposed.

"That should be sufficient," Titus narrated as he leaned forward, gingerly seizing the skewered meat's stake. He lifted it up, taking it off the flame.

Anneliese shut her book eagerly, placing it inside her bag. Argrave took his time, watching Titus set things up.

Titus reached off the side and retrieved four thin yet wide purple leaves. “These are the leaves of a Bitterbite. It is said if one eats too many, they will lose their taste—yet I have had thousands, and they do nothing. Worry not, gentlemen, madam,” Titus spoke smoothly.

“Just call us by name,” Argrave held his hand out. “The term might apply to me, but Galamon definitely isn’t gentle.”

“I would not dare show disrespect to one who dined with Mistress Tatia,” Titus quickly refuted at once.

Argrave didn’t press the issue further.

Titus wrapped the goat meat in the leaf, and then slowly pulled it free of the skewer. “The leaf of a Bitterbite has tangy juices that go well with the spice. Please, gentlemen, madam—enjoy the first bite.” He held out the leaf-wrapped meat, and Argrave touched Anneliese’s elbow, gesturing for her to take it.

She took it, holding it in hand but waiting to take a bite. Titus diligently wrapped another piece of meat, offering it to Argrave. Argrave took it, refraining as well.

“The gentleman Galamon?” Titus questioned.

“He has his strange ways of eating,” Argrave interrupted. “He packs his own food and throws a tantrum if he cannot eat it his way. Don’t mind him.”

“Ah... certainly.” Titus nodded. He bit into his wrapped meat, and only once he had chewed and swallowed did Anneliese and Argrave do so, as well. Argrave knew the leaf itself was not hazardous, but some caution was warranted with a stranger.

The leaf added a flavor reminiscent of lime to the meat, though it was much fainter than the fruit might’ve been. Anneliese seemed to enjoy it. Argrave didn’t find it terrible, but frankly he’d rather just eat the meat as it was. That said, Titus’ skills were impressive. The Burnt Desert certainly had cuisine far beyond that of Vasquer, at least in Argrave’s opinion.

“On the morrow...” Titus looked out across the dunes of sand. “I suspect we will reach Malgeridum by this time.”

“The mining city?” Argrave questioned. “That’s good. Fast progress. Hopefully we aren’t blocked by another sandstorm.”

“The gentleman knows the city,” Titus noted, minutely surprised.

“Yeah. Prime example of Fellhorn’s infinite generosity,” Argrave said sarcastically.

Titus said nothing, staring into the fire. Argrave and Anneliese ate in silence.

“You were a tribal once, right?” Argrave questioned.

“Yes,” Titus confirmed.

“Now you’re working underneath Mistress Tatia as a merchant,” Argrave followed up.

Titus nodded in confirmation this time.

“Your life before, your life now—which would you want to go back to?”

Titus laughed. "The gentleman asks me to choose between starvation and servitude." He looked up at Argrave, his golden eyes reflecting the fire well. "I was born when our tribe was already dead. The tales my elders spoke of—glorious battle against the men of Vasquer, where strength ruled the desert, where we toppled great beasts and rode wyverns across the sandy skies... they were ever just tales, to me."

"So you like it underneath the Vessels?" Argrave questioned.

Titus grabbed an iron rod and shifted one of the logs aside, staring at the crackling flame. "I know suffering with an empty stomach, and I know life underneath Fellhorn's eternal rain. They are different in many ways, similar in some." He stabbed the iron rod back in the sand. "In both, you grow used to loss."

"Death?" Anneliese pressed, moving closer to the fire.

"Yes," Titus nodded. "Random death. Outside the walls, tragedy can strike at any moment—rotting from within, succumbing to that without. The Burnt Desert is not an easy place to live. Yet within the walls..." Titus rubbed his hands together near the fire. "The Vessels need to Drain to grow in power, be it from the people or from the world. They constantly hunger for their people to infract, hoping to grow their Vessel with our lifeblood. Some are no different from the accursed bloodsuckers that prowl the night, pressing and pushing the people until a mistake is made. It is a hunt of a different kind."

Argrave's gaze briefly flitted to Galamon when 'accursed bloodsuckers' were mentioned, but he had tact enough to not let his eyes linger long.

"The only way to ensure your continued existence is to make yourself valuable." Titus held out his hand.

"And the Vessels of Fellhorn—how are they made?" Anneliese inquired curiously.

"Some babies are taken at birth." Titus rubbed his hands together. "It is rarely a welcome thing, and so most resist. It usually ends in the family's death, especially if they were once tribal."

"Torchlight," interrupted Galamon loudly. "In the distance."

Titus came to attention, standing and walking to where Galamon sat. He kneeled, looking out into the horizon.

After a time, Titus said, "I see them. The gentleman has excellent eyesight. My compliments."

"Looks like they're heading towards something... a spring in the rocks," Galamon noted. "Tribals, probably. They have buckets."

"Spring in the rocks?" Argrave asked, also standing and watching. He could see nothing for a time, until he caught a faintly flickering light in the far distance.

"Mmm," Galamon confirmed with a grunt.

"Is it a perfect circle of small stones? Is there one big rock jutting up in the back?"

Galamon moved his head around, scanning. Eventually, he nodded. "Seems so."

"Maybe I'm wrong, but that's no oasis. It's a Brandback."

Titus did not turn his head away as he complimented, "The gentleman has a deep knowledge of the desert. I am consistently surprised."

"Brandback?" Anneliese asked.

"Big lizard thing. It burrows into the sand backwards, opens its mouth a little, and lets its saliva pool. When something steps near to drink, it opens its mouth fully and swallows them whole." Argrave scratched his cheek. "Those people are probably done for if they're going for it."

"They know it is there," Titus stated. "The Brandback."

"What?" Argrave questioned. "What makes you say that?"

"These people have decided to choose death before enslavement," Titus concluded simply.

"But how can you...?"

"No men of a tribe would not know of a Brandback." Titus watched passively.

In the far distance, a burst of black sand exploded into the air like a geyser. Once the sand cleared, a thick, fat lizard creature plopped onto the sand, its entire body covered in black, rock-like bumps. It threw its head with its throat swelled like a pelican, something clearly stuck in there. After a time, it settled, its reptilian head glancing from place to place. It slunk off into the distance, using the last light of dusk to find its path.

"One escaped," Galamon noted. "His bucket is full... yet he isn't drinking it."

"He will return to his tribe," Titus stood from where he knelt. "The hunter may only eat when he delivers his prize before the tribe."

"Saliva? Some prize..." Garm spoke, causing Argrave's uneasiness to rise.

"Hmm?" Titus looked back.

"I said, 'that's some prize,'" Argrave quickly covered.

"Only they can know their triumph," Titus looked back out.

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"Elias is coming here, is he?" Induen smiled. "With his pretty betrothed?"

"Ridia of Jast is not coming, my prince," the royal knight shook his head.

"A shame. Truly a shame," Induen said, though his joy was not dampened.

"Will we...?"

"Try and kill them? Capture them?" Induen finished. "Of course not. Why would we do that? All the beautiful work we've been doing here would be ruined. Duke Marauch's reputation is the worst it has ever been. An incident like that might evoke some pity for the fat pig and his whore wife."

The royal knight seemed a little relieved.

“Severin.” Induen continued, walking across their inn room to another knight. “From what you tell me, two people are spearheading the people in protest of Duke Marauch, no?”

“...yes, my prince,” the knight answered uneasily. “A local priest of Gael, god of justice, and a prominent merchant who was badly affected by the malfeasance we unearthed.”

“That’s good. Two will be better,” the prince smiled broadly. “Here’s what you two are to do. I wish for all of you to find a knight within Duke Marauch’s retinue with a similar build to your own. If no such person exists, make do,” Induen waved his hand. “We’ll have them killed, impersonated by you on another day. Surely royal knights will have no trouble with this.”

“And then, my prince?” Severin asked cautiously.

“The day Elias arrives, and he’s led into Duke Marauch’s castle...” Induen held his hand out and clenched it tight. “...all of you will seize the two dissidents: the priest of Gael, and that merchant. Publicly execute them. Make sure that it’s as brutal and unjust as possible.”

The royal knights had not expected things to take this turn.

“I learned something at Dirracha,” Induen mused, turning around and walking to the window. “The people can be a force greater than the nobles, if angered. The people love the Margrave. And their love... I’ll take it from them. It should belong to me, but it doesn’t. Not yet, anyway.” He held his hand to the window. “All love a hero. My enemy is Parbon, with their centuries-old reputation of honor and justice. I’ll take everything from them—material, immaterial, it matters none.”

“That situation will be... dangerous for us, my prince. Even for you. It will surely cause chaos,” one knight warned.

Induen turned and stalked over to the one who had spoken. “Have you gained no courage? We, alone, stormed a castle and killed its lord. And we, alone, will do this.” He tapped the knight’s chest piece. “If a spindly bastard can flip the Duke against me, I can undo that just as easily.”

He stepped away, walking about as though to calm himself. He paused and glanced at Severin. “And what news have you on that front, Severin? What has my sister promised to do regarding the bastard?”

Severin looked as though he loathed to speak, but eventually, he disclosed quietly, “...the princess said that he was last seen at Ritmont and has no news on that front.”

Induen pursed his lips, and then shook his head in dismissal. “Fine. Inform me of anything new. For now, we will continue to sow dissent while we wait for Elias. Perhaps the Margrave’s son will die. That would certainly be interesting.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 113: Malgeridum

Delphasium, Mistress Tatia’s town, could not be called grand in scale, though the shining marble streets inside made it seem like a pearl amidst the desert. That place was far behind them, and Argrave felt it had been a suitable welcome to the Burnt Desert.

The mining city, Malgeridum, was giant compared to Delphasium, yet it lacked the magnificence the simple trading town had. It stood at the point where the sand dunes began to fade in way of hills of

black rock and dirt, cratered deep into the earth. It had walls, but the city itself was so much lower than the surrounding terrain it was difficult to spot them from a distance. The first thing most would spot was rising smoke from the ever-burning furnaces, and the tarps waving in the wind to ward off sand.

The road to Malgeridum forked into two separate entrances, each for a distinct district. One district was obviously more maintained than the other, made for residential use, while the other was for labor and production. Argrave and his company stood beside Titus' carriage, their bags fully packed. They would separate here—Argrave would head for the residential district while Titus would depart for the production district.

"What's this?" Argrave held a thick round metal disc. It had eight triangles spaced equidistantly on the edge.

"A parting gift for the gentleman," Titus explained. "I understand that the esteemed persons will be travelling to Argent. Even for those who have travelled there before, the dunes and the hills stretch on forever." Titus looked out to the desert behind Argrave. "Just as a sailor must use the stars and a compass to mark their path across the ocean, so, too, must men in the Burnt Desert use a compass to traverse this sea of black sand."

Argrave finally figured things out, and he flipped open the disc's lid, revealing a bit of glassware above a simple magnetized needle. The cardinal directions were marked.

"This is..." Argrave looked down at it. "Damn. I feel pretty stupid. I was worrying about how I was going to find my way around in case things went sour, but... guess I forgot these stupid things existed," Argrave laughed and shook his head. "I appreciate this. It's a very considerate gift. I don't know what I did to deserve it, exactly. Don't you need it?"

Titus scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. "It's an old thing, in truth, one that I used long ago. But it's reliable, and I believe that's the most important thing."

Argrave nodded and closed the lid with his thumb. "You're a nice guy, Titus."

"The gentleman was entertaining and polite—rare company for a merchant as me. And..." he stepped away, retrieving a simple red cloth wrapped around something rectangular. "Here. The madam expressed enjoyment of the Bitterbite leaves, and so I took the liberty to prepare some. Please," he held them out to Anneliese.

She took them from his hands. "Such a thoughtful gift," she smiled warmly.

Argrave felt something unpleasant in his chest, and he found himself stepping forward between the two of them. "So, you're headed to the production district to unload things?" he addressed Titus.

"Yes, my men and I will be headed that way," Titus confirmed. "I apologize, but I could not think of a gift for the second gentleman, Galamon..."

Galamon shook his head. "I have all I need."

"I appreciate all you've done." Argrave held his hand out, holding ten gold coins in hand stacked atop each other. "Here. I know you didn't ask, but don't refuse."

Titus blinked for a moment, biting his lips in clear hesitance. Eventually, Argrave grabbed his wrist and dropped the coins in his hand.

“The gentleman is generous,” Titus sighed. “May your days be vigorous, and your nights tranquil,” he placed his hand on his chest and bowed deeply.

“Maybe not *too* vigorous,” Argrave said musingly. “I wish you well.”

Titus straightened, nodded, and whistled with his fingers. At once, his men spurred the camel forward, and they moved down the road, heading for the production district.

Argrave watched their caravan move away, feeling a little bit empty.

“Can talk again, finally,” Garm veritably shouted.

Argrave turned to Galamon and looked past, seeing the gleaming black and gold eyes hiding behind Galamon’s helmet atop his backpack. *He really leaves himself open for low blows. So much mean stuff I can say in response to that.*

“You did well,” Argrave said instead, turning away to the mining city ahead. “Even still, we have to get inside quickly, find a place to stay. Don’t want to linger in this city long. Not the same type of place as Delphasium.”

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Malgeridum possessed the bare essential qualities of a city.

The word ‘barren’ was the best fit to describe the place. The Vessels in this city were not so liberal with their resources—not a drop of water could be found anywhere, and every field of crops had tall fences with guards stationed. People lined up outside a stately building, tokens in their hands. The tokens marked hours worked, and the people would exchange them for their necessities.

The streets were made of hardened black clay and each building was packed very closely together, enough so that people could not walk side-by-side in some areas. A few of the buildings were small enough that Argrave could see the roof if he craned his neck a little. It made traversing the place difficult, at times, because the population in the place was quite densely packed.

The walls on the outside of the city were not as tall as those in Delphasium, and consequently, the place was filled with black sand blown in from the dunes they had come from. There was a strange, industrial scent hanging about most of the air from the mines, furnaces, and forges, and Argrave was glad that his lungs had recovered from that disease he’d caught in the Low Way. Most people walked about with cloth about their face to protect their airways, and Argrave found himself doing the same.

But as they pushed past the decrepit clay houses, eventually the streets opened to accommodate the wealthier residents of the city—Vessels, and their trusted aides. The well-maintained streets lined with orderly estates were like night and day when compared to the hovels they had come from.

“Here. This place,” Argrave pointed out a gated area. Tents lined the courtyards, each occupied by large beds. “Luxury brothel, as I remember, but it’ll rent rooms to foreigners. Other places won’t.”

Argrave walked to the gate, where two men stood on guard. "Hello," he greeted. "Like to rent a room for the three of us. That possible?"

The guard looked up at Argrave, casting a glance to his fellow. "It will cost much," he cautioned. "Foreigners... bring trouble."

"Name a price," Argrave held his hands out.

"In the northern coin?" the guard questioned, and Argrave nodded. "Hundred gold, including food."

Argrave widened his eyes. "One night, hundred gold for three?"

"For each," the guard corrected.

Argrave placed his hand to his forehead. He knew he didn't have that much, at least not in pure gold. It wasn't enough to warrant using a rose gold coin, either. Even if he cared to use the larger currency, the people here would probably bilk him on that front, vastly understating the value of the rose gold magic coin.

"You do realize we're not asking for your primary services, right? Just need a place to sleep?" Argrave questioned.

"The Master stated this price, gentleman," the guard stated passively.

Argrave sighed, turning around. He had his hand to his chin. "Galamon, get my lockbox, if you please." He turned back to the man. "Tell the Master Zirun I'd like to work out a price in something other than gold."

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Argrave sat on a comfortable cushy chair, sitting straight as he tapped his finger against his temple impatiently. Galamon stood behind him, at the ready, while Anneliese sat in another chair nearby, eyes darting from place to place. They were beneath a canopy in the center of the brothel, surrounded by the employees and the customers. To say the very least of the sights, Argrave agreed with the assessment of 'luxurious.'

Argrave tapped her elbow with the back of his hand. "What are you looking around for?"

"I think you should know by now," she returned easily. "Merely interested."

With no retort, Argrave shook his head, waiting.

"My mother very nearly took employment at a place like this once... when she was at Berendar. She was offered a very tantalizing sum, so she said."

Argrave frowned. "Glad she didn't."

"You dislike places like these," Anneliese noted.

"Empty pleasures and venereal diseases—that's all you'll get here," Argrave said, waving his hand in dismissal.

Galamon grunted in agreement.

"But people will always desire this sort of thing," Anneliese rebutted. "It would be best if—"

"Not now, alright?" Argrave held up a hand to stop her. "The guy's coming."

Master Zirun, a short and well-groomed man, strode across the brothel and entered beneath the canopy. He was a Vessel, lacking a mark on the back of his hand, and with the same wet skin the others displayed. He wore flashy clothing with too many colors and sashes to count, golden jewelry dangling from his neck, ears, and fingers—probably enough metal to add fifteen pounds to him.

Zirun held his hands out, jewelry jingling against each other. "Greetings, foreigners. My guardsmen tell me you have something to offer me."

"Yes, that's right," Argrave confirmed, standing.

"Please—sit," he stopped Argrave, himself moving to sit across from their party.

"Trade is simple. We have plenty of gemstones here," Argrave touched his lockbox as he sat down.

"We'd like a room for three. Preferably secluded, preferably quiet. No need for any services," Argrave emphasized. "Just a nice place to sleep."

"Gemstones, is it?" Zirun leaned back in his chair. "Sir, you do realize this is a mining town, no? Gold, gemstones—we have been blessed with abundance here in Malgeridum."

"Not pearls, though," Argrave held out a finger.

Zirun paused for a long moment, but quickly recovered, added, "Even of pearls—"

"Don't do that," Argrave interrupted. "I know you have gemstones of all types—rubies, sapphires, emeralds—so much so that this little city is a geological miracle. I'm not even sure those jewels are supposed to form so closely together, but what do I know?" Argrave spread his hands out. "But pearls... no oceans, no water for miles and miles. Pearls are a very rare commodity here."

Zirun said nothing, and so Argrave took the opportunity to lean in. "Adorn a few of your courtesans with pearls, this place will be the talk of the city." Argrave flipped open the lockbox, ensuring the lid blocked Zirun's vision. He retrieved five pearls carefully, placing them in between his fingers.

"Give us a room, plus a suitable sum of gold coins minted in the Burnt Desert... and I've got plenty of pearls."

Zirun entwined his hands, staring at Argrave.

#####

"It was a pleasant trade," Argrave said happily, loading the gold coins into his lockbox. Zirun had given their party coins minted right here in Malgeridum, which would doubtless make things much easier in future visits. The coins were smaller, Argrave found, and they had plenty for the future.

"A few of my girls will escort the three of you to your room," Zirun informed, wiping the round pearls free of blemishes. "If you'd like, I can send some to provide services, as well. Free of charge, naturally."

"Not a chance," Argrave dismissed immediately.

“Yes... most in Vasquer are like that, I find,” Zirun commented woefully. “No matter. Be careful not to wander outside. The gates will remain open, but things are not at ease in Malgeridum presently.”

“Not at ease?” Argrave questioned. “What’s wrong?”

“A revolt in the production district,” Zirun shook his head. “The fools seized a supply depot—ah, this is where the citizens receive food and water in return for their labor.”

“That won’t last long, though, will it?” Argrave questioned. “Those places aren’t very big. Three days of supplies, maybe more...”

“True,” Zirun nodded. “And most Vessels have agreed to wait them out, cordon the place off and count it as a loss until the fools themselves submit to be Drained, or until they try and move.”

“A bit slow-moving, but it works...” Argrave said distantly. “Well, I hadn’t planned on going out anyway. Please, take us to our rooms.”

“Certainly,” Zirun gestured towards his girls. “East wing. The Hidden Tryst room. Take them, quickly,” he directed.

Argrave followed, feeling a strange sense of unease at the news.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 114: Watershow

The ‘Hidden Tryst’ room was, as it turned out, a place with only one massive bed. It was large enough to accommodate ten people easily. The three of them had travelled together long enough that such a thing didn’t really cause a problem—the Low Way had dissolved all boundaries. Argrave set Garm up with a book, and the head used simple E-rank magic to turn pages. The room was well-cleaned, it smelled nice, and the bed was soft. A pleasant place, by all standards.

The room wasn’t why Argrave had difficulty sleeping. His mind twisted and turned every which way, thinking about both what was ahead and behind. Once he’d fallen asleep, he’d been disturbed by a nightmare. He had been crucified inside a hole, and the Guardians of the Low Way shoveled flesh-eating worms at him that burrowed into his flesh. By the time he’d woken up, his body looked like Swiss cheese. It had been impossible to go to sleep after that, so Argrave sat beside Garm, reading.

The bronze hand mirror rested facing upwards on the table to remind Argrave of his duty. Just beside it was another mirror, though it showed Argrave instead of the game’s status interface. It had been a while since he’d studied himself. His obsidian color hair was much longer, nearing the shoulders at this point, yet there was still nary a speck of facial hair. It was difficult to say if he looked more or less healthy—though his skin was more colorful, his eyes looked tired and his cheeks were as sunken as ever.

“Argrave,” Galamon called out quietly.

Argrave looked up. Galamon had his breastplate over his chest, but it wasn’t strapped properly. Galamon pointed to the strap and beckoned Argrave over. With a sigh, he placed a bookmark in his book and moved to help.

“Let me help milady with her dress,” Argrave said with half-hearted mockery.

"Sand is the scourge of steel," Galamon said. "I have to be diligent with my maintenance."

"There," Argrave pulled the strap tight, then locked it in place. "Milady's corset is tightened, and I tied the lace."

Galamon turned his head back and stared at Argrave. A snicker drew both of their attention, but Garm quickly quieted down.

Anneliese woke up at that point, sprawled out across the bed beneath its blankets. She blinked for a few moments, taking things in. Deciding to commit to waking up, she stretched out, grunting. She sat up in the bed, her long white hair in disarray and her face slack.

Argrave found himself smiling. "She is risen. Rejoice." He stepped up to the table, picking up his book and turning around. "We should get ready to go. But before we do... I'd like to check out the production district, get some updates on the revolt that's happening."

"What for?" Anneliese questioned, voice different in light of her recent awakening.

"Just bothering me, that's all," Argrave answered distantly. "Leave our stuff. If there's one thing we can count on, it's that no one will steal here in this place, especially not a Vessel. We saw the fate of those that do."

"Am I 'stuff?'" asked Garm.

"That's up to you," Argrave answered quickly. "We'll get ready. Make your choice by then."

"This is fine by me," Anneliese rubbed her eyes. "I hope that man, Titus, did not get embroiled in this."

Argrave looked at her, sharing her worry.

"Something tells me he did," Anneliese sighed, crawling off the bed before rising to her feet.

#####

"You're here. Good," Zirun noted, garbed in vainglorious white clothing. "I had intended to have one of my girls inform you, but if you're here, that saves me the trouble."

Argrave stepped into the main room of the brothel, his companions with him. Garm had elected to come along, and so Galamon hauled his pack to give credence to the disguise. The air was strange. Neither guest nor prostitute seemed particularly focused on the other. That was an unusual thing, given the purpose of the place.

"What did you want to tell me?" questioned Argrave, stepping into the room.

"Nothing important. I'll be out to deal with something the city deems necessary."

"This necessity being...?" Argrave pressed.

Zirun's workers removed the jewelry on his body diligently, fingers running across his face, arms, and a multitude of other places to free the gold. "My fellow Vessels have deemed that the revolt is necessary to suppress with force. I must obey Fellhorn's will."

"What changed?" Argrave stepped in front of Zirun.

The Vessel did not answer, for his workers removed some piercings on his face. "I am unsure. I know only that I was called."

"Right," Argrave nodded, mind elsewhere. He stepped aside.

At last, Zirun's workers removed his clothes. Argrave kept his gaze upwards. The Vessel's body began to shimmer like wind over a body of water. His flesh liquified, bursting out into water. Argrave crossed his arms while Anneliese and Galamon stepped back cautiously.

The blob of water moved about in front of them, formless yet with purpose. Floating in the middle of the water was a small orb of rapidly moving water. This orb contained a body—a baby, to be precise, and one that seemed to be straight out of the womb judging by size alone.

The water surged forth with ludicrous speed, leaving nothing behind. The baby in the orb stayed in the center, pulled along with the mass of water.

Anneliese stepped up the spot Zirun had left, pointing with mouth open wide in surprise. "Was that a... a baby?"

"I don't think Zirun is especially infantile," Argrave said drolly.

"You know what I—"

"Yes, that was the figure of a baby," Argrave cut her off. "Titus told you that they choose Vessels at birth. That baby is their true body... and sole vulnerability in that immaterial state. I told you about their magic, didn't I? I guess seeing is believing."

"Troubling," noted Galamon.

"I don't get it either," Argrave shook his head, staring at Zirun's workers as they moved away carrying his jewelry and clothing. "The body we see when they're walking about is what that baby would look like grown. When they're physically manifested like that, they can be injured normally." Argrave pointed where Zirun had exited. "They go like *that* when they intend on fighting. I'm told it's taxing, so they don't do it often."

"Is Ebonice truly effective against them?" Galamon touched his axe.

"I told you it was," Argrave said. "The water falls away like... well, water, upon contact. Wouldn't use it to block attacks, though. Would probably break the axe. Regardless, we shouldn't need to fight them," he said pointedly, as though in reminder.

Anneliese took a deep breath and exhaled. "And your plan to head into the production district..."

"Unchanged," Argrave stepped forward. "All the more reason now."

#####

Malgeridum was quiet. The small buildings made it easy to see most of what was happening in the flat city. The constantly billowing smoke they'd been treated to yesterday has ceased. In the far distance at the production district, one could see the magic of the Vessels laid plainly. Unnatural tendrils of water danced about the air in ways liquid was not meant to move, unbound by gravity. The water imitated

innumerable things—blades, animals, hammers, shields—yet most common was a simple geyser that tore apart walls, the street, people....

The harsh industrial scent persisted in the air, and Argrave drew a piece of cloth over his face, tying it quickly. He rose his duster's hood over his head and then gestured to Anneliese and Galamon, urging them to follow. Garm perched on Galamon's backpack, disguised by his helmet as per usual.

All of the people were idle as they watched this suppression happen, so it made traversing the streets difficult. Argrave's party wove through the idle crowds while watching the distant event happening ahead. It was like some terrible mockery of a water show—less bright lights and beautiful fountains, much more screaming and mayhem.

After a long while of threading through the crowd, they made it to an encirclement of guards blocking the people from proceeding further. The guards said nothing to calm or move the crowd, merely stopping them from advancing with a braced posture and a large tower shield.

Argrave stepped up to their encirclement, and all the guards near paid special attention to their group. He placed a hand on the top of the shield, trying to look beyond at the writhing water.

"Remove your hand from the shield, foreigner," the shield-bearer spoke.

"I was told the revolt wasn't worth suppressing," Argrave spoke. "What changed?"

The guardsmen looked up at Argrave, staying silent for a moment before spitting, "I don't need to answer a northerner."

"Hurtful," Argrave removed his hand from the shield, covering his chest as though wounded. "Banding the N word about like that... well, I'm the bigger man. Physically and metaphorically, come to think of it," Argrave mused as he reached into his pockets.

"Hear me out. You might hate northerners..." Argrave pulled free some gold coins, having predicted he might need to do something like this. "But you won't refuse a rich northerner, I hope."

The guard's attention was devoted solely to the coins in Argrave's hand at once, though he didn't reach to take it. Seeing the inaction, Argrave turned his head to the others nearby, who had doubtless heard the exchange. He waved the gold coins about, as though offering it to each.

"Alright," the first guard said, freeing one hand from the shield and moving to take the gold. Argrave shut his hand, holding a finger out to urge him to speak first. The guard sighed, and explained, "It wasn't a problem earlier, because the rebels had limited supply... but they got resupplied." He shrugged. "That's all I know."

Argrave stared down at the masked guardsman for a moment in silence, then opened his hand wordlessly. The guard reached up and took the coins, then continued, saying, "Could the gentleman give us some space?"

With a quiet laugh at the change in politeness, Argrave stepped away. His mirth quickly turned into a frown. They walked a fair distance away, where the crowds were not so dense, and Argrave leaned against a wall.

"Well, the man might as well have said it," Argrave scratched his chin.

Anneliese stepped up just in front of him. “You do think Titus had something to do with this.”

“I don’t know,” Argrave shook his head. “If he was... probably not deliberately. He didn’t seem the ‘conscientious objector’ type. I never saw the cargo he had. We didn’t see him load or unload.”

“When things settle... we should go there,” Anneliese said.

Argrave crossed his arms. “I didn’t realize we were the conscientious objectors,” Argrave said incredulously. “Listen, Titus was a nice one... but we can’t be his keepers. If this is his mess, we can’t get involved. Too much at stake. You want to draw the ire of the high-pressure waterjets with legs?”

“Hear hear,” spoke Garm from atop Galamon’s backpack. “Get out of this hole in the ground. No use getting your shoes wet for strangers.”

Anneliese took a deep breath and exhaled. “Both of you are right.” She stepped closer to Argrave. “...at the very least, can we discover what truly happened?”

Argrave stared at her amber eyes. He stayed silent for a while.

“This is a slippery slope, Anneliese, and I’m not talking about the wet roads,” he cautioned. “I won’t agree with doing anything more than a simple walkthrough of the streets after the chaos has ended.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, clasping her hands together. “I will request nothing more, nor act out of turn. But this... I need to know more,” she stepped away.

Argrave stayed leaning against the wall, introspecting. *Hard to say ‘no’ to her. At least she’s not asking me to buy a puppy, or...* Argrave shook his head. *She’s not stupid. If she’s making a request, it has to be important. And truth be told... I want to know, too.*

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 115: Caged Pride

Once the revolt was suppressed, the people went back to their usual schedule with an odd sense of normalcy, returning to the forges and the mines that they had been operating with an almost routine disappointment. The disappointment didn’t seem to stem from the Vessels’ victory—that seemed an inevitability. Rather, it was almost as though they had been deprived of an interesting happening.

As Argrave advanced with Anneliese and Galamon, they were still treated to oddities. The aftermath of the fight left water everywhere in some places, but the puddles on the ground bubbled as though boiling. Miniscule drops rose into the air, seeking out their origin: the Vessels of Fellhorn from whence they had been born.

Argrave walked aimlessly for a while, observing the carnage alongside all the others. There were bodies to be sure, but most had been captured alive. The Vessels Drained them. It was a gruesome thing. The Vessel would grip their forehead, and then the victim’s body would shrink, their skin would crack and curl, and dust would scatter everywhere. The screams made it clear it was not a painless thing.

During these executions, the Vessels remained the picture of politeness. They would smile or bow at Argrave and Anneliese as they stood wrapped in improvised cloth to cover their nude bodies after reversion from their immaterial form. Their propriety served to display they viewed this suppression of dissidents as a triviality.

Despite their concerted effort to find Titus, they found not a hint of the man—not his caravan nor his person.

“If we haven’t seen any of him, that’s a good portent, no?” Argrave asked Anneliese as they walked, the water still dancing in the air around them.

“There is a reason I asked you to do this beyond the mere concern about his well-being,” Anneliese said, keeping her arms crossed as she advanced. “He was especially anticipatory arriving here... as though he had something large planned. Nervous, especially.”

“Meaning... more so than you might expect?”

Anneliese pondered that. “I cannot say for sure. Some people are more nervous than others. It may merely be a—”

“Red herring,” Argrave finished, pausing on the road.

“I do not follow,” she paused with him. Galamon stepped ahead, scanning all nearby warily.

“Something misleading,” Argrave explained quickly. “We’ve been walking around for a while now, though. Are you satisfied enough to move on?”

Anneliese sighed. “Yes. Thank you for your indulgence, Argrave.”

“Sure. Let’s just not make a habit of overindulging,” he said dismissively, turning. “We should get moving while the weather is clear. Don’t want to deal with another sandstorm.”

#####

Argrave fell to the sand, black sand billowing past his face. He held Titus’ compass in his right hand, while a spell matrix formed in the other. When it materialized, a thin translucent ward spread out, no thicker than a piece of paper, but the whipping sand ceased. Argrave took a few minutes to clear himself of sand, shaking his face and hood to dislodge the small black grains. Anneliese and Galamon came to join Argrave, cooped up beneath his ward.

Above and around, the black sand billowed about them. The sandstorm made it seem as though a thousand mosquitoes moved past them, or as if the night itself made to consume them. Despite Argrave’s insistency to move quickly, his haste had only landed them in the middle of the situation he had most been hoping to avoid. The ward abated the sound, creating an odd zone of quiet that was disconcerting when contrasted with the chaos outside.

“God... damn it,” sighed Argrave, out of breath and weary. “I guess we made good progress. Can’t deny I’m struggling, though.”

“Take off the helmet, please,” pleaded Garm. “Got sand in my nose. Shake me about.”

Argrave looked over, then stood before either of his companions could do anything. He lifted Galamon’s helmet off, and then did as the severed head bid, spinning and shaking the head about.

“Stop, stop!” he said at once. “Gods. Somehow, you’re the least gentle one.”

“Are you sand-free?” questioned Argrave.

"Yes. Just set me down. You have shaky hands."

"It's called a 'benign tremor,'" Argrave said in faux condescension as he fulfilled Garm's request, sticking the stake deep into the sand. After, Argrave fell to the sand, opening up the lid of the compass and moving it to line up properly.

"We're headed the proper direction?" questioned Galamon.

"Yeah," Argrave shut the compass. "If I could keep up with you two, might be we'd be at our next stop by now. Unfortunately... well, you saw."

"Least you *can* walk," Garm commented.

Argrave ignored the head's comment, feeling that nothing could be achieved by responding to him. He settled down, getting as comfortable as one could atop the sand dune. "We can only wait this out," Argrave commented.

The other two agreed and took their positions. Silence settled over them as people grew to relax.

Argrave stared up at Garm, rubbing his hands together as he deliberated whether or not to say something. The head was ignorant of his gaze, for he faced forward.

"Garm," Argrave broke the silence.

"What?"

Argrave adjusted himself so that he could look at the head. "What are your plans for regaining your body?" Garm's eyes fell upon Argrave, unshaking. After a long while without an answer, Argrave continued, "Because I don't see a way forward for you."

"And what would you know?" Garm retorted at once. "Some half-baked C-rank mage, never dipped a finger into necromancy."

Argrave chuckled quietly, lowering his head. "Necromancy's all but died out as a school of magic. The only practitioners remaining are criminals and exiles." Argrave looked up to meet Garm's gaze. "Not exactly people you'd trust with your soul... doubly so when they realize the value of what's in your head."

"So what?" Garm pressed. "I have nothing but time."

"My point is..." Argrave sat cross-legged. "You will never be able to fix this problem on your own. You are limited as you are now."

"Real keen insight. The severed head has limited options," Garm mocked.

"Back at the Low Way, you said that you had to be adaptable," Argrave recounted. "I haven't seen any of that, since. All I've seen is a stubborn adhesion to this mire you've been forced into."

Garm closed his eyes. "What do you want from me? Openness? Honesty?" he said with disdain. "I can't teach you spells. I can't inscribe them, in case you haven't realized. I can give guidance for what you already have, and nothing more."

"I don't know what I want from you," confessed Argrave.

Garm kept his eyes closed, and silence settled within the ward once more. Argrave recast the spell so that no sand would leak, waiting.

"Why did you come to this place?" Garm finally opened his eyes, staring at Argrave passively. "I can't discern that."

"To fix my body. I get sick easily," Argrave answered after a moment's pause.

"How?" Garm continued.

"We have to get one more item. The Wraith's Heart." Argrave flipped open the compass, mentally routing the path to Argent based on his memories of the game's map. "After that... we have to go talk to an alchemist living elsewhere in the Burnt Desert. He'll make me Black Blooded."

"So, this alchemist promised a cure for you, provided you collect some artifacts for him. The Unsullied Knife. The Crimson Wellspring," Garm tried to conclude.

Argrave shook his head. "Never met this alchemist. Few people remember his name, and he doesn't know these artifacts even exist. But I know he can and will fix the problems I'm dealing with." Argrave settled back comfortably.

"So, you're delusional," Garm posited as though he'd finally figured things out.

"Maybe. Care to make a bet?" Argrave smirked. "I know a little too much about a lot of things. What I just outlined... I bet everything will happen the way I say it will. There might be some twists and turns along the way, but by and large, all that I say is true."

Garm furrowed his brows, but Argrave was certain there was some intrigue on his face. "What are you trying to convey to me, here?"

"The things I know—and I do mean know—aren't limited to Gerechtigkeits coming." Argrave leaned in a bit closer to Garm. "If you want some proof of Gerechtigkeits, I can't offer that. You'll come to know in the future, naturally, but I can't give you anything now."

"Because you're delusional," Garm concluded, repeating his earlier observation.

"Believe what you want. If there's one thing I can't control, it's what's in your head." Argrave tapped his temple. "But there is one thing I can offer you. I can promise you'll see some proof that my knowledge is genuine, at the very least. You've already seen some of it. You'll see a hell of a lot more in the future."

For the first time that Argrave could recall, Garm looked overwhelmed. Argrave laid down against the black sand, staring up at the writhing sandstorm. He kicked his feet back and closed his eyes, letting out a self-satisfied sigh.

#####

In the corner of a ridiculously luxurious room, there was a man with a rather large frame leaning up against the wall. He sat atop a bed, listlessly staring out the window at the setting suns. Despite the

luxury of the room, he was extremely emaciated, his skin drawn tight against his bones. His hair was long and uncut, shining like blood against the sunlight. His eyes shone like two rubies.

The rattling of metal echoed out across the room, and the man's head turned. He pushed away from the wall, moving to sit at the edge of the bed with a weary caution. After a long time of shaking, a final click echoed out, and a large metal door opened up.

A knight stepped into the room, each step slow and cautious. He came to stand in the center. For some reason, his breath was labored.

"...you're not one of the guards," the red-haired man spoke, his voice hoarse and tired.

The man removed his gauntlet and pulled free a dagger. He took two unsteady steps forward.

"I see," said the man sitting. "You're here to kill me."

"Don't make any noise," the knight said, though his voice was strained and shaky.

"I can't comply with that," said the emaciated man, though he did not move to call for help. "Why are you doing this? Do you hate House Parbon? Do you have another reason?"

The knight froze like a child caught doing something bad.

"At least answer the man you're to kill," Bruno of Parbon said. "Why are you doing this?"

"M.... M-my family," the knight sputtered. "I have to," he said with conviction and desperation. "*I have to.*"

"They threatened them," Bruno nodded, brows furrowed in understanding. "Who?"

"I... I..." the knight stepped forward, holding the knife and breathing quickly.

Bruno stood up. He was much taller than the man and had great presence despite his emaciated state. "You don't know, do you?"

The knight wordlessly pointed the knife at Bruno, his training enabling him to keep a steady hand.

"If you want to save your family, I won't fight back." Bruno spread his arms. "I never had any hope of getting out of this alive. Let my life save others, at the very least. I know enough of politics to know that my brother will only benefit if I die. Vasquer will lose a card. Chaos will seize the northern lands—a noble murdered under house arrest. Such a thing is an affront to the oaths between monarch and lord."

The knight's breathing grew more erratic, and he stepped forward. Bruno turned around, and knelt on the floor. He sat, head held high, neck clearly exposed.

"Just do it," Bruno said with conviction. "Ensure, at least, you keep your family safe henceforth."

The knight's breathing slowed and steadied. He took a step forward, the knife raised into the air. The knight struck out at Bruno's neck with all the speed of a snake, and the room was dyed crimson.