

Jackal 116

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 116: Expedience

The Dragon Palace, seat of House Vasquer, moved as though it was a beehive with a bear on the outside. Officials, guards, and royal knights flowed quickly, each with their own purpose and with a sense of urgency. Diplomats met couriers, frantically reading and writing letters to send off to Vasqueur's supporters. Royal knights obeyed commands from their commanders, each seeking different leads on the murder of Bruno of Parbon.

One person waded through the crowd with slow, steady steps. Royal knights bearing golden armor pushed through the crowd, acting as a wedge for their master. King Felipe III towered above all present, and though he was broad already, his veritable mane of graying obsidian hair redoubled his presence. He had gray eyes as steady as stone, and a beard all the way to his stomach. He wore elaborate black and gold armor that could nearly be called ceremonial, though enchantments on its surface bolstered its protective ability. A black mantle bearing a golden snake wrapped around a sword hung from his shoulders, barely touching the ground.

King Felipe moved through his courtiers, breathing steady and step calm. He stepped through the Dragon Palace, walked up the stairs leading to his throne, and then moved past it into a large meeting hall. A single large table stood at the center, with innumerable maps splayed out across its surface.

A thin, tall man waited politely in the room, his hands behind his rigid back. He had black hair kept diligently trimmed and rich blue eyes. His clothes were fanciful and bore the black and gold of House Vasquer. He had sharp, sunken features, with a stern air about him that commanded some mystique.

King Felipe stepped into the room, looking about. "Guard the room," he directed his knights as he stepped forward.

The man placed his hand to his chest. "Father," he greeted, dipping his head.

"Levin. Despite my direction, you've still not improved your magic," King Felipe came to stand before his son. "Even my mistake shows better results than you."

"Some are unsuited for standing on the front lines. I know my place," Prince Levin said smoothly.

Felipe stared down contemptuously but shook his head and said nothing more on the matter. "Tell me what you've uncovered."

Levin readily launched into explanation, saying, "The one responsible for organizing the event has been detained. The one who ordered this... remains unknown," Levin said disappointedly. "The maid, Therese, has some connections to House Parbon. Her house originates from a cadet branch of their house. She served in the palace, attending to many courtiers."

Felipe moved to stand over the maps on the table, staring down at the uneven rectangular continent of Berendar. "We allowed a cadet branch of House Parbon in the palace?"

"Her relation was so distant none considered it would hold bearing," Levin explained.

"And nothing of her backing?" Felipe continued.

“Under torture, she revealed all the information she knew. They led to dead-ends. Her contacts fled, abandoning her. She will be crucified in the city square on the morrow,” Levin outlined. “I have sent some more seeking leads, but...”

Felipe smacked Levin’s head, and the man staggered slightly. “I give you a kingdom’s resource, you can’t keep one valuable asset safe? You persist on a thread, Levin. I question if it’s worth maintaining your life. You may cause trouble on succession.”

Levin shook his head, straightening his back once more. “I know my place. Induen is my better. I am inferior.”

Felipe stared down at Levin. “Be thankful Orion is your elder. Were he not, I would slay you.”

“I must thank my fortune,” Levin dipped his head seriously.

“Regarding your brother... the plague,” Felipe stepped around the table, retrieving another map. “Outline its spread.”

Levin leaned forward, retrieving a writing implement. He drew a circle around part of the northwestern region of the kingdom. “Orion has been working diligently to keep it limited to this area. Travel has slowed in the northern regions on account of winter. When the ice thaws...” Levin trailed off, setting down his tool. “It will spread.”

Felipe stared at the drawing, saying nothing. “A prisoner under house arrest died under our care. This will be perceived as a foolish act of tyranny. The northern nobles rallied beneath us will waver. We cannot expect them to be as steadfast as before.”

“I’ve been working on—”

“No,” Felipe said coldly. “You will recall non-essential men in northern territories. Ensure only that we know that they do not act against us. Now that things have come to this...” Felipe stroked his long beard. “We are weakened. We must weaken in turn.”

“Then I will direct my attention towards sabotage,” Levin nodded.

Felipe lifted his head up, staring Levin in the eyes. “Send men to the northwestern regions. Collect the corpses of those that succumbed to the plague. Spread them across the south, everywhere.” The king leaned over a map of the south. “Make sure Orion remains ignorant. The south will become a hellscape, where dead on the streets will be more common than clouds in the sky.”

Levin’s breathing grew quick and his eyes widened. Once his breathing calmed, he nodded. “I will see this done, father.”

“At the very least... I can count on your obedience,” Felipe looked over. “Go. See it done.”

Levin turned and walked away. As he walked, his expression grew dead.

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Wind howled against the stone. In the middle of a cold stone cell, the sounds of someone shivering echoed in the empty dungeon. An orange-haired woman, nude, leaned against the wall. Her pale white

skin was marred by jagged cuts everywhere. There was nothing in the cell besides stone and iron—not a single basic amenity. There were only the iron bars of the cell, and a window ten feet above. Not even the tallest could ever hope to reach it, and even then, it was too thin to grant passage.

As the woman sat there, shivering, waiting, a click echoed throughout the cell. The woman turned her head, peering out into the hallway beyond the bars. Another click came, louder this time, and she flinched. The clicks came again and again, each louder. She came to realize they were moving up the wall. The woman stood, moving to the cold bars of the cell.

Something flashed near the window, and she shrunk away. After a moment, a thin rope ladder entered, dropping down. The woman shrunk away in terror, curling into a ball in the corner of the cell. The intruder chipped at the window, sending shards of stone into the cell as the window was forcibly widened.

Eventually, the passage opened wide enough for entry. Someone crammed their way in, and then dropped down, landing. They wore a thick cloak and light leather armor.

“Therese?” the man spoke, kneeling down.

Therese looked up, terrified. The man moved forward slightly, and she shrunk away as though he intended to hurt her.

“Wear this,” the man directed, setting something down and stepping away. “No time for terror, no time for delays. I offer help. Success lies on you.”

Her breathing slowed as she stared at what he’d set down. It was a simple fur robe. She slowly moved towards it, taking it in hand. After she put it on she winced terribly, opening the scabs on some of her wounds, yet she seemed to relish in the warmth offered by the robe.

“Come,” the man directed, moving to the ladder. “This little climb is the last thing you’ll need to do. There’s a mage waiting outside.”

Therese walked unsteadily, wrapping her fingers on the ladder. She climbed up, shaking terribly. The man stepped up to the bars, peering beyond into the hallway. Once Therese was near the top of the ladder, he walked away, following just behind her on the rope ladder.

Therese stalled at the top, having some difficulty making it through the narrow gap. The man gave a somewhat heartless push, forcing her past. An arm gripped her, pulling her to safety. She yelped out and started trembling once more, but slowly, she realized she was in no danger of falling. The carved side of the Dragon Palace had little room for standing, yet stakes had been stabbed into the side, held up by magic. A big man held her up effortlessly.

The man who entered into the cell emerged, rising to his feet. He held his hand out. “Let’s go. Don’t make noise, lady.”

Therese nodded frantically, and the one holding her stepped off the stake. His boots lit up, and he slowly descended, gales billowing about his feet. Therese buried her head into the man’s chest, unwilling to watch.

After a long time, the man landed soundlessly on something. Therese lifted her head up. They were on a ledge on the side of the mountain that bore the Dragon Palace. Just behind them was a cave—it seemed to have been carved by hand, for it was supported with makeshift wooden pillars and showed signs of excavation.

The big man set her down. “Go into the cave,” he directed.

Therese placed her hand to her chest and walked into the cave, casting glances every which way as though something could leap out at any moment. She spotted someone sitting, though they were of much thinner frames than those who’d entered and retrieved her. She walked up slowly.

Princess Elenore lifted her head. She was free of her blindfold, and one could see her empty, horrifyingly deformed eye sockets. Therese was used to the sight, so it was not jarring, but she still could not help but hold her breath.

“Did you retrieve her?” Elenore spoke. “Is she fine?”

“Elenore,” Therese said, stepping forward.

“Therese,” the princess rose at once, stepping forth. She very nearly bumped into the woman, but Therese caught her arms.

“You’re alive,” Elenore said, relieved. “That’s... I brought a healer. Come, come.”

Therese’s face was a mess of emotion—relief, indignance, betrayal, joy—but she stepped forth, still leading the princess even now. A woman stepped forth from deeper within the cave, rushing to tend to Therese’s wounds.

“Therese... you did well,” the princess said lightly. “And I failed you.”

With those simple words, the former maid burst into tears, lowering her head onto the princess’ shoulder. Elenore did not reject her, merely standing there while comforting her.

“You will be taken from here... to a safe place, a place I know will never be touched by the war,” Elenore soothed sweetly.

“I didn’t tell them anything, my princess,” Therese muttered into her shoulder. “I did... I did my best.”

“I know,” Elenore touched her head delicately. She pushed the maid away so their faces were before each other’s. “Now... you must abide alone for a time. Live well. Live free. You will be taken care of.” The princess deposited a sack of metal coins into the former maid’s hand. The light of the rose gold magic coins sheening could be seen even through the cloth.

Magic shone at the back of her head. Therese’s body sagged, and she fell onto the healer, unconscious. The healer hauled them away delicately, where yet more joined to tend to her.

Once Therese was a sufficient distance away, the man who’d entered the cell stepped up to Elenore. “Didn’t know you had compassion. You pulled a lot of strings to save one little maid.”

“And what would you know?” Elenore replied at once, all her sweetness gone. “This isn’t about compassion. This is about reputation, power.”

“Oh yeah?” the man asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Elenore said. “Wanton displays of cruelty befit my brother, not me. Everyone who serves me can guess that I was behind what happened to Bruno. With this, they know that those who serve me faithfully will not be tossed aside when it is expedient. Indeed, I can save my people from any trouble, even the attention of the King and his Kingdom.” Elenore turned her head. “It’s a message. Nothing more. High-profile incidents demand proper replies.”

“Guess I expected too much from a Vasquer,” the man shook his head.

“Don’t overstep, Ruleo,” she cautioned. “We share a goal, and so we work together. Do not presume to grow comfortable.”

“Do not presume,” Ruleo mimicked, then cackled. “Whatever. We’re done here. Give me the payment I asked for, the usual way.” He walked into the cave, past the people treating Therese, and vanished into darkness.

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Chapter 117: Myriad Metal Monuments Marring Mountains

Argrave’s legs gave out as his feet sunk into the top of a sand dune, and he collapsed ungracefully onto the ground. As he lifted his face up and shook his head to dislodge sand, a lizard blending in with the surroundings scurried away, heading for the distance. Argrave followed it with his gaze, and far ahead, a great monument loomed above.

“Are you all right?” Anneliese asked, kneeling beside Argrave with genuine concern in her voice.

“Just...” Argrave rose to his knees, adjusting his misaligned backpack. “...exhausted.” He pointed ahead. “You’d think three days of resting while we hid from that damned sandstorm would mean I’d be able to handle a desert hike easily. Whatever,” Argrave shook his head. “I was worried that I got my directions mixed, but... there’s Argent. In the distance. The silver one.”

The land before them was like a great crater in the earth. The black sand dunes of the Burnt Desert faded in way of rocky hills of igneous rock, descending down towards a central point. There were marks in the earth where rivers had once flowed, but they were gone—dried up utterly.

Far beyond, sand dunes ranged once again, and a mountain encircled the sand, seemingly forming a great bowl. A wide waterfall descended down the side of one of these mountains, though it was quickly shielded by another tall peak. Argrave saw a vague silhouette flying about, and after a time, distinguished it as a wyvern. In those mountains lived the last free tribe.

In the center of the crater, there was a fortress city: Sethia. Its gray walls were every bit as grand as Mateth’s, and perhaps even stood taller. The fortifications formed a perfect half-circle around the city itself. Where the missing half of the circle was, three roads led to three high towers, each structure the color of precious metals.

Argent was, as its name might suggest, the silver tower. It was polished to the point where it reflected all around it. The reflection created a strange warping effect on its lower half, while the top half reflected the sunlight, rebounding into the air like a radiant crown of gold. It was surrounded by a wall of the same make as Sethia before it. The walls shielded an estate befitting a kind.

The other two towers, Aurum and Cyprus, varied mainly in their tower's color. The copper tower, Cyprus, had long ago been covered with patina—its bright green was pretty, yet decidedly lackluster in comparison to the two other towers. Aurum shone as brightly as Argent.

"One of these things is not like the other," Argrave sung. "What you see now in those towers is a good display of what's actually happening in Sethia." Argrave leaned closed to Anneliese and pointed two fingers out, lining them up with the gold and silver towers. "Aurum and Argent shine brilliantly, and control most of what goes on within the city. Cyprus has faded, lost its splendor."

"The mountains beyond... that is where the last independent southern tribes are?" Anneliese asked.

"Well, yeah," Argrave nodded, lowering his pointed fingers. "But don't you worry about that. Keep your eye on the prize."

"The prize, is it?" Anneliese's gaze lingered on Argrave as he rose to his feet.

"That's correct," Argrave turned around. "We four have to exploit the faction dynamics within the city to get what I need."

Though Argrave spared a glance at his place atop Galamon's backpack, Garm did not react to his inclusion in their party.

"Outsiders will have trouble gaining influence," Galamon criticized.

Argrave turned his back to the city. "When people are down on their luck, they're not going to be choosy with the hand reaching out to help them."

"So... we aid Cyprus, the one that has lost their luster," Anneliese concluded, walking past Argrave to stare at Sethia.

"Quick as a whip, little lady," Argrave moved his head, following her as she walked past. "The current Lord of Copper is a young, ambitious Vessel who wants to recover his faction's power. He'll do anything to this end. Argent has the Wraith's Heart—it might seem counterintuitive to go with Cyprus, but as you'll find, their faction is willing to do just about anything to get ahead."

Argrave strode away, continuing, "They'll take suspicious people so long as they're helpful. They'll do anything that needs to be done, provided it gets them ahead. I intend... to pit them against Argent. It's already what the Lord of Copper wants—I merely need to give him the push."

"Do wyverns visit the city?" Anneliese questioned.

Argrave turned his head. "Look, I know I talked about getting a wyvern, but you might want to curb your—"

Anneliese grabbed Argrave and turned him around to face the city. He staggered a little, but she kept him steady and pointed off into the distance. He followed where she was pointing, squinting.

"You see?" she asked as if validated.

Argrave didn't answer, staring at three flying creatures steadily growing closer to the city. He didn't know what to make of the situation. As the wyverns grew closer, he saw many people on their backs.

Argrave started walking down into the crater, keeping his eyes fixed ahead with his brows furrowed in confusion.

The wyverns narrowed in on one of the towers—Argent. The furthest ahead landed on the wall around the tower. Someone atop its back threw a sling, and the projectile slammed into one of the windows, shattering it. After, the wyvern craned its neck, and the people atop the thing climbed up into the tower. The other two wyverns circled about, one clinging to the tower, all offloading men into the window.

“What in...?” Argrave whispered, still walking into the crater.

“This is beyond your expectations?” Galamon questioned, jogging to catch up.

“What do...” Argrave stopped. “No... No, I get it.” Argrave nodded. “They’re raiding the tower. God damn it,” he cursed, moving a little faster. “We’ve got to get down there. I have to see who’s leading them.”

Exhaustion forgotten in wake of urgency, Argrave moved down into the crater quickly enough that he could not afford to keep his eyes on the raid happening ahead. He watched his footing carefully as he descended down the rocky black hills, sending dirt and dislodged rocks tumbling down ahead of him.

A bell rung out across the city, loud enough to be heard even distant as they were. As they descended into the crater, Sethia’s wall grew too tall for them to see over its top. Argrave gave the walls a wide berth, not wishing to draw the attention of any of those people guarding outside. Instead, he moved around Sethia, hoping to get the best view of Argent that he could.

They were not alone in wishing to view the spectacle, it seemed. People emerged out from the city walks, rushing to get a better look at the rare occurrence. Argrave felt that was a fortunate thing, for he did not need to be so restrained in his approach. Soon enough, he had a clear view of the incursion.

The people were southern tribals, as could be expected from the masters of the wyvern. They wore armor made of wyvern scales, each and all beautifully crafted. They offloaded things from the windows, throwing crates and bags of valuables. Gemstones scattered from one poorly tossed bag, and he heard a shouted admonishment from a rider.

Argrave walked while catching his breath, eye on the wyverns now that he had some leeway. Eventually, he saw the person he expected emerge from the tower. A tall man wearing a gray coat of lamellar wyvern-scale armor stepped to the window. His helmet had a grand red plume.

“Knew it was you, Durran,” Argrave muttered beneath his breath as he watched. “Nobody else would—”

Argrave’s voice caught in his throat as he spotted another person step up. The man’s shining plate armor stood out starkly beside the tribals, wearing armor of wyvern scale. The newcomer bore a mace, and his helmet was made in the shape of a boar with two tusks.

With words escaping him, Argrave watched silently as the raiders began to emerge one by one, climbing back onto the now-loaded wyverns. They clutched their haul tightly. From the city of Sethia, a mass of water made its way over the walls. The southern tribals spotted this, hurrying their escape. The wyverns braced, preparing to lift into the sky.

With their powerful wings creating gales and scattering sand everywhere, the wyverns took off into the sky. Argrave shielded his eyes as he watched them go. The mass of water—a Vessel, undoubtedly—wound its way up Argent until it came to the cone-shaped roof on its top. The water swirled in front of it, and a thin line of water shot out like a bullet into the distance after the wyverns.

Despite the tremendous distance made, one of the wyverns was hit. It swayed, roaring, but managed to rebalance in time to prevent its descent. Argrave could see its blood dripping down into the sand it passed over, gliding for the mountains as it lost altitude.

Argrave turned around, where Anneliese and Galamon watched with as much interest as he did.

“Let’s find a place to talk,” Argrave sighed.

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“Let me explain things,” said Argrave to his other three party members. They had elected to wait until things calmed down in the city to go inside—being implicated with this happening would be a difficult stain to remove. They sat cross-legged in a relatively secluded part of the crater.

“The... avatar I told you two about, with which I experienced this world before.” Argrave placed his finger on the ground. “I had ten choices each time. A custom-made one, or nine pre-existing ones. Of the ready-made, each was divided into three distinct categories—spellcaster, warrior, or rogue.”

Argrave paused, but all three were listening intently—even Garm, though he looked confused.

“Stain was the pure rogue. Nikoletta was the pure spellcaster,” Argrave continued. “You two met both of them,” he pointed to his two elven companions.

Both nodded.

“I also mentioned Melanie, as I remember—she’s got a warrior focus, but she also has some traits from the rogue side of things. Then there’s Ruleo, who’s rogue-focused with magic abilities... now, I’ve seen two more of these avatars.”

Garm frowned. “What in the gods’ name are you talking about?”

“A game,” said Argrave, pushing past the head’s interruption. “Boarmask is here—the pure warrior. Durran is also here—another warrior with a dash of magic spice. From what I saw, they’re working together.”

The two absorbed the information. Anneliese adjusted her sitting position, then asked, “What significance does this hold?”

“Well...” Argrave paused, trying to discern this for himself. “Both are highly resourceful, and both are very talented. I have no doubt they were the driving force behind the raid that happened today. I can say this with certainty because it falls in line with what the player could do—one of the ‘quests’ I described to you.” Argrave kneaded his palm, questioning if he was explaining things sufficiently.

“Do you believe these people took the Wraith’s Heart?” Anneliese followed up.

“No. Too well-secured to be seized in such a quick raid.” Argrave leaned back, looking to the shining silver tower. “Just... things won’t be predictable.”

“Then let us go based off what you know, and what we have seen,” Anneliese suggested, and Galamon nodded, agreeing with the idea. “You know the people in control of this city. What will their response be?”

Argrave looked down, thinking. “The southerners don’t really have a use for baubles and trinkets from the tower. They have more pressing concerns, and don’t value the material as much.” Argrave looked up. “The Vessels will respond as Durran probably intended for them to. I suspect he’s working with Cyprus. It’s a provocation... one that won’t work, I believe.”

“But why would he...?”

“His brain works in ways I can’t codify in short-form,” Argrave sighed. “I could explain, but maybe you’ll have the opportunity to ask. I don’t want to make an enemy of him.”

Garm looked to have much on his mind, but said nothing. They stewed in the silence, before Galamon asked, “What do we do now?”

Argrave turned his head back to Sethia. “Things have probably settled. We can go to a place that I know—no brothel this time, thank the lord. From there...” Argrave turned his head back. “We’ll have to adapt.”

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Chapter 118: A Hand in Need

Argrave had a question: how does one gain the good graces of a faction in a xenophobic cult with enough power to rule over a city?

As much as he wished to, he certainly couldn’t walk up to any of the three towers, declare his intention to go inside, and be welcomed. The circumstance in Delphasium had been exceptional, but Sethia was a much larger city, and its lords were not nearly as gregarious as Mistress Tatia had been. Argrave and co. would be refused at the gate, he was certain, and he did not wish to test the theory.

In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ the player’s induction into Cyprus had been spurred by a random, coincidental happening—a chance meeting, in essence. The player would meet a Vessel serving within the tower of Cyprus, demonstrate their prowess, and... things went from there. Argrave could not replicate that. *Causing* a chance meeting was even further beyond his purview.

Despite thinking on the matter during the entire journey, Argrave couldn’t answer his question. But with a little refinement from his companions, some half-baked ideas he’d been ruminating on blossomed into one beautiful little scheme.

“This is the home,” Galamon whispered and nodded. It was night, and few people were out. They stood before a rather humble dark stone house. It had no windows, and its doors were shut tight. “I smell dried blood... and not in small amounts. If things are as you say, this is the place.”

Argrave exhaled. "Good. I thought it was, but it's better to be certain... been a couple of months, you know. Things are starting to fade from my memory. So many spells to learn, overwriting what was once there..." Argrave twirled his finger about his head.

"Do you have a solution for that?" Galamon questioned seriously.

"Only rerunning things through my head constantly," Argrave admitted. "Whatever. Anneliese is with Garm. Guess you and I just have to wait. Won't be long. Midnight, I think." Argrave looked up at the sky, staring at the red moon.

"You don't really need to be here," Galamon stated neutrally. "Following someone is best done alone."

Argrave held out his hands. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Galamon raised a brow, then shook his head. "As you will." He grabbed Argrave's arm, shepherding him away a great distance. They made their way into an alley between two houses. It was quite dark, and Argrave couldn't even see the house any longer.

The wait was long and boring, and Argrave wished he'd heeded Galamon's suggestion. Galamon's patience was boundless, though, and Argrave stood there fidgeting his hands until the elf's whisper broke the silence.

"Someone's come out," he said. "They're being especially paranoid."

"Wouldn't you?" Argrave questioned, craning his head to see beyond the wall. Galamon forced him back.

After a while of tense silence, Galamon pushed Argrave deeper into the alley. "Come on."

They made their way through the alley, emerging on a street on the other side of the one they followed. Galamon was especially alert, taking quiet and deliberate steps in pursuit. Argrave tried to stay just as quiet and didn't dare speak—he knew Galamon was tracking with senses other than sight, as the man they were following was not anywhere in the sight.

"Hmph. Seems he knows the guard patrol routes," Galamon noted. "He's made it to the farmland. He's digging."

Argrave smiled and exhaled in relief. He had been somewhat skeptical this would work without a hitch, but things had fallen into place. They waited quietly on the street. After a time, Galamon started to move beyond.

They came to a patch bearing pepper plants. Argrave couldn't see anything amiss, but Galamon knelt down, removed one gauntlet, and then dug into the earth. The elven vampire had to dig very deep, but eventually, Argrave saw a dim blue mark. As Galamon dug more, the rest of it was revealed: a freshly severed human hand with a mark on the backhand signifying its former owner as a human belonging to a Vessel of Fellhorn.

Galamon picked up the hand. "This is what you need?"

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. The thing was mostly drained of blood, and the dark-skinned hand was much paler than it had any right being as a consequence. "That should get some attention, for sure."

“Then I’m to do the next thing?” Galamon questioned, rising to his feet.

“Yep.” Argrave nodded, tearing his gaze away from the hand. “Go to the house. Scare them. Make sure they think someone’s onto them.”

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“Excuse me,” Argrave greeted, drawing close to the large gates of the wall to Cyprus. Two men stood in front of the great stone doors of the wall. They bore brown silken clothing covering most of their body, and their spiked helmets were made of dull bronze resembling copper.

“Keep your distance,” the guards cautioned. “Turn back. This is the residence of the Lord of Copper. You have no reason to be here.”

“Is this the place I might report a crime?” Argrave said quickly, ensuring he got their attention.

The guards looked at Argrave and his company of two warily. They might’ve brought Garm, but he didn’t want to risk anything with this little venture. He was safely in their inn.

“A crime?” the guard repeated.

Argrave held out a hand—not his, strangely enough. The guards looked at each other, then back to Argrave.

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“Funny how offering a hand to someone in need can earn you friends so easily,” Argrave mused, sitting cross-legged on a once-decadent couch that had not been maintained or changed for several years.

Neither Galamon or Anneliese, sitting just beside him, seemed amused by his joke, and so Argrave sighed as they waited.

“Come on. A bit of levity amidst morbidity is the best way to handle it,” Argrave urged them.

“What we are doing here is beyond merely turning a blind eye,” Anneliese said. “We’re involved. It is merely hard to swallow.”

Argrave had no answer to that, so he stayed silent.

As Argrave had hoped, the hand alone was evidence enough to earn him a meeting inside Cyprus. The guards out front had deemed this matter important, and so they fetched someone more able to handle this matter.

Argrave looked around the interior of Cyprus, taking in the sights. It was the first floor of the tower, so one might expect that it would be the best-kept and most presentable. ‘Disrepair’ was the best term for the room Argrave saw, though. There was one long, if decrepit, tapestry winding about the whole of the room, depicting the god Fellhorn and various Fellhorn-peripheral scenarios. After a while examining it sequentially, Argrave realized it depicted their creation myth.

He was just about to rise to his feet to examine the tapestry when someone came back into the room. Barring his brown-plumed helmet, the man seemed a guard just as those before. Argrave knew who he was: the Lord of Copper’s primary human commander, Captain Jeralian. He was an old man with the air

of a hardened veteran about him. His hair was all gray, and his beard was short and patchy as though he was normally clean-shaven but hadn't groomed in a few days.

Captain Jeralian stepped up to them. He had the severed hand, clasping it by the wrist. "Foreigners. My men tell me that you discovered a man trying to bury this hand."

"That's right," Argrave confirmed.

"And, further..." he stopped, retrieving a stool off to the side. He set it across from them and sat. "You allege to have discovered an underground smuggling ring where the citizens of Sethia are spirited from the city and taken to the southern mountains?"

Argrave paused a few seconds before nodding and confirming, "Yes."

Jeralian straightened on his stool, back rigid. He stared at them with cold golden eyes. "Describe what happened."

"Well..." Argrave paused as though gathering his thoughts, but he had long ago prepared what to say. "The three of us were walking about the city, and—"

"At night?" he interrupted.

"It's nice out at night," Argrave shrugged. "We're from the north. We enjoy the cold; the moon is nice." Argrave held his hands out and continued to explain. "Anyway, we turn the corner and stumble upon this guy. He's digging near a patch of... those spicy, fruit-like crops," Argrave made the shape of a pepper with his fingers, acting ignorant of what they were.

"Peppers," Jeralian interrupted. "Go on."

"He sees us, we see him. I didn't think anything was amiss at first, but then he takes off, holding a bag or something. He dropped that hand you see there," Argrave pointed. "We start chasing him, and—"

Jeralian held out a hand to interrupt. "Why were you chasing him?"

"Because he dropped a severed hand," Argrave said as though it was obvious. "A fresh one, too."

"You chased him because of that?" Jeralian pressed disbelievingly.

"You're acting like that's unusual," Argrave retorted, equally incredulous. "It's the duty of the faithful to ensure no crime goes unpunished—such is as Veid teaches us."

Jeralian bit his lips, thinking about what Argrave said, then nodded. "Go on."

"Once we catch up and he sees that we're foreigners, he starts pleading with us. He tells us about what he's been doing. Apparently, people come to him—usually former tribals, as he said—and they set things up to send people away to the mountains. They sever the person's hand to get rid of the Mark of Fellhorn, stage a death where it's difficult to find the body, and use this underground passage to get far enough from the city to make the journey to the mountains," Argrave concluded, pointing at Jeralian.

Jeralian furrowed his brows, staring at Argrave as though he was a madman.

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“...and he claimed he could take us to the house where this smuggling ring purportedly is, master Brium,” Jeralian said, kneeling before a man in a bed.

The ‘Lord of Copper’ fit his title well, even if only by virtue of his copper-toned skin. He wore silky orange clothes, which concealed a thin body with a large frame. The wet nature of the Vessel’s skin made his body seem like genuine metal, shining against the light splendidly. All of the jewelry he wore was copper—rings, bracelets, earrings, et cetera. He sat on the edge of the bed, posture straight and tensed. He was a handsome man with tight, stern features, and wavy brown hair descending to his shoulders.

“Your impression?” Brium inquired, voice low and serious.

“He’s very clearly a foreigner,” Jeralian said at once. “His customs, beliefs, and behaviors are far from ours. Regarding the veracity of his words... the information he offers is too easy to confirm and matches up with some occurrences noted in the city. I can’t believe he’d lie about this.”

“Yet... stumbling across someone burying a hand? Having that same person disclose the entire operation?” Brium asked rhetorically. “If the people involved were that incautious, they would not have lasted this long.”

Jeralian lifted his head once, then quickly lowered it, saying no more.

“He’s telling the truth about this thing’s existence,” Brium finally concluded. “But he isn’t being entirely honest about his role in the matter.”

“What should be done, master Brium?” Jeralian said quickly.

“Thinking of his character... I believe he was involved with their group, but once he discovered they offered no benefit, came to those he thought would. He’s enterprising. Ruthless, even.”

“Yet he came to Cyprus, master? Meaning no offense,” Jeralian quickly added.

“Argent or Aurum might offer a one-time reward, or none at all... but I think he doesn’t wish to be powerless. He wants room to grow.” Brium smiled. “He chose luckily... or chose well. I cannot decide which. What of his capability?”

“He claims to be a C-rank spellcaster, while his elven companion is B-rank. The last, the warrior... is intimidating,” Jeralian said with a simple shake of his head.

Brium stood up from his bed. “It seems I must speak to this man myself, discern if he is ruthless and intelligent enough to be of use in Cyprus’ future. He may be of great use... or a waste of time. I’ll decide that.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 119: Contracted Metalworker

Argrave had been pondering morality the whole time during his journey to Sethia. He supposed it was normal to examine oneself when confronted with the uncaring power dynamics within this southern region of Berendar. Argrave had his own moral code, naturally, and though he might be a bit more flexible than most others, he largely felt he was a righteous person. Everyone did.

And yet Argrave now found himself exposing a secret smuggling ring that offered people freedom from the Vessels, all to earn the good graces of a cult worshipping an ancient god that used its subservient people as walking water bottles.

He reckoned it was a little like exposing the Underground Railroad to become friends with Jefferson Davis.

Of course, Argrave had Galamon scare them a little before exposing them, and hopefully they wouldn't be genuinely caught... but their operation had gone bust, and there would be no more escapes from the city.

Argrave was drawn from his haze of thoughts at another person's entrance. He was a bit surprised to see the next comer—Brium, the copper-skinned Lord of Cyprus. Though Argrave could not deny he was surprised he'd climbed the managerial chain so quickly, he came to attention at once, uncrossing his legs and sitting a bit more politely.

"Greetings, gentleman, madam," Brium began smoothly, coming to stand before them. "I am the Lord of Copper, Brium. I came here to personally thank the three of you for what you've exposed here today." He placed his hand to his chest in thanks but did not bow his head—that little gesture was a good show of his personality. On the surface he was polite, yet beneath was pride and ambition that did not allow him to bow his head to any.

"A pleasant surprise, meeting the Lord of this tower. I am Argrave... of Blackgard," he hesitated in saying the last part, remembering well what happened when he last used that name. "My companions are Anneliese and Galamon," he introduced in turn.

"...of Blackgard," Brium repeated. "What is your home of Blackgard like, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's a bustling riverside city, located where many rivers meet. Place has the only bridge for miles, so it's a rather busy trade city," Argrave supplied smoothly.

Brium smiled inexplicably. "I see." He moved the stool that Jeralian had set across from them, then sat atop it himself. His back was rigid and unbent, and he surveyed each of the three of them in turn.

"This smuggling ring you exposed—I am having men examine it as we speak," Brium began. "You've done a valuable service. Yet strangely, you came to the tower of Copper." Brium rubbed his fingers together. "Perhaps I am ignorant of your lands, but as I recall... copper is the least valuable form of coinage in Vasquer."

Argrave nodded, catching the message beneath the Vessel's words. "Gold and silver are shiny and brilliant. People tend to like those metals for that reason."

Brium gestured towards Argrave. "And yourself?"

"Copper..." Argrave leaned in until he was at the edge of the couch. "Copper a strong metal at its core. But when you combine it with something else—a different metal, far from itself—you get something stronger. You get alloys. Bronze. Brass," Argrave counted the two with his fingers, then waved his hand with a smile. "Both prime examples."

Brium laughed lightly, raising his hand to cover his mouth. "I see your metaphor. You are different—far from copper, certainly." Brium lowered his hand, expression stern. "But metalworking is a complex business. The wrong component can weaken the metal instead of strengthening it. How can you be certain you'll get the results you want?"

Damned metaphors making my hand spin, Argrave thought.

"It's as with anything—I've done it before." Argrave leaned back to emphasize his confidence. "But... if there's doubt, you can always stick with the reliable—practice, testing. Make a small batch of bronze alloy instead of converting all your copper at once. Once you're sure it works, upscale the process."

Brium stared down Argrave. His dark brown eyes had an intense sharpness to them that made it clear he scrutinized Argrave carefully. After a time, his eyes lightened and he smiled. "Do you enjoy poetry, Argrave?"

Argrave was taken aback by the conversational turn, but he answered, "Some, certainly."

"Do you write?" he pressed.

Argrave shook his head. "Not poetry, but yes, I suppose what I've done qualifies..."

"Perhaps, at a later date, I can share some of my poems with you. I have the feeling you'll appreciate it."

Feeling strangely insulted, Argrave nodded slowly. "Another time, maybe," he said without committing.

"But I digress. Back to this matter of alloys, and power..." Brium lowered his head, lost in thought. After a time of deliberation, he raised his gaze up to Argrave. "I think things are as you say. An alloy... the thought has never crossed my mind, but I believe it's worthy of, at least, a test batch."

"I'm pleased you agree," Argrave said, though the words felt empty.

"But cutting past all this..." Brium placed his hands on his knees. "A metalsmith's services can't be cheap. What do you want, exactly?"

"To make a strong alloy," Argrave said vaguely, "... of which my... metal, is a part of."

"Let's set aside the vagaries and speak frankly," Brium waved his hand dismissively.

"Alright." Argrave thought of his words carefully. "Beyond eking out a place for myself in this city, Argent has something I want. It's not the sort of thing they give away, either, even if I ask really nicely."

"Ah," Brium nodded as if he'd figured things out. "And bronze is more than fitting to break silver."

"Yeah," Argrave simply agreed, tired of this long analogical train.

"Well..." Brium crossed one leg over the other. He held his hands out, placing the tips of his fingers against each other like some kind of diabolical schemer. "I'm going to have to work something out for you to do. And verify the veracity of the information you disclosed, naturally. That said..." Brium held a hand out. "I believe this may serve to be a long and fruitful relationship, gentleman Argrave of Blackgard."

Argrave looked at the Vessel's hand, acknowledging that the other intended for a handshake. He triple-checked he was wearing thick leather gloves and was quite thankful for the protective enchantment as he reached out and took the other's hand.

"Likewise," Argrave concluded.

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Their party walked from the tower of Cyprus. Argrave's steps were heavy. He felt guilty, like he'd done something wrong—the talk with Brium hadn't assuaged that feeling.

"There's something I'm curious about," Anneliese spoke.

"Are all poets deviants?" Argrave tried to guess her question in jest. "The answer may surprise you."

"No," she laughed while shaking her head. "This name—Blackgard. You use it consistently. That is what I was curious about."

"Oh." Argrave scratched the back of his neck, lowering his head.

"You're embarrassed," she noted.

Argrave looked at her. "If I wasn't before, after that call-out, I definitely am."

"Your embarrassment only makes me more curious," she pressed.

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed. He looked between both of them—even Galamon expressed that he was focused on Argrave's answer.

"That city I described, back there..." Argrave paused in the road. "It doesn't exist. But I've made it before." Anneliese and Galamon looked at him strangely, and he quickly added, "In the game."

Argrave continued. "A lot of northern and southern Berendar are divided by a big river—in the future, it becomes an almost natural border between the rebels and Vasquer loyalists. The biggest bridge between the two is an important place to hold in the war. It's located in a valley, too, so it's quite a defensible place. There's a sizable and largely ungoverned native population, too."

"So this city, Blackgard—you founded it in the game?" Anneliese questioned.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "Probably the best bit of land in the game. Lots of good farmland, choke points preventing raids, pre-existing population, center of trade—"

"But the name," Anneliese stopped him. "What does it mean to you?"

"Just a name, isn't it?" Argrave answered, turning back to the road.

"I do not believe it is merely that," she insisted.

Argrave bit his lip, the answer on the tip of his tongue. "Alright," he surrendered, throwing his hands up in the air. "If Gerechtigkeits wins, the world ceases to exist—it becomes a void. A void is blackness. I considered that name—Blackgard—just as that. A guard against that endless darkness. A guard against Gerechtigkeits."

"I see."

"You see," Argrave repeated.

"I think it is a noble name," she said sincerely.

Argrave laughed. "Well, I should probably stop using it, or it'll stick."

She tilted her head. "Is that so bad? It is a fine name, and it does indeed represent what you do."

"Well..." Argrave scratched the top of his head, thinking on the matter.

"Do you not intend to establish this Blackgard once again?" She held a hand out to Argrave as though to encourage introspection. "You said you wish to follow the course you deem best. Is this not part of it?"

"I'm no lord," Argrave shook his head. "Can't press some buttons and make people build a whole damned city for me as I could before. Someone inexperienced like me would do a lot more harm than good."

Galamon shook his head. "You overestimate the abilities of lords, I think." He looked around. "This place alone is testament to that."

"Why does it seem like you two are trying to persuade me?" Argrave questioned suspiciously. "We're thinking about the distant future when tomorrow is uncertain. Let's stay on task, shall we?"

The two of them conceded with slow nods.

"Good," Argrave said in conclusion. "I know you two might be blue working with the Lord of Copper back there. He views us as a means to an end. What he hasn't considered, hopefully, is that he's the same to us. Argent, Cyprus, Aurum—I don't intend this to be some sort of power game."

"How do you mean?" Galamon questioned.

"We're raising a dog," Argrave said with a little smirk. "A fierce dog, to compete in the dog fight. We'll raise Cyprus up... and then we'll bring in Aurum and Argent, and the two will snarl and bite at each other. And who, you ask, wins in this bloody sport?"

Argrave waited for an answer, but neither Galamon nor Anneliese supplied one.

"Definitely not the dogs, I'll tell you that much. Poor bastards." Argrave shook his head woefully. "No, the spectators win."

"The people of the city," Anneliese guessed.

"Them, too," Argrave acknowledged. "But I was really referring to the southern tribals. Guess that guy's way of talking rubbed off on me."

Anneliese furrowed her brows, lost in thought. "But how...?"

"If I've got things right, we'll soon be involved with Durran and Boarmask. Ask yourself this—why weren't any Vessels at Argent when the raid occurred?" Argrave spread his hands out. "Because Cyprus used what little influence they have to make that happen."

"I think I understand now," Anneliese nodded.

Galamon adjusted the sword on his hip as he thought, then asked, "Why is Durran working with Cyprus?"

"Were I to guess... he hopes to earn a better living situation for the tribals," Argrave pointed to Galamon. "He's a tribal himself, you see. Brium probably made empty promises. Fellhorn doesn't like violence, but lies and deception are fair game." Argrave held his hands out. "This is only my speculation, of course. I think we'll find out the truth of things quickly enough."

"I worry about what the Lord of Copper will ask of us," Anneliese admitted.

Argrave sighed. "Yeah. That's the uncertain bit. We have to hurry up and wait once more."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 120: Copper Link

Argrave found the city of Sethia to be a mix between Delphasium and Malgeridum. While lacking the despotism of the latter, and not exactly possessing the abundance of the former, it met in the middle. Perhaps the Vessels were somewhat cautious of the treatment of their people with a threat—the southern tribals in the mountains—looming so close.

Indeed, they had managed to find an inn at a decent price. The coins they'd obtained in Malgeridum had been of tremendous help in securing a non-exorbitant expense. Only a day had passed in the town, but Argrave suspected he would be spending much time in Sethia, so he was glad to not spend too much.

But now they idled and studied, nothing to do beyond wait for Brium to contact them. Only a day had passed, but Argrave appreciated the change in pace very much. Good food, a decent bed—a welcome reprieve from their time trapped in a storm of sand.

"If I might advise you, Argrave..." Anneliese said gingerly, sitting on a table before Argrave's bed. He sat half-covered by a blanket.

"You're smarter than me. Why would I ever refuse your advice?" he conceded quickly.

"Oh. Um..." Anneliese showed a rare moment of pause, taken aback by his words. Cheeks a little red, she gathered herself quickly and said, "I would hold back trying to learn any B-rank spells yet."

Argrave leaned back into his bed, looking down at the B-rank spell book. He thought about her words, then lifted his head and asked, "Why?"

"Because it is challenging, especially if you have only a shallow mastery of C-rank spells," she explained patiently. "At the moment, I believe it would be best to focusing on those you are capable of learning, rather than trying to stretch yourself as you are."

Garm added, "The girl is right. You might have the magic capacity to handle spells of that rank, but if the knowledge is shallow, you'll only waste your time. It'll take longer. Much longer. It's naught but wasted time."

Argrave bit his lip, then decisively shut the book, setting it on the table where Anneliese sat. "Alright. I'll heed your advice. A part of me questions if you just want more time to ask me questions about my homeland," he pointed to Anneliese.

She smiled. "I wonder," she replied vaguely, though Argrave knew she was only joking.

Argrave lowered his finger, then flitted his gaze between the two of them. "But I'm just curious—why should I hold back on reaching this milestone? Why would it take longer?"

"Because B-rank magic differs greatly from the ranks below it," Garm said. "Each rank before it adds complexity, both to the matrix and the spell. The increased complexity accommodates increased power. The matrix is larger—it can manifest more raw magic."

Anneliese nodded as Garm spoke. "But B-rank magic does not add another dimension to the spells. Instead, the previously static matrixes become animate."

"I know about that," Argrave said. "But why would having a shallow understanding of lower-ranked spells hinder me? For C-rank, I just kept studying, thinking about it... until something clicked," he shrugged, not fully grasping it himself. "I know it's far from the image of a scholarly mage, but it worked."

"The fact you don't understand why something clicked is the problem," Garm admonished, and Argrave turned his gaze to face the severed head. "Put simply, you will be adding movement to C-rank spells. If you can't understand the quintessence of these spells, how will you ever learn how to move them?"

Argrave didn't respond, and Garm's face grew serious as he continued.

"Learn more. Come to understand C-rank spells completely and utterly—illusion, elemental, healing, it matters not. When you understand *what* you did different, you will be ready to poke at the next barrier. Until then, refrain."

Argrave nodded, taking in Garm's words in silence. "Thanks for the advice," he finally remembered to say.

Garm closed his eyes. "Nothing more unbearable than watching incompetence as an expert," the head dismissed. "Doubly so when I am unable to do much myself."

Argrave found it difficult to hold back a smile at the head's attitude. "But I have—"

Sharp knocks disturbed Argrave's words, and he tensed, immediately looking to Galamon. The elf stood up, holding his Ebonice axe close at hand. Evidently the vampire had not heard whoever was just outside the door, and that set all of them on edge. Argrave quickly lifted Garm and hid him under a blanket.

Galamon opened the door slightly, bracing it with his foot so it could not be forced open. A woman wearing red clothing stood beyond. It took only a few seconds looking at her wet, dark skin to identify the woman as a Vessel. She had sharp, narrow features, and looked so thin as to be starving.

Argrave immediately recognized her as one of the Vessels sworn to serve the Lord of Copper, though for some reason he could not recall her name. "Galamon," he called out. "She's one of Brium's. Let her in."

The woman seemed surprised, yet not uneasy, that Argrave knew her purpose immediately. Once Galamon opened the door, she eyed him and his axe without much caution before taking slow, almost sauntering steps inside. She looked around the room.

“So you’re the ones,” she said.

“The chosen ones, yes,” Argrave said glibly. “Something you need?”

Unamused by his quip, the woman stared at Argrave coldly. “Argrave?” she asked, and when Argrave confirmed with a nod, she continued, saying, “The Lord of Copper would meet you. He expects to see you and your companions out front of the grand tower of Cyprus.”

“Out front?” Argrave tried to confirm.

“Yes,” she confirmed begrudgingly, as though she loathed the question. “The master says to arm yourself, though he isn’t expecting you’ll need to fight.”

Argrave furrowed his brows questioningly, and then nodded. “We’ll be there, shortly.”

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Though Argrave had been worried that Brium’s request to see them out front meant that he would refuse them access to the tower of Cyprus, that was not the case. Instead, the Lord of Copper stood just outside the walls of his tower, with a small entourage of Vessels.

The Vessels swearing fealty to the Lord of Copper all wore clothes matching the shades of the metal that was their namesake—oranges, browns, reds, and all in between. None of their outfits could be called ‘decadent,’ barring Brium’s. Argrave, still in black enchanted leather, felt out of place as he approached them.

Brium had been engaging the Vessels near him, but when he spotted Argrave he tore away from the group without a word and spread his arms wide as though to welcome Argrave with an embrace. Finding himself in a predicament, Argrave slowed and raised his hand to wave.

“Lord Brium,” he said cautiously.

“You’re here. And promptly, too,” Brium greeted, not making to embrace Argrave as he feared. “That’s good. Honestly, you’re early. That’s fine. Let us speak some. I will inform you what is to happen.”

“I’m all ears,” Argrave said.

Brium placed his hands together, then walked past Argrave, obviously wishing for him to follow. “I found nothing suitable to pass to you on such short notice, unfortunately. These things take time. Perhaps that is why you were surprised to have been contacted so quickly, hmm?”

“If you found nothing, then...?” Argrave trailed off, unsure where this was going.

“Ah. My mouth outpaced my mind,” he shook his head, walking down the road. Argrave followed him, the two of them walking side-by-side. “I’m sure you remember a certain happening some... two days ago, I believe. It revolved around the southern tribal’s wyverns, and a raid on Argent?”

“It was our welcome into the town,” Argrave nodded.

“Was it now?” Brium questioned, then continued. “At the time, much of the Lord of Silver’s Vessels were engaged with me,” Brium placed a hand to his chest. “Even Lord Quarrus himself was engaging in a discussion with me. It was a minor dispute—which of the city’s people belong to who and such. This proved an inopportune time for them to have such a discussion—their tower was raided while they were away.”

“Funny timing,” Argrave commented.

“Hilarious,” Brium agreed with a plastic smile. He stopped in the road, and Anneliese and Galamon came to stand with Argrave. “Today, the lords of Argent and Aurum have insisted I meet to discuss this matter. They believe I am subverting them.” Brium clasped his hands together. “I have to correct the misunderstanding.”

“But... what do you want us to do?” Argrave questioned.

“You’re going to come with me to this meeting,” he stated plainly.

Argrave didn’t know what to say to that for a time—it had been the last thing he was expecting to hear. He shifted on his feet and questioned delicately, “Don’t you think, if you want to give them the idea that you *aren’t* subverting them, bringing a foreigner into the meeting might send the wrong message?”

“I have some plans on that front, fret not,” Brium shook his head. “You’ll learn them once we’re there.”

Argrave was frustrated by the vagary but could not point it out directly. “This doesn’t really test whether or not we’re trustworthy,” Argrave noted. “In fact, it’s really just risking for nothing. I could cause problems for you.”

“Well...” Brium raised a hand to his chin and cradled it delicately. “A part of me likes you. You possess some of the politeness of a gentleman of the Burnt Desert without the obsequious fawning I’m constantly privy to as the Lord of Copper. A pleasant balance.”

“I trust that’s not all,” Argrave pressed.

Brium put on his best smile once more. “I think you know in your *head... what’s at stake.*”

Argrave’s features grew taut at once. Between the emphasis, the word choice, and the complete non sequitur, there could only be one thing that Brium was referring to—Garm.

“Don’t worry,” Brium said calmly as Argrave’s mind whirled with a million questions. “I don’t care. Indeed, that kind of thing only affirms my choice. Someone willing to step past the line into the forbidden is precisely what I need at this juncture.”

Argrave suppressed the urge to shout and demand, ‘how.’ As much as he wished he could believe that Brium was simply bluffing to extract information from him, there was little room for interpretation. It was no bluff. Brium knew about Garm, and beneath that, he could make Argrave’s life very difficult.

Argrave was certain Brium wasn’t an exceptional schemer or master at espionage. That made the scenario all the more baffling. They hadn’t been incautious with Garm—measures were taken at every turn to ensure he couldn’t be easily seen.

“Once more... don’t let this weigh at you,” Brium said, reaching up and grabbing Argrave’s shoulder. It felt like a spider was on his arm, but he stayed still. “We have a meeting to attend later; I’d like you to keep your tongue sharp for that.” He removed his hand and waved Argrave forward. “Come. Meet the Vessels beneath me.”