

Jackal 131

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Chapter 131: Durran

Argrave, without much option, took Durran to an establishment that he knew had private rooms for eating. Dawn was just arriving, so their timing could not be better. Some Vessels ran the place, but they worked for Aurum, so Brium would likely never find out about them. Even still, ever cautious, Argrave had warded their conversation.

Of all the characters in ‘Heroes of Berendar’ barring the custom-made one, Argrave had definitely played Durran the most. Melanie stood at a close second. They were fun to play, mainly, but Argrave liked their personalities the most. He understood them well. It helped him plan a course of action for this conversation rather quickly, suppressing his panic.

Durran was a fairly tall and lithe man with light brown skin and wavy brown hair that generally contributed to his natural charm. With his robe set aside, one could see the golden tattoos all along his skin, some marred by scars. Unlike during the raid, he did not wear his wyvern scale armor, instead bearing simple brown leathers.

“Trying to kill me with the weight of debt?” inquired Durran, who’d taken two chairs to both sit and support his feet. “This place is expensive.”

“If you’re destitute after raiding Argent, I’ve got to seriously question if you can understand this conversation through your haze of stupidity,” Argrave returned, leaving his arms atop the table. “You’d have to be stupid to lose that much money, after all.”

Durran laughed, then set his glaive against the wall. The cloth wrapped around the blade fell away briefly, revealing a black edge that didn’t look metallic. “Shiny bits of metal don’t mean much in the mountains, unless it’s steel.”

“But I know you spend more time away from the mountains than most,” Argrave said, and Durran merely grinned, saying nothing. “Surprised Boarmask isn’t here. Busy feeding the poor, saving people, giving sermons?”

Durran frowned. “Gods above, how much do you know?” He took his feet off the chair and leaned in. “What’s my mother’s name?”

“Trick question. You don’t know,” Argrave shook his head.

Durran leaned back. “Was asking as a joke, but...” he looked to Anneliese and Argrave. “You three... what in the gods’ names are you? Super-spies? Can’t guess your angle. Northerners—northern elves, at that, sticking out like pearls in the sand.”

“I’m the only one you need to worry about,” Argrave shook his head. “So, you want to illuminate me on this genius idea you had to ruin everyone’s plans? Yours, mine? Were you feeling a little suicidal today?”

Durran looked uneasy, but he set his feet back on the chair. “I don’t know. I had to know who in the world was talking about something I’ve done my best to keep quiet. I kept thinking about it. The whole

thing made me uneasy, had to do something. I just—" he started to shake his head, then paused. "Hold on. I came here to ask questions, why am I feeling interrogated?"

"Because I'm better at talking," Argrave answered smoothly. "Just because it's weighing at you, you trod across the desert and cause all of us undue trouble? You have to work on that impulsivity. It's a liability."

"Better than sticking about, waiting. You want something, you've got to—" He stopped, then held his hand out and shook his head. "Whatever. I came here to demand some answers about—"

"And what makes you think you deserve answers?" Argrave interrupted at once. "If I hadn't told you anything, you'd be leading your tribe to the slaughter. You'd throw yourselves against Aurum and Argent, dying en masse, and then Brium would butcher your people—or perhaps it'd be better to call it 'dehydrate' your people. Let's clear the air." Argrave pointed at Durran. "You didn't come here for answers. You came here because you can't stand that psychopathic wannabe poet with a spray-on tan played you for a fool, and I stopped you from running off a cliff with your tribe following just behind."

Durran's face tensed, anger and defensiveness both seizing him. The door of the room opened soundlessly, and the servers outside stopped at Argrave's ward. Argrave dispelled the ward with one hand, refusing to break his gaze from Durran. The innkeeper and his serving staff entered.

"The meal for today's goat meat, with the house spices plus some gold flakes, courtesy of the Lord of Gold, blessed she be," the fat innkeeper explained gruffly. "Some bread from the farms, recently baked, and a soup. Considering you're mostly foreigners, and one of you is an unmarked tribal... twelve gold."

Argrave pointed at Durran. "He'll pay."

The innkeeper looked down at Durran, holding his hand out. Durran finally broke his gaze away from Argrave, then reached to his pocket. He counted out the coins, then passed them to the innkeeper.

"Enjoy," the innkeeper left them, then he and the serving staff filtered out, recognizing the tension in the room.

As soon as the door was shut, Durran began immediately, "First of all, none of that's been established. You don't have a shred of proof. If I hadn't seen you coming from Cyprus, even your association with Brium would be up for question."

Argrave laughed as he brought back the ward, blocking out the sound. "What do you want, pal? A journal detailing all of his malice? Maybe a poem or two about sucking your people dry? Sorry, fresh out of incriminating things."

"Brium promised—"

"Promised what?" Argrave interrupted. "That he'd leave your people alone? Maybe liberate some of the people underneath Aurum and Argent's control, allow them to return to the tribes? And—let me guess—he swore under the name of Fellhorn? He's a Vessel of Fellhorn, you must've thought—surely he can't break that vow."

Durran stared wrathfully, and Argrave leaned back into his chair.

"You trust the guy willing to kill his own people to get ahead? He's jumping at the idea to get at other Vessels, to get this whole town under his control. It's not because he thinks the other two are tyrants.

It's because he won't share power with them." Argrave tapped his temple. "I thought you were a cynic. How'd you fall for this scam? You owe me a hell of a lot more than this meal. You owe me the lives of thousands."

Anneliese pushed a plate closer to Argrave. "You should eat," she urged.

A bit taken aback by the consideration amidst the heated argument, he picked up the fork without much thought and began eating. Durran stared heatedly, making Argrave find it difficult to enjoy the taste of his food.

He had time to finish chewing, and so Argrave continued, "Look. Listen. I get where you're coming from. You feel like you're on a sinking ship, and so you're desperate to find anything that's going to help your people." Argrave waved his fork. "Don't let that desperation make you stupid. If there was any dissent among the Vessels about the southern tribals fate, things would never have progressed to the point they had. You're dumb, but not that dumb."

Durran crossed his arms, and Argrave continued to eat.

"Stop holding back. Tell me what you're really thinking," Durran shook his head.

Argrave lowered his fork and started laughing, caught off guard. Durran joined him in laughter.

"Gods be damned," Durran wheezed out after they'd finished. "Look what you've done to me. How am I to eat when you hit me with a gut-punch like that, you bastard?"

"Truth is a heavy meal, isn't it?" Argrave picked up his fork. "It tastes foul, too. But it's good for you. Good for all of you."

"Takes a while to digest, that's for certain," Durran finally removed his feet from atop the other chair, then leaned into the table, picking up his fork. "I don't know. You make a lot of sense, but... I'm not sure. Not sure about too much. I have to look into this."

"Well, whatever you do, don't pull this little stunt on Brium," Argrave said firmly. "You'll find that conversation much drier than this one, I promise you."

Durran chuckled, weighing the fork in his hand before setting it down as though unable to stomach the food before him. "You won't answer me, though? About how you know Gebicca?"

"I spoke to her," Argrave shrugged.

"Where?" he asked.

"Northwestern part of the mountains, crushed beneath rocks."

Durran bit his lips. "What'd she look like?"

"Uhh... jet-black skin, black hair... long-ish, I suppose... sharp, big nose, a bit angry-looking, and a pretty broad chin."

"And her eyes?"

Argrave paused. "I don't know. I didn't gaze into her eyes as she died. Bit weird."

"Yeah. Don't know why I asked. Can't remember, either." Durran picked up the spoon, settling on the soup. He looked confused.

Argrave enjoyed the meal, feeling quite self-satisfied with the contemplative silence that followed.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" he nudged Anneliese's elbow.

"Very... hot," she confessed. "It is too much."

"Come on," Argrave pressed. "The more you eat, the easier it gets in the future."

Durran swirled the bowl of chunky soup around, saying little. Finally, he let the spoon go, and raised his gaze to Argrave once more.

"Alright. Let's forget all this other nonsense. I just want to know—what's your position in this? You working beneath someone? Rivals from another town? Interfering for the northern kingdoms? Wandering prophet, maybe, got a god to sell me? That last one would explain all the things you know that you shouldn't."

"Argent has something I want. Can't get it from them directly, so I have to use the tools I've got." Argrave took a bite as he allowed Durran to process his words, and once he'd finished chewing, continued, "I could just go along with Brium, but I don't fancy letting the Vessels run things uncontested. Hence, I want your people to come out ahead."

"If things are as you say, I think it'd be best to just let Brium throw himself on the sword."

"You could," Argrave agreed, though he did feel a bit disquieted at the notion of the southern tribals backing out. "I know you're not the type to do that, though."

"Pfft. What do you know about me?" Durran leaned back, putting his feet up once more.

"Let's see... your father was a tribal chief, you're a self-studied mage after you found some stash of spell books—oh, and you're hiding that fact from the tribe. Especially your father. You like gardening, but this embarrasses you. You killed your uncle because he was... well, worthless, frankly. You hate the traditionalists of the tribes, but you want to see your people flourish nonetheless." Argrave planted his fork into the meat before him. "Need I go on?"

Durran had grabbed the table while Argrave was speaking, and now he stared wordlessly ahead. Argrave could practically see the thoughts running through his head—Argrave had disclosed things that Durran had never told anyone. He was just shy of having an aneurysm, Argrave suspected.

"I have some more embarrassing bits, but I spared you from that," Argrave commented. "Mostly because I didn't really want to say them."

Durran rubbed at his chest. "Never thought the first one to take my breath away would be some weird-looking northerner. Gods, I—"

Durran stood up, stepping towards his glaive. Argrave watched him.

"List—" he pointed, then stopped himself, curling his fingers into a fist. "I've gotta... I've gotta go."

He grabbed his glaive and then made for the exit. Argrave dispelled the ward, allowing him to pass. Once the door had shut, Argrave grinned smugly and hunched over his food.

"I think the food is splendid," Argrave shook his head wistfully. "Let's take our time."

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Chapter 132: Intrigue of the Desert

Durran stepped into a hovel on the edge of Sethia, leaning against his glaive. Once he passed the barrier, he shut the rickety wooden door behind him. He stood there, breathing heavily, almost as though wounded.

"Did you—" a man's voice called out, and then the sound of plate boots against wood sounded out as someone moved up to Durran. "What's the matter? You're pale. What happened?" the man insisted. He wore a helmet depicting a boar, though most of him was covered by heavy plate armor.

Durran said nothing, merely waving the concerned knight away. "My brain's on... fire," he said, shaking his head. "Need to sit."

He pushed into the room, eventually leaning against the wall. He slid down, sitting. Though the knight stood over him, concerned, Durran's mind was lost in introspection.

How could he know? My uncle, I've never told anyone—not my father, not any of my friends, not anyone. No one knows. No one knows, I'm sure of it. But he does. I'm glad my uncle's dead—I'm proud I killed him. But no one should know!

Durran could still recall those gray eyes, cold and dead as stone, staring him down. There was a heartless fury in Argrave's eyes as he rattled off Durran's deepest secrets one by one. His words had enough accuracy it was as though Durran himself was spilling his secrets. It was a summary of his essential qualities, all from a man he'd never met before.

"What's wrong with you?" Boarmask insisted, kneeling before Durran. "Is someone in danger? Is the operation... if so, we've no time to waste."

"In your land... can any know your thoughts? Can any see your memories? With magic, faith, I don't give a damn, can they?" Durran lifted his head, breathing brought under control.

Boarmask said nothing. "I've never seen you like this."

"Way to answer the question," Durran growled.

"No, no one can explore your mind," said Boarmask. "If they can, I've never heard of such a thing."

"No tales, no myths?" Durran queried hopefully.

"...that's the realm of the gods, not mere mortals," Boarmask shook his head.

Durran lowered his head against the wall. "You have no idea how little comfort that brings me."

Boarmask grabbed the man's robes, shaking him. "What happened?"

"He knew you," Durran free himself of the knight's grip easily. "And he knew me—way too damned well. Uncomfortably well. Things I've never shared with anyone, he knew them like he did them."

Boarmask stayed kneeling for a moment, and then he sat down. "He knew me?"

"Your name, epithet, whatever. He knew you were at the raid. Not so hard to guess your name, 'Boarmask.'" Durran settled against the wall, getting comfortable. "Real genius name. Definitely not something a child would conjure."

"...my old title was much worse," Boarmask shook his head. "He knew me...? What did he look like?"

"Extremely, uncomfortably tall—could touch the ceiling with his head, that kind of tall. Midnight black hair. His companions were elven. The northern elves. Snow elves, I think you people call them. There was a female with him—one more elf than the southron elves said," Durran rattled off quickly and idly.

Boarmask looked at Durran intensely. "What color were his eyes?"

"Gray," Durran said immediately.

"Gods above," Boarmask raised a hand to his helmet. "Did he seem... sickly to you?"

Durran paused. "He was... uncomfortably thin, yeah," he confirmed nervously. "Why? Why are you bringing up your gods?"

"The King of Vasquer, Felipe III, has a son named Argrave. Illegitimate."

"Illegitimate? What in the world does that mean?" Durran questioned, confused. "Is he not a real human? Some kind of freak, half-ghost or something?"

"Born out of wedlock," Boarmask explained.

"What a stupid thing to call it," Durran shook his head. "All children are 'legitimate.' Whatever—I won't question your bizarre northern traditions. Get to the point," Durran waved.

"You asked me..." Boarmask muttered, then continued, "The king's son matches your description. And he has the same name."

Durran sat in silence for a second, digesting that, then questioned, "What does that do for us?"

"It confuses me," Boarmask shook his head. "I don't know much about him. He allegedly halted an invasion from the snow elves. I don't know the truth of that, but I do know that he brokered an alliance between two noble houses."

"You're speaking a different language right now. These things mean nothing to me," Durran shook his head.

"Then put it out of your head. I'll think on it. All you need to know—he's the son of one of the most powerful men in the world," Boarmask pointed at Durran. "What did you learn?"

"I learned that we need to talk with Titus," Durran said. "And I'm pretty strongly inclined to believe that Brium plans on killing my people."

"Titus told us—"

“Not to contact him except in dire cases,” Durran finished. “This is pretty dire.”

Boarmask considered this, then posited, “Titus may not be entirely forthright, then. He might be our primary deceiver. How well do you know him? Would it be wise to get in touch with him?”

“Titus?” Durran repeated. He rose to his feet. “I know one thing for certain. Titus won’t rest until each and every Vessel is dead or dying. Now I’m thinking that he might be willing to sacrifice anything to achieve that.”

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Argrave stepped back inside the inn, glad to be free of Durran. Though he was worried the man might do something foolish, he hoped that their conversation had rattled him enough to help keep his mouth shut and his actions measured.

Though Argrave was half-relaxing at this point, glad to be returned to his room, Galamon stopped him, grabbing his shoulder.

“There are people in our room,” he informed Argrave, staring at the wall which hid the room they’d been staying in.

Argrave took a breath and exhaled. The innkeeper, a non-Vessel woman, seemed to be only idly cleaning her tableware after serving a meal to the others. She did not seem tense or nervous.

After a time of searching, he spotted the only other person in the room. The man stood as Argrave spotted him and walked closer.

“Argrave,” he called out, coming to stand a fair distance away just before a table. Light from the fire burning in the hearth nearby fell across his face.

“Titus?” Argrave questioned incredulously. “What are you doing here?”

Titus, the merchant who’d taken them from Delphasium to Malgeridum, looked no worse for wear than when they had left. As ever, the well-built former southern tribal wore an extravagant set of red and gold clothing. He gripped the edge of a chair, staring at the three of them.

“I believe the gentleman was not expecting to see me again,” he greeted.

Argrave shifted on his feet, the matter of the people in their room still weighing at his mind. That the two were here together—no coincidence, Argrave presumed.

“You were headed for Malgeridum,” Anneliese spoke. “And you work for Mistress Tatia. Why are you here?”

“Madam Anneliese,” he greeted her. “Did you enjoy the—”

“Just answer her question,” Argrave interrupted, feeling annoyed.

Titus shifted, adjusting his grip on the chair. He pulled back the chair and sat. “I came to find you three,” he disclosed, then gestured for them to sit.

Argrave stepped closer but refused to sit. “You’ve found us. What happens now?”

Titus' gaze jumped between the three of them. "Have I done something to offend?"

"Showing up at the place we're staying, for starters," Argrave spoke. "The odd time of your arrival. Let's skip the preambles, shall we? Why are you here?"

Titus placed his hands on the table, tapping his fingers against the wood. Eventually, he lifted his golden eyes to Argrave and said, "Mistress Crislia, the Lord of Gold, would like to speak to you. She is waiting for you now."

Argrave felt a chill. He was already involved with a lot of people that he didn't really want to be involved with, and now another had shown up—not at his doorstep, either, but behind it, already lurking in his room.

"I thought you said you worked for Mistress Tatia," Argrave crossed his arms.

Titus held Argrave's gaze. "I never said that."

"But we asked, and you nodded," Galamon pointed out.

"I don't recall ever..." Titus rubbed his hands together.

"I do," the elven vampire said coldly.

Titus looked up at the giant warrior, then swallowed. "...I admit, I was minutely deceptive. But I never imagined you would become so deeply entrenched in the politics of the Vessels. I did not think—"

"Didn't think you would ever get caught in the lie?" Argrave interrupted, then sighed. "Whatever. It doesn't matter, not anymore. Do you have anything else to say, or shall we go?"

"You agree to come?" Titus questioned cautiously.

"She's waiting in my room. Can't really refuse her," Argrave noted. "But Brium has eyes on me. A Vessel named—"

"Yarra won't be coming, not for a while yet. Mistress Crislia made sure of that," Titus shook his head.

"You know about that," Argrave noted. "I've got to question your role in all of this."

Titus had nothing to say to that. He stood up, pushing the chair aside, and then moved to their room.

"...should we go?" Galamon questioned.

He nodded. "Be ready," Argrave cautioned, following after Titus.

Argrave did his best to recall every detail about Titus. He could recall little—the man was not a major player in the Burnt Desert, at least not in 'Heroes of Berendar.' He had vague recollection of a dye merchant with that name, someone that would recolor the player's armor and weapons. Even of that, Argrave was unsure. Months had passed, and he had nothing to reference anymore—no more wiki to search. Titus was never someone involved with two major Vessels, Argrave was certain of that. This entire thing had come out of left field, and left Argrave feeling very unsteady.

What good am I? Tens of thousands of hours spent on the game, yet variables keep popping up left and right to make sure nothing goes smoothly. Some help I am. Utterly useless, he chided himself.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned quickly.

“Do not think that way,” Anneliese said simply, shaking her head.

Argrave felt a brief wave of emotion, but he collected himself. “You’re mind-reading now? Trying to spook me, make me forget? Very effective strategy,” he commented with a laugh.

She smiled, then pushed Argrave forward. “Go on,” she commanded lightly.

Titus stood at the doorway, holding the door open. Though the innkeeper looked at them strangely as they passed, Argrave made it to the door.

Crislia, the Lord of Gold, sat in a chair at the center of the room. Her features were predominantly elven, and she bore gold in abundance, the same as before. Two Vessels stood just behind her. They had the same features as her—golden hair, vaguely golden skin, golden eyes—yet they seemed more... imperfect, somehow, like reserves.

“The mercenary Argrave,” she greeted. “If that is indeed what you are. I am glad you decided to come without issue. It shows that I am not dealing with someone... unreasonable.”

“If people give reasons, I’m sure to respond with reason,” Argrave said, stepping in slowly and cautiously. “So, what brings you to my humble and temporary abode?”

“Address the Lord of Gold with the respect she is due,” one of the Vessels at her side reprimanded.

“Varia,” Crislia raised her hand, silencing the Vessel. “They come from the north. We cannot expect them to be as couth as we Vessels. I take no offense,” she shook her head. “Please, Argrave, continue as you were.”

“Why are you here?” Argrave repeated, considerably more brusquely.

Crislia paused, staring up. “I am here to discuss the future of Sethia.”

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Chapter 133: Easy Out

Mistress Crislia, the Lord of Gold. Though Argrave was embarrassed by his lack of knowledge of Titus, he knew plenty about the master of Aurum, the golden tower on the outside of Sethia. The knowledge came from facing her as an enemy, though—the player could only ever collaborate with Cyprus, and Aurum and Argent would always be one’s enemies were that the case.

The Crislia Argrave knew was narcissistic and greedy. She didn’t lack for ambition, both for spiritual and physical matters. She would constantly try and expand both her physical wealth and her Vessel by Draining people, sacrificing their souls to Fellhorn—typically, both would expand at the same time. She was fond of forcing merchants to infract so she could both seize their wealth and their soul.

“What did you wish to discuss about Sethia?” Argrave inquired, making no move to proceed further into the room towards the three elven Vessels across from him.

“Brium’s speech, heretical though it may be, did resonate with me,” Crislia said, crossing one leg over the other. Her gold ankle bracelets rattled against each other, metallic rings echoing about the room like muted windchimes. “Even if he is misguided.”

Argrave took a breath, and nodded slowly, reminding himself to play the part of a loyalist. “Brium speaks a lot of sense, I find.”

“True. The southern tribals—they are unruly beasts, obsessed with war and glory and honor. The fools are utterly unable to set aside grudges,” she criticized condescendingly. “Well, those tribals still resisting, anyhow. Most beneath our banner have been brought to heel.”

“Someone should do something about that,” Argrave commented, reflecting Brium’s sentiments outwardly.

“And that is just the point.” Crislia leaned forward against her crossed legs, very obviously trying to make use of her sex appeal. Anneliese frowned and glanced at Argrave but calmed quickly when she saw his stoic face. “I tried to broach the subject with Quarrus, but the Lord of Silver cannot be reasoned with. Despite being the one who suffered the raid from the tribals, he is adamant we stay our course.”

Argrave felt an uncomfortable inkling. “It sounds to me as though you’re coming to view things as Brium does.”

She did not confirm it, but from Crislia’s expression alone Argrave knew he was right. “I cannot very well approach his tower in the open. As such, I have deigned to come to you—a mercenary, largely free of prying eyes.” She leaned back. “I wish for you to tell Brium this: if he surrenders to me, I will collaborate with him, and be the herald of the flood he so desires to wash away the southern tribals in the mountains.”

“Surrenders how?” Argrave tilted his head.

“If he becomes my vassal,” she spread her arms out. “It is only the natural course of things. Gold has always stood far above the likes of silver and copper.”

Argrave nodded slowly. “And what of Argent?”

“A city must have a firm central power to properly shepherd the ignorant into doing what is good for them,” she said with a smile. “I will tolerate no other to contest my power. Quarrus has already proven... disagreeable.” She leaned back further, crossing her arms. “Have you more questions, or will you deliver the message?”

Argrave hesitated for but a moment, then gave a quick nod. “I’ll get this to him.”

“Excellent,” she said, rising to her feet. “I will leave you, then.”

The elven Vessel walked past, her two other companions eyeing Argrave as they moved past. Titus was the last to leave. His gaze stayed on Argrave as he left—it seemed emotionless.

Once the door shut, Argrave stood staring at it. The Brumesingers, as though summoned, lowered themselves from Argrave’s clothes and started to prance about the room, playing. Their fur seemed a little darker than before, faintly tan. The souls of the dead were abundant in this place, it seemed, and they had plenty to eat.

Anneliese conjured a ward at once.

"I dislike that woman. Argrave, I—"

"That's the easy way out," Argrave interrupted her. "And it's walked right into our hands. A lot of the uncertainty—whether or not the southern tribals are capable of fighting the Vessels, whether or not I'll be caught playing the double agent... if I persuade Brium to accept Crislia's offer—and I'm sure I can—I can get the Wraith's Heart as easy as anything."

Argrave's words brought a silence over the group, and whatever Anneliese had to say, she didn't continue.

"Brium would agree. I'm sure he would. He might betray Crislia later, but he'd definitely agree now." Argrave turned around, facing his three party members. "We could stroll into Argent and pluck that heart freely. We'd be gone before the sun rises the next day, headed for the Alchemist."

Galamon crossed his arms, staring down at Argrave. Anneliese remained silent.

"Do it then, you damned fool," Garm encouraged. "You owe these people *nothing*. You're no hero. You aren't a savior. Stay in the good graces of the powerful. Regardless of if some ancient calamity is actually coming, having powerful friends here only helps you."

Everyone stayed silent, and so Garm continued.

"Even if you help the southern tribals and all of the Vessels are purged from this city, their new fledgling government would be of no help to you. They're small, insignificant, and with manifold enemies on every flank. They're good for no one. And considering your covert role, I doubt they'd be grateful. They wouldn't even know you'd helped them!" Garm shouted.

"Garm," Galamon veritably snarled, turning his face to the severed head.

"Hold on," Argrave finally spoke up, raising his hand. His eyes were bright with epiphany. "Did you get sand in your ears, Garm? Do the Vessels seem the grateful type?"

"Well..." Garm said, voice muffled from beneath Galamon's helmet.

"On the contrary. What we've seen, it's shown us that these Vessels don't see people as people at all. Gratefulness, reciprocation—those words aren't in their diction." Argrave stepped around. "Long-term, neither the tribals nor the Vessels seem like good options. Ungrateful pricks, one and all. Might sound like I'm being mean, but it's true. I've met the tribals."

Galamon furrowed his brows, watching Argrave as he paced about.

"But here's the key difference. The Vessels don't care about life—hell, most of them we've seen have an active interest in Draining people's souls." Argrave paused, pivoting on his heel to face his party once again. "It'll be easier and safer for us to help force a collaboration between Crislia and Brium. But dispel these notions of pragmatism versus morality. There's no extra benefit. So, should we erase the last pocket of resistance to the Vessels? That's the only question."

"You might be saving your life. Does safety mean nothing to you? Don't be a fool," Garm insisted.

"I'd sacrifice a bit of personal safety to do the right thing," Argrave summarized. "I think I'm fine with that."

"Talk is talk. When you die later, there'll be no time for regret."

"That's just the thing," Argrave shook his head. "I've been working hard to become powerful, but I'm still walking about like a little player." He spread his arms out. "The whole point of being powerful is getting what you want, no? And I really want to do things my way. I won't die," he shook his head confidently. "None of us will."

"You are a maddening idiot," Garm rebuked.

"On the contrary," Argrave disagreed. "Every time I look in my mirror, it tells me I'm intelligent. That's a fact, strangely enough," he shook his head. "Brium and Crislia are going to have an unfortunate miscommunication. Aurum and Argent will proceed onwards as they have been, and attempt to wipe Cyprus off the map. Then, in the ensuing battle, they're going to be removed from power. All of them. Forcibly. Any questions?"

"Not a question," Anneliese raised her hand. "An observation, though, and a hypothesis."

"Please," Argrave gestured towards her.

"Titus knew about Garm," she said with certainty. "I gleaned that from his wandering gaze, and his mental state. As for my theory regarding that..." she hesitated, a bit uncertain. "Titus may have been the one to inform Brium about his existence."

Her words made Argrave pause, and he stood there in silence for a minute. He thought back to the journey, and to the man's mannerisms—he had been very generous and pleasant company. His lack of prominence in Argrave's memory made him lower his guard with the travelling merchant.

But that journey had been when they were most carefree with Garm. Argrave had set him by the window in an attempt to be nicer to him and win his favor. When they had spotted the Brandback, Garm had spoken up—Argrave had tried to cover for him, but Titus *had* heard the head, that much was for certain.

"Hah," Garm laughed. "I told you it was unnecessary, giving me the window. Look what happens."

"Yeah, next time I'll encase you in clay and keep you in a bag," Argrave snapped back at once, then directed his attention to Anneliese. "But what's the reasoning for him being the one that told Brium?"

"He loathes Crislia. I can guarantee you he does not serve her out of loyalty. It is such a complete and utter loathing as to be uncomfortable," she stated. "And he felt guilty when looking at us."

Argrave nodded, putting the pieces in place. "But anything else...?"

"He knew about Yarra, and knew she would be coming," Galamon supported Anneliese. "Further, he was able to delay her arrival."

"That might be Crislia's influence, though," Argrave argued.

“Crislia never mentioned Yarra. She seemed to be ignorant that Brium did have eyes on you—she said so plainly. She spoke to you precisely because she thought none were watching you, if you recall,” Anneliese countered.

“It’s...” Argrave scratched his chin. “It’s plausible—more than plausible. But this guy, Titus—I know nothing about him. That’s why I was getting all moody earlier,” he pointed to Anneliese.

She nodded. “I thought that might be the case. But you cannot know everyone in millions.”

“I should know enough to avoid something like that from happening,” he disagreed. “Getting blindsided like this—I’m putting everyone at risk.”

“You sought me out because I’m good at handling risk,” Galamon pointed out.

“Can’t rely on you for everything,” Argrave dismissed.

“Why not?” Galamon asked simply. Argrave didn’t have an answer for that.

“Do what you can. Do what you excel at,” Anneliese urged. “But do not loathe yourself for occasional shortcomings. I dealt with that, once. It is an unpleasant thing, to constantly undermine yourself.”

“I can’t be complacent,” Argrave insisted. “Too much at stake to settle for ‘good enough.’”

Anneliese sighed. “You *are* a maddening idiot,” she repeated Garm’s words with resignation. Strangely, he did not feel the need to contest the point when she made it.

“Let’s wait for Yarra,” Argrave concluded, stepping away. “Then... we’ll set things in motion. Or resume things, I suppose. Crislia’s visit doesn’t change a thing. In fact, it might just speed things up tremendously...”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 134: First Ripple on a Still Lake

Though Argrave had wished to inform Brium of what Crislia had said immediately, the Lord of Copper had been preoccupied with something. Anneliese and Argrave spent that time planning for how to handle the changing situation. Ridden with anxiety, he had returned the next day, catching the Vessel early in the morning.

“She told me to ‘know my place?’” Brium questioned, one hand placed atop the other on the table as he stared at Argrave.

“Well...” Argrave trailed off, acting hesitant to repeat it.

Brium sat there for a while in the silence. He tapped one finger against the back of his hand, gaze distant. Eventually, he stood up, pacing about the room.

“...I’ll give her an answer. Tomorrow.” He turned his head to Argrave. “And things will be expedited because of it. When one is spurned, love can turn to hatred overnight. She must have something prepared for both answers—Crislia plays both sides against each other, she always has. Immediately after my refusal, there will be retaliation.”

Argrave took a deep breath and gave a steady nod, resolving himself. On this front, he and Anneliese had been correct. He had done everything he could. He could only hope Durran moved as quickly as he did and did not lose himself in indecision.

"Indeed, we might expect their attack tomorrow, as soon as my answer is given," Brium placed his hand to his chin. "This suits me fine; I have everything in place. But you... you will head to the southron elves. You will prepare them, and then I will expect to see them coming to Cyprus tomorrow morning. Yarra will accompany you to gather them—no exceptions," he pointed his finger. "I will stall for your arrival."

Though hesitant, Argrave did eventually give a nod of agreement. "She'll have to wear a veil, but I can certainly make this happen."

"Then make it so," the Lord of Copper snapped. "Rushing water is always cleaner than stagnant water. And Sethia will soon become as clean as ever."

#####

"Why did you lie to me?" Durran demanded, holding his glaive to Titus' neck. The blade was made of a black bone, and sharpened enough to rival any blade. The merchant wearing red and gold sat across from him with hands still, maintaining complete ambivalence to the situation.

"Because it was easier," said Titus.

"Easier?" Durran repeated. "No—I know that's not true. Even if you'd been honest that Brium intended to betray us, I would have gone along with it. You're one of us—you used to be. You know we would take this chance to liberate Sethia. You just wanted us to be unaware. Wanted us to die."

Titus pressed his finger to the glaive, pushing it away. "I won't answer," Titus said boldly. "Go. Do your duty. After Crislia's intervention, the battle will come all the sooner."

Durran stood. "Answer me, damnit, or I'll cut your head clean off."

Titus' golden eyes remained firm. "You would lose the battle without the men under my control to help you."

"I don't care. We haven't attacked yet. I can call this thing off—I still have that luxury. If you won't explain yourself, I'll ruin whatever you had planned." Durran readied his glaive.

"Durran..." Boarmask interjected, voice cold and cautious. He stepped up beside Titus.

"I won't answer," Titus shook his head. "Stop bluffing. Sit."

Durran swung with all his might, rage fueling the swing. Titus remained still, yet closed his eyes. Yet a ringing sounded out as metal met metal. Boarmask held his hand against the blade. It had bit through the gauntlet's plate, cutting into the knight's hand. Blood dripped out.

Titus had his teeth clenched, staring at the glaive. Sweat dripped down his brow, but he stayed firm.

"I'll kill you too, pig. Don't think I won't," Durran said coldly. "These are my people's lives, and he was ready to throw them away. He would see them battered and broken in the streets of Sethia. I need a reason to let him keep breathing."

"This is not the answer," Boarmask shook his head, voice tight with pain.

"It is an answer. Even if it's wrong, it's an answer. I don't like leaving questions unanswered, you see," Durran pulled his glaive back.

Boarmask stepped in between Titus and Durran. He drew the mace at his side, holding it in his hand.

"There is no sense in this," Boarmask shook his head. "I won't allow things to fall apart. Sethia must be liberated. The injustice here cannot persist."

Durran took a fighting stance, holding the glaive before him. "Tolerate one injustice to end another. Whatever happened to the honor you constantly talk about?"

"This isn't an easy choice for me," Boarmask replied. "But we cannot let things fall apart. After things have settled, I will help you bring Titus to justice. But not here. Not now."

"I can't work with him!" Durran yelled. "Not until I get answers. So step aside, or I'll finally answer that burning question of 'who's stronger?'"

"This, here, is precisely why I hoped your people would die," Titus said bitterly. "Fine. I will tell you."

Durran stood there, not taking his gaze off of Boarmask. The armored knight dropped his mace, raising his hands to the air. Only then did Durran relax.

"Talk, then," Durran gestured, standing over Titus.

"The Vessels, the southern tribals—there is no future in either," Titus said. "The Vessels are merely the current tyrant."

"What are you talking about?" Durran demanded.

"We work together to end the reign of the Vessels, establish another foothold for your people to fight back against the unending rain of Fellhorn." Titus waved between the two of them. "I have no love for the Vessels. They stole my baby from me, claiming it as a Vessel. They Drained my wife, Drained my twelve-year-old child... all because he was ignorant of Fellhorn's laws."

Durran's intensity softened a little, a vague semblance of sympathy weakening his anger.

"Yet centuries before, the southern tribals ruled over this vast desert. They wrested control from the southron elves—burned their cities, butchered their people, destroyed their knowledge." Titus crossed his arms. "And after? The tribals turned their gaze to the north—Vasquer. They threw themselves against the Lionsun Castle, hordes dying yearly."

"Centuries of rule, and to what end? Your people achieved nothing!" Titus stood up, staring Durran down. "Ignorant savages, condemning their people to death. A tyranny of a different type—a human tyranny. I would not suffer your people's control over Sethia. I wished to build something different. Something better. And I won't apologize for that."

"No matter who got in the way, is that it?" Durran spat.

"Yes, that's it," Titus spread his arms out. "There's your answer. I kept you ignorant because you are the enemy as much as the Vessels are."

Durran stared him down in silence, hand clenched tightly against his glaive.

“We will work together to remove the Vessels. With Crislia’s intervention, the battle will come soon. But as far as I am concerned, your people are yet another blight on this beautiful land.” Titus shook his head.

Durran backhanded Titus, sending him sprawling against the chair. The flimsy wooden thing shattered. He turned in the same movement.

“We’ll do our part, Titus,” Durran said coldly. “And then we’ll settle things.”

Titus stared up at him bitterly, slowly rising to his feet amidst the shattered chair. Boarmask’s gaze lingered on Titus for a long while, and then he moved for the door, following after Durran.

#####

With a direct command from Brium, Argrave had no choice but to leave Sethia immediately, still sore and unrested from the wearying journey to the elves. Things had mostly aligned with their expectations, barring Yarra’s presence.

They arrived back at the flat stretch of sand they had first entered into the southron elves’ territory. Argrave didn’t know if the elves had time enough to migrate, but the sword stabbed into the sand was broken—their magic would no longer function, even if Yarra did the correct ritual. He supposed it didn’t matter anymore, anyway.

“Break the seal, once more,” Yarra directed Argrave.

Argrave looked to Galamon, who stood behind Brium’s trusted Vessel. “Need to spill some water, first. Time for blood.”

Galamon removed his helmet from atop Garm’s head quietly, placing it over his own. He set the backpack down. His Ebonice axe was the only that could be drawn without making noise, and he did so. Yarra crossed her arms, ignorant, and began to turn to look around. The elven vampire’s axe descended, cleaving into her head.

Water burst into the air near a hundred feet as though a hole had been made in a dam. Yarra staggered towards Argrave, who stepped back to avoid her. She fell, but as her body made contact with the black sand beneath, her flesh turned to liquid and a great mass of water exploded out. The explosion caught all of them, tossing them back. Argrave landed on his back a fair distance away, much of his face stinging where he’d been cut by high-pressure water.

A great sphere of water rested where Yarra once was, an infant form encased in the center. Argrave could see blood on the back of the baby’s head through the crystal-clear water. Focused, he raised his hand and started to use the spell [Electric Eel]. Blue eels of lightning emerged from his hand, sparking loudly as though crying out in the silence of the night.

The sphere of water took on purpose in that moment, going from an unrefined mass of water to a dangerous Vessel—tendrils of water rose into the sky, each and all twisting and writhing towards the three separate targets. The attacks seemed sluggish compared to what they had seen at Malgeridum. That was the effect of the blow to the head, Argrave knew, and he’d long ago instructed Galamon to do just that.

Anneliese conjured a B-rank ward with her enchanted ring. Jets of water slammed against the golden shield, and it cracked in a multitude of places. Galamon seized the initiative, pressing against the Vessel's onslaught. Each swing of his Ebonice axe made the approaching tendrils lose their animation, turning into harmless water.

Argrave, though, left himself open, retreating away. Yarra's attacks were unrelenting and dangerous. He dodged as best he could, though he had little doubt that his enchanted leather gear saved his life many times. With greater distance, the water needed to be stretched thinner. The orb in the center, encasing the Vessel's infant form, began to thin.

Common perception dictated that water conducted electricity well. The opposite was true. Water—pure water, unpolluted by dissolved matter—was actually an amazing insulator. Argrave only knew this bit of knowledge because the Vessels were resistant to electricity in 'Heroes of Berendar,' a fact which spurred him to research the science behind the matter. He would need to strike very close to Yarra's true form to end her, and as such, he needed to stretch her thin.

A jet struck Argrave in the cheek, casting him to the ground. His vision blurred with pain, but he remembered his role. The electric eels he'd been conjuring the entire time rushed forward towards the Vessel's physical body. The baby was drawn away by a current, twisting about and away with inhuman speed as it tried to get away from the assault. Argrave hounded it as unrelentingly as it had hounded him.

The water rushed back, trying to protect the infantile form, but Argrave kept his pursuit up. Blood started to drip into his eyes from a wound he didn't know he had, but he persisted. Eventually, as the water rose up into the sky, sparking eels nipping at its heels, Yarra ran out of water to flee into. The electric eels surged into the water, and the infant form protected by Fellhorn's blessing sparked with electricity.

After an unbearably long moment of suspense, the titanic mass of water sagged like a body losing life. Then, gravity seized it, and it all came crashing down, filling the vast pit where the illusion magic formation had once been.

Anneliese managed to escape the rushing tide of water without getting wet at all—Argrave was far enough he didn't have to move. Galamon, though, trudged out, water draining from holes in his armor. His expression was hidden by his helmet, but he seemed incredibly bitter. Once he freed his feet of the water, he walked up to Argrave, patches of wet sand stuck to his armor.

"Clean," said Argrave, out of breath. "Not as clean as I'd have liked, but..." Argrave moved to the newly-formed pool, using the water to clean his face.

"It's done. These things... are very difficult to deal with. I question our chances," commented Galamon.

"She was one of the strongest," Argrave reassured. "A wyvern is a great match for them." The Brumesingers emerged from Argrave's duster, scattering out over the sand and watching Argrave, almost worriedly. Argrave healed his cheek, then searched out other cuts to tend to.

"We have stepped past the point of no return," Anneliese noted, joining the two of them. "If things go awry..."

"If things go awry, then we'll work something out," Argrave shook his head. "Let's get our bearings... and then get ready."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 135: Banners

Argrave's hand emerged from a still body of water, grasping onto a sandy beach. The sand fell away, and he fell back in. A second later, his hand came back up, and he used his elbow to raise himself up out of the water.

"Christ," he gasped, water dripping off his face. "Cold. Didn't think about how much of a nightmare this place would be."

Argrave felt a colder glaive pointed against his neck, and he raised his head up, blinking water out of his eyes.

"That's because it's an emergency entrance to this place," Corentin said, staring down at Argrave with his one good eye. "And I'm questioning how you knew of it."

Argrave shamelessly grabbed Corentin's glaive, and the old one-eyed veteran laughed and helped Argrave out of the pool. Soon enough, Anneliese emerged, having little trouble freeing herself from the pool.

Lastly, Galamon came up. Weighed down by plate armor, he had to climb up the side of the wall, digging his hands and feet into the sand bank. Corentin offered a hand, but Galamon refused it, coming to stand tall.

"...I'll have to do rust treatment. Again," Galamon said bitterly.

"Who's this one?" Corentin inquired, staring at Anneliese.

"Another friend, completely trustworthy," said Argrave, rising to his feet while shivering. "Water's too cold. I hate this."

"Welcome to Otraccia. You've come a little too quickly," Corentin shook his head. "We've only just migrated here. Beyond telling Durran what you've told us, we haven't had time to do anything else, least of all deliver supplies to the southern tribals."

"Yeah," Argrave nodded, shaking himself about to cast off some of the water. The Brumesingers jumped out of his duster, shaking themselves off of all water. Argrave shied away as he was pelted with water droplets. "That's because things are moving a little too quickly," Argrave said grimly, shaking cold water off himself.

"What do you mean?" Corentin stabbed his glaive into the sand and crossed his arms.

"The battle will happen tomorrow morning," Argrave conjured fire, holding his face a little close to ward off the cold. "Things have gone a lot faster than I thought they might."

Corentin's one eye grew distant. "Gods above."

"The Lord of Copper sent me here to gather fighters—something I don't intend on doing, naturally," Argrave assured at once. "I know well that your people aren't exactly fit for a large-scale confrontation of this sort. I was hoping, though, that I might get some of the war relics you promised the southern tribals. A Sand Courser, most preferably. We have backpacks. We left them outside the illusory entrance, because they're filled with books. Not exactly suited for water."

Nor is Garm, Argrave thought, but kept that to himself. It wouldn't be dangerous, per se, but he still felt hesitant to bring the head into the town in case something unforeseen should come to pass.

Corentin took a deep breath and exhaled, then nodded intently. "A Sand Courser? I can't decide this. Wait here. I'll bring the others. They're checking out the old buildings, making sure the forges and such still function."

The one-eyed veteran took off in a steady jog, but Argrave paused before sitting down. The enchantments on his gear had warded off the majority of the water from seeping in, but his clothes were still a bit heavier.

"Do you think these supplies will help, if we even get them?" Anneliese questioned.

"If we get them, they'll do more than just 'help.' It'll probably be our lynchpin for the raid on Argent." Argrave sat cross-legged in the sand, waiting. "Maybe I didn't talk them up enough. I just never thought we'd be the one to use them."

Anneliese sat down beside him. Galamon was removing his armor, shaking the water off it annoyedly.

"I'm a bit nervous," he confessed to Anneliese. The Brumesingers came to him, curling up near his legs.

"A bit?" she repeated.

Argrave furrowed his brows, then shook his head defeatedly. "Fine. I'm really nervous."

She laughed, then grabbed his wrist, giving silent support with a gentle grip. Argrave turned his head, locking eyes with her. He said nothing for a time—he didn't know what to say. Something finally came to mind.

"What happened here? We feed a stray dog, it follows us to our new home," Morvan No-Nose shouted out, prompting Argrave to turn quickly and leave his words unspoken. "And it brings friends," the southron elf noted, coming to stand before them.

"Morvan," Argrave greeted, rising to his feet. "Everyone. Didn't expect to see me again so quickly, I'm betting."

"It's like I was telling them. He just missed us too much," Corentin shouted out from the back.

The old veterans laughed, and Florimund came to stand before Argrave. "Corentin informed us of the situation. The battle is to start tomorrow?"

"According to everything I've been told, yes," Argrave nodded.

Florimund turned around, looking at his men. He said nothing, lost in thought, but eventually turned back to face Argrave. "Alright. We'll lend our support."

Argrave smiled and nodded excitedly. "That's good. That's great!" he praised.

"The boys and I—we've been talking," Florimund continued. "We're old. Some of us... well, most of us... we're almost too old."

"Yeah, Florimund has a hard time functioning as a man anymore," Yann called out.

"I'll give you a crack in the head, 'can't function,'" Florimund turned about, laughing. Their easy-going banter seeped into Argrave's mind, easing his frayed nerves somewhat. "As I was saying, we're old enough to fight... but too old to be of much use for much longer."

"What are you driving at?" Argrave held his hands out.

"The southern tribals," Florimund turned back. "There's bad blood between us. For centuries, there has been. Giving them arms, armor—that won't be enough to put that to bed." He looked back to the veterans. "We'll be joining you."

Argrave's eyes widened. "What?"

"Even if the Vessels are wiped out, we have to make peace with the tribals," Morvan noted. "We can't function if we keep wandering about, isolated migrants roaming from hidden town to hidden town."

Florimund nodded. "We need a place in this new world. And we won't have one if we don't get involved. The tribals need to know we're their allies, not their enemies." The old elf crossed his arms. "Durran's a good man, but he can't control everyone's actions, everyone's thoughts. Fighting with them, side-by-side... they'll never forget that."

"It'll help if they're afraid of us, too," Yann noted.

"Well..." Argrave put his hand to his chin. "I'm not in the position to say 'no.' I can take every bit of help I can get."

"Then it's settled," Florimund reached up, grasping Argrave's shoulder. "We'll prepare. And then, tomorrow, I'll lead my men into battle at your side."

#####

It was a cold morning. Durran sat there, watching the suns rise ever higher above the sky. He had donned his armor—wyvern scale armor—and sat atop rocks, arm wrapped around his glaive as it leaned against his shoulder. His wyvern, a great gray beast, lounged nearby, resting.

"Not a cloud in the sky," Boarmask noted, staring out. "It'll be a fine day for things."

"Clouds mean rain," Durran said. "It hasn't rained in years."

Boarmask grew silent at Durran's answer, and the two watched the rising suns in silence.

"I meant what I said," Boarmask broke the silence. "I'll help you with Titus, when things are done."

"And what will you do, hmm?" Durran turned his head. "Give him a fair trial? I don't think we have the same idea of 'justice.'"

“Every man deserves a fair trial,” Boarmask crossed his arms, plate armor creaking. “No matter what they’ve done.”

Durran shook his head. “Life isn’t fair. Don’t bother trying to make it so. You’ll just end up with a gut full of spite, loathing this twisted world.”

“Durran!” someone called out, and Durran twisted his head back. A warrior wearing wyvern scale hopped over the rocks, making his way over to the pair of them. “Durran, it’s your father.”

“What happened?” Durran rose to his feet. “Has he gotten worse?”

“No,” the warrior shook his head. “Better, actually. Best I’ve seen him all year. But... he’s asking to see you.”

Durran ground his teeth together. Then, he held his glaive towards Boarmask. “Hold this. If you see Brium’s signal, blow the horn. You know the drill.”

Boarmask took the glaive, and then Durran set out, scrambling up the rocks adeptly. Eventually, the mountains cleared up into a large, open valley. The place was beautiful, overgrown with life, a large river running down its center. Homes had been built into the side of the valley, carved out from the rocks. Nearly each and every home had a wyvern just above it, nesting in a cave. People flew about atop wyverns from place to place, and the place was a hive of activity.

Durran ran up the center of the valley, moving past the great mass of people as he followed the river. All were readying for war, their weapons prepared for combat and their armor at the ready. People seemed to bubble with excitement, young and old.

In the back, there was a crude stone palace. Durran paused at its foot, catching his breath, and then entered with slow, steady steps. The stream running down the valley originated from this place, and consequently, it was well-guarded. Wyverns and men both stood at attention here, watching and waiting. None barred Durran’s entry, and he made his way for the back.

Inside, there was a bed of stone holding an emaciated man with a large frame. His wispy white hair was silver from age, but the man still had powerful golden eyes. He rather resembled Durran, though seemed much sterner. A young woman attended to him.

As soon as Durran entered, his father’s golden eyes locked on him. “Boy,” he called out, voice hoarse.

Though his father’s voice was nowhere near as powerful as it once was, his words still had an almost instinctive effect. At once, he ran to his father’s bedside and kneeled.

His father grabbed his armor and shook him weakly. “What are you thinking?”

Durran offered token resistance, then seized his father’s wrist and pulled it away. “Father, you’ve just woken up. Don’t strain yourself. You may make things worse.” He looked to the woman attending him. “Give us some space.”

“Worse?” his father repeated as the attendant left. “I’ve got one foot in the grave, how much damned worse can it get?” he wheezed, then coughed. “But I hear it. Outside. Men preparing for war—it’s a sound I’d never forget. The nervous cheers.”

Durran took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Stop this foolishness,” his father said at once. “You bear my name, ‘Durran.’ We don’t have the numbers to do this.”

“But I—”

“I won’t hear it. I am still chief. This ends, now,” Durran’s father commanded. “You will go outside. You will tell them my order. I will not have the last of our people, the last of our great beasts of war, perish in this assault.”

Durran stared at his father, saying nothing.

“Don’t give me that look, boy,” Durran’s father reprimanded. “I am still chief. Disobedience will not be tolerated. You have nephews eager and willing to take your place. You’re my son, true enough, but the tribe comes before you, before me.”

“You’re talking about banishing me?”

“Not talking about. Threatening. Key difference, boy,” the chief shook his head. “Now, go. Go!” he shouted, pointing out the door.

Durran rose to his feet, walking to the entrance. The female attendant made to go back inside, but Durran grabbed her wrist.

“My father said he wished for some time to be alone with his thoughts,” Durran said. “Give him some time. He’ll call you when you’re needed.”

The female attendant nodded, and Durran walked outside, staring out across the valley. His gaze was grim and torn, and he clenched his fists tight.

“All the times he chided me for being weak... now he wants me to back off?” Durran muttered.