

Jackal 141

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 141: Steel Tempered by Tyrants

In the alleyways of Sethia, someone crawled away on their knees, veritably pulling themselves forward using the walls. They pushed aside rubble, heaving, then eventually collapsed against a building, breathless.

“Haah... haah,” the man breathed. Covered in grime, dust, and sand, the man was entirely nude. He was ridiculously skinny, appearing both dehydrated and starved. His hair and eyes were brown. His skin was the color of copper.

If any of the residents of the city saw him, they would know he was unmistakably the Lord of Copper.

Brium did not consider himself a fool. He knew when he had lost a battle. His enemies waited beyond, letting the elves tear at him like wolves hunting a lion. All of his allies were vanquished. His death was inevitable. As such, rather than perish, he elected to commit the only cardinal sin for Vessels of Fellhorn—severing his connection with the ancient god.

Two Vessels before Brium had done such a thing. It was an abominable act, and all who had done it had died miserably. Brium was no more than a mortal man, now. He looked much older than he once did—near forty, his true age. He was weak, friendless, and surrounded by people hostile to him. But he was alive, and that alone was sufficient.

After having caught his breath, he tried to rise to his feet. Something stopped him from doing so. Brium raised his head up, only to see a man in plate armor holding a boot to his shoulder.

Boarmask stood there. His namesake, the boar helmet, was badly dented. Part of the mock boar’s eye was caved in. His armor had been ripped asunder in many places, and even now, the man was bleeding.

“Planning an escape?” Boarmask questioned. “You aren’t why I’m stalking these streets. But the world must consider itself fortunate that I was watching. A tyrant such as you cannot escape judgement.”

Brium raised his hand up. He opened his mouth, but his tongue was dry, and he could form no words. Boarmask raised his mace up. Light fell onto his helmet, revealing a blue eye as cold as the deep sea.

“Reap the misery you have sown.”

Boarmask’s mace descended. After a second, the man pulled away his foot and mace both.

“Gods above, nurture these souls I send to you, wicked though they may be,” Boarmask prayed as he cleaned his mace. “There is one more I must send to meet you. I beg of you—watch over me, and ensure I walk the righteous path.”

Boarmask limped into the alleyway, where Titus’ voice grew ever louder.

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Now that Titus had brought his plan into light, many of the oddities and inconsistencies throughout their journey started to make sense to Argrave.

Regarding the weaponry... the only place where that many elven war relics could be found was in Malgeridum, deep within a cordoned section of the mines. Titus presumably found them there. The revolt was likely a distraction to move them—and it would explain why Anneliese noticed Titus was nervous and anticipatory.

His strange, uncertain allegiance started to make sense, if only just. Since he knew much about Durran and the tribals, he had likely been the intermediary between them and Brium. He was near certainly the Lord of Copper's primary agent in this coup, influencing guards and population alike.

The mystery remaining, though, was how this dye merchant had grown to this position of prominence. Was it a variation between fiction and reality? Was it a set of coincidences, one after another? Had Argrave brought this about by changing things? Or were powers beyond Argrave's ken influencing matters?

Argrave stepped into the square where the victors gathered, listening to Titus. Blue eels sparked and swirled around him dramatically. His Brumesingers flanked him, filling the air with their mysterious fog as they sung their chiming song. Following behind was Anneliese, Galamon, the southron elves. Everyone noticed their presence—flashing lights and growing mists were eye-catching, after all.

If they wanted to be heard in a large crowd, they must be seen—and Argrave made damn sure they'd be seen.

Anneliese held her hand up and cast [Skysunder], the loudest spell that they knew. It achieved the same effect as Titus' bell—everyone focused on them.

Argrave spread his arms out and shouted, "People of Sethia! People of the tribes! All of the lords of this city are dead and gone! The Lord of Gold, slain by her own people! The Lord of Silver, felled by my hand!" Argrave revealed the silver inheritance medallion—it was a ceremonial thing, and so easily recognizable. "And lastly, the Lord of Copper, slain by the heroic elves of the Burnt Desert!"

The crowd greeted this with enthusiasm—it was the sort of friendly welcome Argrave hoped to receive, that they might be more receptive to further direction. Durran turned his gaze towards them, too, and urged his wyvern to rest not too far from them.

"Despite what Titus claims, the southron elves did not provide Durran with any weaponry whatsoever." Argrave stepped forward, standing atop rubble to reach a higher place. "I brought the elves into this struggle for independence—no one else!" Argrave waved Florimund up to where he stood.

"It's true," Florimund added as he came to join them. "We provided no weaponry to the people here. We were aware of the coming battle only days ago—there was no time to distribute weapons to anyone."

"He's covering for them!" a member of the crowd shouted. "The elves need the tribals' protection!"

"Do a people who would confront the Lord of Copper alone seem the type to scrape and bow for the sake of protection?" Argrave countered quickly, anticipating Titus' men might try and sabotage things. "No! They seek peace, not protection."

"I can attest to the southron elves' innocence in this matter. Yet how can any trust Durran?" Titus shouted out. "The tribals know he was the one to discover the southron elves, despite what this foreigner claims!"

He discredits me by naming me foreigner, Argrave deduced quickly. "If none know of this collaboration besides the tribals, then how do you?!" Argrave questioned. "Where is your proof?"

"Because I was once a tribal," Titus replied quickly. "And I still have friends there. Belhard!"

The man who'd spoken against the elves earlier rose, almost in cue. "Aye! Titus has kept in contact with us. He suffered underneath the reign of the Vessels, fighting for independence from within!"

"Then it seems just as likely that he is the one who armed men with elven war relics as Durran," Argrave suggested at once.

A few voices rose up, booing, and the power of the few bought voices within a crowd made itself known. A mob was a volatile thing—humans are reasonable creatures, by and large, but within a crowd, one can project their opinion infinitely. People join in protest simply to be a part of the group. Self-awareness and personal identity are muted in a mob, and reactions trend towards the emotional side of reasoning.

The large majority of the people likely did not know who Titus even was, but the crowd soon joined in expressing their disdain for Argrave's accusation.

Titus rang his bell and made to speak, but Argrave seized the opportunity.

"I accuse no one!" Argrave explained. "There is simply no proof in this matter! A proper judgement cannot be made."

"And why not?" another voice chimed in. Boarmask appeared on a roof, holding a man by the neck. "I captured this man. He had these," he explained, holding out arrows that had purple runes etched into the arrowheads. "How did you get these?!" Boarmask demanded of the man, shaking him about.

Argrave nodded at the unexpected contribution.

"Titus! Titus' men gave them to us, gave us all our plans!" the man shouted, choking from Boarmask's grip.

Those words could not be booed, but a silence did take over the crowd.

"The man's been badly beaten—he'd say anything!" Titus refuted, and his men planted in the crowd joined in support.

"Argrave..." Galamon muttered, stepping up to him. "Titus' archers are getting twitchy."

Argrave nodded, feeling a sense of nervousness.

"What's more," Titus continued. "Durran, son of the current chief, led his people into war against his father's wishes!" He pointed to Durran, still mounted atop his wyvern. "Your father said he would exile you if you went through with this!"

Argrave's heart froze. In the game, Durran could reconcile with his father and earn his support if the player took certain actions—he didn't know if the Durran of this reality had. Though Argrave looked to

Durran, hoping to all that was holy that wasn't true, he could glean nothing for the man wore a helmet. Argrave looked to Anneliese.

"...Titus isn't lying," she shook her head.

"He led men into war against the wishes of his dying father!" Titus declared damningly. "If that proves anything, it shows that Durran is one who would do anything to gain power! By giving elven war relics, ordering indiscriminate slaughter, he sought to weaken Sethia, control it completely with his tribals!"

Dying father? Argrave noted. *Durran's dad never...*

"People!" Titus shouted, stepping forth to the edge of the tower he stood atop. "For centuries, the Burnt Desert has been trampled beneath the heel of tyrants! For the first time in ages, we have liberated this place from the cruel, from the unjust, from the wicked!"

Cheers began to swell, and Titus continued. "In the distant past, the southern tribals waged war unending—with each other, with the north, with the southron elves!" Titus spread his arms out and paced about. "And after them came the Vessels—tyrants of a different breed, religious fanatics fueled by zeal and following cold laws of an ancient god. We have suffered beneath them, all of us! They took the very water from the earth, the very blood from our veins, our souls from our bodies! My own wife, my children, both Drained by the Vessels!"

Argrave sought desperately for a point to interject, feeling the crowd slowly slipping away into Titus' narrative. His words seemed ironclad, though, and Argrave did not dare force his way into things lest he draw yet more ire.

"In Delphasium, our people labor for hours unending, tending to fields and feeding grapes to their overlords!" Titus pointed north. "In Malgeridum, the Vessels prostitute our women to the rich, while the men work in the mines, breathing metal and fire day in and day out to be rewarded with only food and drink!" Titus pointed east. "In Carlandian, people toil away, crafting fineries and papyrus that the Vessels use wastefully. Tyrants all—untenable, intolerable, unjust!"

Titus paused to take a great breath. "This land—this great land, with its stark beauty, does not need to be ruled by those past!" He stepped to the edge. "We cannot allow a man like Durran, a man who would do anything to gain power, to once again lead us towards death and misery! We need a nation to mend the wounds caused by despots! We have that opportunity! Let us go forth into a new age, embracing change! Embracing unity between the southern tribals, the southron elves, and all the people of this vast desert!"

With that, Titus turned and rang the bell. Perhaps he did not need to, though. The great ringing was completely muffled by the deafening cheers that erupted following Titus' speech. Argrave could feel their voices shake the air, almost.

"His archers are all but ready to fire," Galamon said loudly in Argrave's ear.

Argrave nodded. It was a game of chicken, now—Titus had no plans to back down. Argrave could tell that the man was willing to do anything to achieve the future he envisioned. That impression was drilled into the crowd's bones just as well as Argrave's.

An incredibly loud noise split the air, sending the mist spawned by the Brumesingers dancing away in a whirl. Durran's wyvern roared, head held high, maintaining its volume for nearly ten seconds. People stumbled over themselves, afraid, and many readied to fight.

Durran walked atop his wyvern's snout and removed his wyvern scale helmet.

"Let this 'tyrant' speak," he said, wrath in his voice.

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Chapter 142: Left Wanting

"You," growled Durran. "All of you. Before the battle is even finished, you devolve into base vultures. You pick at a carcass still warm, still pumping blood." He looked about the crowd. "You paint me as a monster with the direction of some snake merchant, who puts forth his own claim to the city in the same breath."

The people beneath Titus rose their voices, but Durran raised his own volume, drowning them out. "I thought to help people. The purest motivation, devoid of politics, of ambition. I left the tribes, saw the people of Sethia suffering... and I knew that something had to be done, even if it cost me my future in the tribe." Durran spread his arms out, and his wyvern rose him up higher. "It seems, though, that good intentions are always marred by opportunists. I should have known better.

"So go forth," Durran continued, waving his hands dismissively. "Go into your 'new age,' striving for a better future, led by men like Titus who butcher your brothers and sisters to frame another. I'll have no part of this anymore, even if you beg. But I won't stand here and let anyone accuse me of wrongdoing."

"Durran..!" Boarmask called out.

"Forget it," Durran shook his head. "Titus. If there's one thing we agree on, it's that my people offer no future for the desert. But you... you are no different than the Brandback buried in the sand, luring people in with promise of an oasis only to swallow them whole. I won't endanger myself to save fools—not any longer."

Durran strode down the back of his wyvern's neck. People shouted at him and threw things.

Titus made a hand signal, and Galamon tensed, grasping Argrave's shoulder to remind him of the archers. Argrave knew that Titus, ruthless as he was, wouldn't remain content in allowing his largest opponent to simply walk away. Thinking desperately, Argrave willed the electric eels he'd summoned earlier away from his person until they hovered above the belltower Titus stood atop. It was a conspicuous move, but Argrave felt no other option.

"Durran," Argrave called out, voice tight. "One of the men with me is injured—Corentin. I think I'll need you to give them a ride... for safety," he alluded.

Argrave pointed to the roofs where the archers watched, and Durran, with a higher vantage point, spotted them and caught on quickly.

"Fine," he said, acting bitter. "Hurry things along. If I see these snakes any longer, I might vomit."

Argrave locked eyes with Titus. The two held their gaze for a long while. Argrave spread his arms out, letting the electric eels dance a little faster. Eventually, the dye merchant lowered his hands, and

Galamon's tense grip slackened. The archers soon slid down the roof quietly and jumped off. Argrave called back his eels, though kept Titus' position in mind.

"...the bodies," Florimund spoke up. "They need to be delivered home. I don't wish to leave them in the open sun. Corentin—you should go with. I'll stay. I need to speak for my people, should the need arise."

"I can bring the bodies," Durran said, gaze distant. "But not much else."

"We can walk back to Otraccia," Argrave suggested. "Sorry to impose, Durran, but... can you help them out?"

"Might not be welcome home, anymore," Durran noted, keeping his wyvern steady as he stared out across the crowd with cold eyes. "Otraccia is as fine a place to go as any." Durran stopped scanning the crowd, setting his eyes on Boarmask. "And what will you do?"

"My business here is not yet done," Boarmask said simply. "But I won't act rashly. Not yet. I refuse to make things worse. So go... Durran, Argrave." The masked knight looked to him as he mentioned his name. "You rather resemble your brother... though much skinnier," the masked knight noted.

Argrave didn't know how to respond to that for a time, but eventually he managed, "Hopefully a lot less heartless."

"I don't know." Boarmask shook his head. "Time will make that clear."

"That's true... Rolf," Argrave said the man's real name, then walked away, content to leave him unsettled. As Argrave left, Boarmask never tore his gaze away from his departure, stunned.

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"Now you see the merit of your help," Garm noted as they walked across the warm sand. "You leave hated, unwanted. You extend your hand only to have it bitten. If people find you have a heart of gold, they won't admire it. They'll mine it until every vein of gold is dry, leaving you only with a withered husk of stone."

Argrave trod up the dunes silently, turning to look back at Sethia. The place was badly flooded and largely ruined. Galamon walked with them, unfocused, while Anneliese led them, her expression indiscernible.

"You sure know how to cheer everyone up, Garm," Argrave finally responded, voice and gaze both distant. He thought back to the battle against the Lord of Silver. "How's your soul?"

"My soul?" Garm repeated, confused.

"Spare me the act," Argrave turned from Sethia, facing the head atop Galamon's backpack. "You used [Voice of the Corrupt]. Barring the fact that's a B-rank spell you supposedly can't cast, I know you haven't done any soul harvesting recently, so you must've used a piece of your own."

Galamon devoted his attention to the conversation, while Garm's black and gold eyes stayed fixed on Argrave.

"The proof," Garm finally said. Argrave raised a brow in the silence that followed. "You've given plenty proof."

"About Gerechtigheit?"

"What are you, exactly?" Garm asked. "The things you know... I have no choice but to acknowledge it. You're not an extrasensory of some kind—it seems you have a base of knowledge to fall back on. What is it?"

Argrave said nothing, thinking of how to answer this. Garm continued his inquiries. "You mentioned avatars... and other strange, convoluted things. Are you the hand of some god? A prophet? I certainly don't see you kneel and pray at any time, so it's doubtful."

"You're willing to admit, then, that I'm telling the truth?" Argrave stepped a little closer.

Garm's eyes followed Argrave. "My soul... yes, I used some of my soul. Much of it was to save myself. I die with you, in case you forget."

"I asked that question a minute ago, and you answer it now?" Argrave shook his head.

"I'm making a point. It's an analogy," Garm closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened once more, they seemed fiercer, somehow. "I'm a walking... damn," he trailed off, recognizing he used the wrong word. "I embody a contradiction."

"Embody," Argrave repeated. "Even that word is a bit ill-fit—"

"You think I'm not aware I live only because of your party's generosity?" Garm interrupted, voice cold. "My existence can only be sustained by selflessness, yet I preach constantly about the virtue of self-importance."

"We brokered an agreement," Anneliese said. "The others agreed. It—"

"A deal maintained only because you people are stupid enough to keep your word," Garm butted in once more, then laughed. It was a bitter, slow chuckle, that slowly trailed off. "I always found the Veidimen foreign. A people who value contracts, honor, loyalty, above even their own life. It seemed ridiculous. Yet here we are. Excluding one notable exception that happened today, my presence has only hindered you. Still, you keep me around."

Argrave crossed his arms. "Yeah, we keep you around. You think we shouldn't? I don't know as much as I want, but even the Order of the Rose wasn't this... absolutist, shall we say, about these things."

Garm lowered his gaze to the sand below. "It's a personal philosophy, not a cultural one. I'll spare you my tale of woe—I don't care to relive it by telling it to others," he raised his gaze back to Argrave. "But every time I tried to be generous... I was disappointed." He laughed through his nose, then added, "Even landing as I am... the man who made me this way... I taught him. Hah!"

Garm laughed as though it was the funniest thing in the world, repeating the line, 'I taught him.'

"I helped him devise the theory that makes you three drag me about as the burden I am. I was on a selfish streak until that point, but then I decided to be golden hearted once again. Look at me now."

"You're alive," Argrave said simply. "He isn't."

Garm sighed. "I know. Disappointing in some ways, oddly comforting in others. But the point is this." Garm's brows furrowed. "It's hard for me to muster the will to do something that doesn't benefit me. Not after what I've been through."

"But..." Anneliese prompted him, catching he had more to say.

"But that boy, Durran," Garm began. "He reminds me of myself. Same sense of humor. And he projects that very same disappointment I feel. That... coupled with how you fools have treated me... I don't know," the trailed off, taking a pause to regather his thoughts. "All I can do is think—I'm more brain than skin. And I've been doing much thinking."

Garm's gaze jumped between the three of them. "I'd like to ask a favor. I want to talk to Durran. You said a while ago you want him as an ally. Maybe I can make that happen. Almost... like confronting myself, in a manner of speaking. But... and though I loathe to say it... if you can give me this last bit of proof, if you can become Black Blooded as you claim... I'll help you. All of you. No more holding back. I'll cooperate. Fully."

Argrave smiled—it felt like the first time he'd done that today. "I'm happy to hear it."

"Don't act like it's earth-shattering," Garm cautioned. "We've established I'm a burden who can offer very little genuine help. My magic takes months to replenish—that one spell I used set me back immeasurably."

Anneliese raised her hand to draw attention. "Durran may not be as you think, though. His anger is not genuinely towards the people, I believe—it is towards himself. His own weakness, his own inability."

Garm smiled knowingly. "All the more reason, then."

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Galamon held his gauntlet in hand, sitting atop a rock. His arm had been cleanly severed, destroying the armor with it. It had been a difficult task to remove the flesh from the metal, but now that it was free, he could not reconnect it with the rest of his armor. It was yet another thing he needed a smith for.

They were in the oasis town of Otraccia. Argrave spoke with Durran and the southron elves—he'd practically ordered Galamon to rest, perhaps in an attempt to allow the vampire to regain his focus, put his self-loathing to bed.

"Galamon," Anneliese interrupted, and the vampire raised his head up quickly, surprised. "I have never come this close without you noticing before. You are very disturbed."

Galamon said nothing.

"Do you know..." she began, stepping closer. "I am the reason those slaves in Argent are dead?"

Galamon frowned at once. "Don't comfort me with pedantry. Regardless of any mistake you might've—"

“Come to think of it, so is Argrave. And Garm.” She knelt down, staring at him. “We were aware of your vampirism—aware you are a hungry, bloodthirsty fiend. Yet we travel with you. We refrained from killing you.”

He stared at her, his expression still fierce.

“You see how ridiculous that sounds, no?” Anneliese said flatly. “I know you will piece yourself together, given time. But... I simply wished to contribute that to your thoughts. Everyone, it seems, is blaming themselves. Durran blames himself. Argrave blames himself. Even me... everyone feels responsible for misery around them. Like... we failed. We were found lacking.”

Galamon dropped the gauntlet he held.

“I... understand your point,” he finally said.

“Argrave relies on you. Seeing you like this makes him worry. And I do not like him to worry. That is all.” She shrugged, then rose to her feet.

“Cold words,” Galamon shook his head. “Fine. Never thought I’d be told to stop whining and suck it up.”

“That’s not—”

“Relax,” Galamon held a hand out. “Joking.” He rose to his feet, standing with a straight back. “Let’s go, then.”

Nothing more needed to be said, by Galamon’s estimation.

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Chapter 143: Cushioned Iron Fist

“When you said you had something to show me...” Durran trailed off, then looked to Argrave. “This is one of the last things I expected. You’re...”

“Not a necromancer, no,” Argrave shook his head. “He is, though. And he wishes to speak with you. The southron elves don’t care much about necromancy, so fret not.”

Durran stared down at Garm, brows furrowed and eyes wide. “Not ominous at all,” he nodded his head slowly. “Listen... I—”

“You *should* listen,” interjected Garm annoyedly. “Argrave. Let me speak to him alone.”

Argrave looked down at Garm. “Sure about that? What if...”

“If he ends me... avenge me, pretty please?” Garm mocked. “Just put me in the sand, walk away. The elves need to talk to you—that much I know. This one’s too bothered to be of much help. I’ll talk to him.”

Argrave shrugged, then planted Garm into the sand. “Alright. Be gentle, Durran—he’s more sensitive than he looks.” He walked away in long strides, casting glances backward occasionally.

"I know this is bizarre," Garm began once Argrave was far away. "But I don't want to be slowly introduced to you. I don't have the luxury of patience, grooming you to understand what I am. I need to speak, now."

"This is some..." Durran ran his fingers through his matted hair. "What are you?"

"Living misery," Garm introduced himself. "And Garm, High Wizard of the Order of the Rose."

Durran stared for a moment, then shook his head. "This should mean something to me?"

Garm sighed. "Foolish of me to think one secluded in the mountain would know of my order... It doesn't matter. I was once an A-rank mage. Still am, technically... but limited, as you can plainly see. Argrave has been accommodating me the past month."

Durran shifted on his feet. "Alright. Still not getting the full picture, but... you're a powerful spellcaster. You *were* a powerful spellcaster," he amended. "Still don't see why we should be speaking. Still don't know... how you speak," he added, obviously disturbed as he gazed at the stake protruding downwards from his neck.

"I'm speaking to you because we're alike, and we've gone through similar things." Garm paused, then lowered his voice. "Galamon, the big one—how near is he?"

Durran said nothing, very suspicious. Eventually, he scanned the distance, then said, "Pretty far."

"How far?" insisted Garm in a whisper.

"One... two hundred feet, I guess."

"It should be fine, then, but keep your voice down. That one hears all, and I won't draw suspicion by conjuring a ward." Garm cleared his throat—an action that disturbed Durran—and then continued.

"You. I can practically smell it on you. The frustration with other people. The frustration with yourself. Your weakness. Your ineffectual leadership."

"Are you about to tell me not to feel this way? A head on a stick comes to cheer me up because we're similar?" Durran laughed. "What is this, a joke? Comedy can't solve all woes, if this is what you're getting at."

"But you're also pragmatic," Garm continued in a low mutter. "And after that little awakening back at Sethia, doubtless you're feeling a bit... disillusioned. You're realizing how stupid the average person is."

Durran stared down at Garm, silenced by his words.

"You're right to think that. People can be stupid, provided they're leaded poorly," Garm stated matter-of-factly. "But you... you're weak. Nothing. No more than dirt, unable to enact meaningful change. You need power to save people from their own stupid decisions—power the world has proven you lack in totality."

Durran's golden eyes gained back some of their fire as he stared down at Garm. "In totality? You're taking the putdown a bit far, totem pole."

"Do you know why it is I travelled with the three of them?" Garm questioned. "I needed options. I needed a way to earn a new body. But things can change. The winds can shift."

"Sensible goal, I guess," Durran stared down at Garm cautiously. "Can't imagine life is easy for you as you are now."

"It's misery, as I said earlier," Garm confirmed. "I need a change, fast. Ever had sleep paralysis? It's a terrifying thing, and that terrifying thing is my entire life. I feel like I'm losing my mind every day. And now... my soul is damaged. You probably don't understand the meaning of that, but... it is..." the head struggled for the words. "It's bad for the mind, to say the least."

"Is it my turn to comfort you?" Durran questioned.

Garm sighed. "You *are* just like me. Damned smartass. No wonder people hate me."

"Hate? Women love me, I'll have you know," Durran quipped.

"Love you for a week or two, maybe more, 'til they realize they've made a mistake. I've had my fun in the sun, believe me—you can't fool me," Garm answered, undaunted. "You can see why that might be hard for me, now."

"We can agree on that, at least," Durran nodded slowly.

"We'll agree on more, if I've read you right—I know I have. You're weak. You resent this. You're proud of being talented, of being handsome, of being superior... not for vanity, but because you believe that you can handle the future best because of it."

Durran didn't answer, but his pupils shook as if he'd heard a sentence he'd been thinking for years.

"Imagine lacking arms, legs, even a torso... lacking independence." Garm stared up, unblinking. "I know you don't pity me. I wouldn't. But I... I know power. I know power better than any of the people you've seen today. Any you've seen *die* today. Brium, Quarrus, that golden one... forget her name... in my prime, they were *nothing* to me."

"Seems that worked out well for you," Durran interjected.

Garm blatantly ignored him. "We're on a limited time frame, so I'll speak my offer plainly. You'll help me. Quietly. Argrave, Galamon, Anneliese, even your lizard pet—you'll tell no one of our arrangement. And... in return... I'll make you know power, too. Power beyond your conception."

"Pretty sure it's a universally bad idea to accept a bargain with a head on a stake," Durran pointed out.

Garm smiled. "Maybe so. But time is running out fast. Soon, Argrave will become Black Blooded—the damn boy is so confident, it'd be more surprising if he was lying. He's under the impression he's the only one that knows this Alchemist, but the Order of the Rose knew of him, too. You're going to follow along—he wants you as an ally, and it should be simple enough." Garm's smile slowly dropped. "They won't want this. I don't plan on giving them a choice, though. I've been waiting too long for one bit of freedom."

Durran furrowed his brows, then finally whispered, "What exactly is it you want?"

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Florimund returned to Otraccia at night. Argrave was ready to receive him—the other southron elves tended to the bodies that Durran had brought back. Argrave certainly wasn't going to sleep. The elves of the village treated Argrave strangely—treated him as simultaneously a guest and a danger. He supposed it was respect. He wasn't used to that.

The leader of the old veterans didn't give news, first. Instead, Florimund asked Argrave, "Their bodies. They made it safely?"

"Er... yeah," Argrave confirmed. "They haven't been buried."

"I'll do that tonight," Florimund shook his head, his large ears swaying with the movement.

"Maybe you should rest first," Argrave suggested. "Well... not my place to give you advice. What happened at Sethia? Hated to leave like that, but it's clear it wasn't exactly safe."

"Titus... is already the *de facto* leader," Florimund shook his head. "He took control quickly. But... well, it did not feel like an armed takeover. He had medical needs tended to, food distributed, water collected, shelters established..." Florimund retrieved something. "And he gave me this. Instructed me to bring it to my people."

Argrave looked down. Light was dim, but he recognized it was paper.

"You've read it?" Argrave questioned, looking up.

"It's a proposal to us. A pact of non-aggression, mutual defense... and promises of supplement, aid, cooperation. Permits free entry into Sethia, gives exemptions from tolls and taxes. Priority in trade. All of it, free, and for the southron elves alone."

"That's..." Argrave trailed off. "It sounds like a very good thing. And that might be the problem. A honeyed apple hides poison all the better. It asks nothing of you?"

"There are some things," Florimund nodded, unrolling the paper. Argrave conjured light, scanning the document quickly. The ink was old and dry, suggesting the document had been drafted some time ago. "We have to recognize Sethia as independent... support Titus as its leader... and agree to use their soon-to-be minted coins in all of our dealings. Mutual defense, too, might be considered a 'condition.'"

Argrave soon confirmed the things Florimund described with his own eyes as he read the paper.

"But he..." Argrave hesitated to argue against the document. This was regarding the southron elves' future—what place did he have to argue?

"I know what you think," Florimund nodded. "This is a man willing to butcher innocents to gain this power. He tried to frame one of his allies when it was politically expedient." Florimund stepped away. "I cannot make the decisions for my people, though. I will tell them everything—believe me, I am as wary of Titus as you are."

Argrave rolled up the paper and held it back out to Florimund. "Don't forget he was ready to kill more people had I not threatened him personally."

"But he does not demand fealty," Florimund noted, taking the paper. "Instead, he suggests cooperation. He seemed... amenable to negotiations, too, if we were unsatisfied with the proposal." The elf held the paper close to his face. "We are isolated, protected. With the Vessels gone from Sethia, we are the safest we've been in decades. I see no reason we cannot probe, figure out whether or not he can be trusted."

"If that's your decision," Argrave said cautiously. "Regardless, I am eternally grateful for your help. What you've done... what you lost," Argrave noted, looking away where he knew the bodies of the veterans lie. "You have my condolences."

"Morvan would tell you to shove your condolences..." Florimund lowered his head, then laughed. "They were glad to be sacrificed. They fought for hope. Hope... for the first time in a while, I have some. Our future might not be so bleak." Florimund looked at the paper. "But maybe I'm an old man, fooled by a snake merchant."

"Be careful," Argrave warned. "Titus... I wish I knew more about him. I wish I could give you better advice than that. You might try asking Durran."

"You can't be expected to know everything, everyone." Florimund stepped up to Argrave, looking upwards into his eyes. "Did you get what you needed at Argent?"

"I did," Argrave nodded.

"Then what is next for you? My people made promises to you—they remain valid."

"I'll leave early dawn," Argrave looked to the sky. "Should reach where I need to be in a day. There..." Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled, as what was coming slowly set in. "Going to get some cosmetic surgery. Change my blood from red to black. Once that's done, I'll come back here, call in that promise." Argrave shrugged. "Though, with the war relics you gave us, feels like I'm asking too much..."

"Cosmetic surgery? Are you joking?"

Argrave lowered his head. "Well, it's not cosmetic."

Florimund snorted. "You're the sort that likes to be mysterious, I see."

"I'm caught," Argrave smiled.

"You should sleep," Florimund suggested. "Our homes are open to you."

Argrave looked away. "Can't sleep. Won't bother trying."

"New to bloodshed?" Florimund questioned.

"No. Not that," Argrave shook his head. "Sad as it is... gotten a little used to blood."

"Guilt, then," Florimund concluded.

Argrave frowned. "How'd you know?"

"It's obvious," Florimund nodded. "You have the guilt of a leader. You feel that the plans you made are insufficient. All the suffering—it's on your hands."

"A bit true," Argrave closed his eyes. "If I had been smarter, better—"

"Pointless questions," Florimund pushed Argrave lightly. "Reflect on mistakes—correct them. Ruining your inability is a useless thing."

Argrave digested the words, then laughed with a shake of his head. "I think Galamon said something like that, in the past."

"Because he was a leader once, too." Florimund pushed Argrave's shoulder once again. "I've said enough. I must... bury those I lost."

Argrave nodded. As Florimund left, he called out, "Thank you, Florimund. For everything."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 144: Ride and Die

"You want to give us a ride?" Argrave questioned Durran.

"I do," Durran nodded, spinning his wyvern scale helmet about in his hands. Up close, the armor was quite impressive—a coat of gray lamellar wyvern scales stretching down to the knees, held together with studs of what looked to be brass. His glaive was made of wyvern bone. It was done in the style of the southron elves. All-in-all, impressively armed.

Argrave crossed his arms. "Why?"

"You probably saved me from Titus," Durran answered at once. "I owe you a debt."

"I'd expect you to default on the first payment of any debt you got," Argrave shook his head. "And it's not 'probably.' I *did* save you from Titus."

Durran laughed. "You act like you know so much about me. It's a bit perplexing."

Argrave stared at Durran. The man was obviously in better spirits—he couldn't help but spare a glance at Garm.

"I know an uncomfortable amount about you," Argrave nodded. "Your favorite color is gray... particularly when supported with burgundy."

"Maybe that's why I'm coming," Durran suggested.

"Because your favorite color—"

"No, because you know so much about me," Durran interrupted.

"There is something I don't know," Argrave confessed. "Your father. You said he was dying?"

"Well... he improved in time to dish out some spiteful, life-ruining nonsense, but yeah," Durran nodded.

Argrave looked to Anneliese, and she nodded, confirming he was being honest. Argrave turned away. *Did he just catch an illness randomly? It's certainly possible... but it could be foul play, too.* Argrave juggled the idea, but then realized, *Does it really matter, now?*

“How in the world do you know so much about me while being ignorant of common knowledge within the tribe?” Durran stepped forth back into Argrave’s sight.

“For reasons you couldn’t comprehend or codify,” Argrave snapped back to attention. “Listen... the place we’re going is very out-of-the-way.”

“That’s fine. It’ll be nice to have a last long voyage with my girl,” Durran looked to where his wyvern was. Some of the southron elf children played with the creature cautiously. “She isn’t mine. She’s the tribe’s. She’ll go back to the tribe when I set her loose. She’s still young, and she needs to have children. Not many females left living after the battle.”

“Finders, keepers, maybe?” Argrave suggested.

Durran was confused for a second, but he placed the meaning after a time and laughed lightly. “She’s a social one. She won’t last long away from the others.”

Argrave sighed. “Maybe you can get another, then, bring it too. I’ll take it.”

“That’d be a sight, watching you try and fly,” Durran turned his head back. “But you still never answered me.”

Argrave looked over to Garm. “Ought to have him talk to people more,” he noted. “Happy to accept free transportation. I’ll need to get things together, secure them on the back of your wyvern... then we can get going.”

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Durran’s wyvern hovered above endless blackness. They were only a few hours past sunrise, and the suns had not yet come over some distant mountains, keeping the black desert illuminated only by the pale blue light of dawn.

Even if the place had been better illuminated, the only thing they’d be able to see better would be the eternal black dunes of sand. Not a bit of civilization could be seen in any direction, even from their significant height. To be lost in this place was a death sentence, it seemed—nothing lived here. Even the Brandbacks, titanic predators, did not lure prey in this place.

“You sure you aren’t taking me somewhere secluded to do me in?” Durran shouted over the winds.

“Given how many people hate you now, I don’t think seclusion would be necessary,” Argrave returned.

The great wyvern continued to glide onwards, Argrave confidently directing Durran where he knew to go. He used the mountains and the compass as his guide. Beside him, he saw Anneliese struggling with her hair—one of her braids had come loose, and strands of hair battered about everywhere. Argrave leaned in, shielding her from the wind, giving her time sufficient to correct the issue.

“Thanks,” she said. “Perhaps I should cut it. Given how much we travel, it only causes problems.”

“That would be a tragedy,” Argrave stated. “It looks too good to cut. Though, your choice, naturally.”

Anneliese tilted her head but said nothing in response. Argrave turned his attention back towards the dunes of sand.

Now that they approached Argrave's final goal, he finally felt the nervousness set in. He had been obsessively checking everything to be sure that nothing was amiss—the Wraith's Heart was fine, the Amaranthine Heart still functioned, the Unsullied Knife still retained its power, and the Crimson Wellspring had not a single crack.

Still, becoming Black Blooded as Argrave had a thousand times more weight than it had in 'Heroes of Berendar.' Failure and success both promised to be monumentally emotional things. If Argrave failed, now... to say the least, the prospect made falling off this wyvern seem not so bad.

But Argrave was not worried about failure. The Alchemist might be temperamental... but he would be as eager to perform this surgery as Argrave would be to receive it. Such was his nature. Argrave was more worried about whether or not his companions would get through this unscathed.

Argrave spotted a shift in the constant sand dunes and tapped Durran's shoulder. "There!" he pointed. "Where the color changes."

"The lighter shades of black?" Durran questioned, and Argrave nodded. "No, those are just quicksand pits. Must be somewhere else."

"That's the spot, Durran," Argrave insisted.

Durran turned his head back, staring Argrave down, but then eventually swallowed and nodded. As they neared the pits of quicksand, the wyvern started to slowly descend, spurred downwards by its rider. They circled around, and Durran eventually landed atop a dune of sand a fair distance away. The landing scattered sand everywhere.

"Whew," Argrave breathed out, then stepped off the wyverns. His legs, weak from the ride, collapsed beneath him, and he slid down the dune a bit in a sitting position. His Brumesingers abandoned him immediately, jumping to safety. Once Argrave came to a stop, he overlooked a vast plain of deadly quicksand.

Well, *somewhat* deadly quicksand. As long as one wasn't stupid, they could easily get out, even if they landed in the center of one of the pits. It wasn't meant to catch humans—it was meant for animals. Indeed, *meant*. They'd been constructed here, not formed naturally.

Argrave's Brumesingers came to his side, their golden eyes glowing. Apparently, they had much to eat here—plenty of souls drifting about, ready for feasting. Anneliese stepped up to Argrave, her own fox held in her hands. It quickly jumped down from her arms and watched the pits ahead, eating souls in silence with its kin.

"Desolate," Anneliese noted.

"Depressing," Galamon confirmed.

"Dastardly," Argrave finished the alliteration with an ill-fitting word, then sighed. "Now I'm thinking about Brium, that poet creep..."

"This is the treacherous path you mentioned?" Durran walked up, too, still holding his wyvern's reins as he walked. "Hope there's something I'm missing."

"Nope. Pick a hole, any hole... actually, that hole, specifically," Argrave pointed one out. "I've taken this path too many times to forget it."

"You want us to jump into quicksand?" Durran frowned.

"Us?" Argrave repeated. "I thought you wanted to give a ride, nothing more."

"I still want answers," Durran shook his head. "If I have to tag along until I get them, so be it."

Argrave frowned, suspicious of that answer. Durran was whimsical, but not to this degree. He had a purpose, certainly. He wondered what Garm had said to the man—it had to be something related to that. Argrave wished to simply ask, but he feared he might make Garm feel distrusted when things seemed to be improving.

Still, Argrave knew he didn't have the luxury to relax his vigilance—especially not when he was at the cusp of becoming Black Blooded. Argrave liked Durran. He wouldn't mind having him tag along, temporarily or permanently. He was talented, diligent... but his loyalty was untested.

I'll have a word with Anneliese and Galamon, have them keep a closer eye on Durran, he decided with some measure of guilt. He felt paranoid. He wasn't about to let guilt ruin months of blood, sweat, and tears, though. He wanted to trust Garm, but their own experience had proven he was capable of deception. Durran was no saint, either.

"Well, I don't exactly loathe your presence. If you wish to follow, follow." Argrave rose to his feet with a grunt. "But maybe I'm just a madman about to jump into quicksand. Ought to consider that."

"Some say genius and insanity are two sides of the same coin," Garm commented. "Fortunately, you're none too genius, and by the law of inverse... I'd say we're safe."

"I see Garm has volunteered to enter first," Argrave said with a bitter smile as he walked back up to the wyvern.

As Argrave tussled with his backpack, unstrapping it from the wyvern's back, Durran walked up to Argrave.

"Hold on a minute," Durran said cautiously. "You're just going to... jump in? I mean, the thing probably isn't deep enough to even take you. You'll just get stuck. What is it you're expecting to happen?"

"There's a path below," Argrave explained.

"A path," Durran repeated.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded, then pulled his backpack free. He put it around his shoulders. Anneliese and Galamon moved to do the same, retrieving Garm and their own luggage.

"Alright, alright," Durran nodded. "Alright, I've got some rope. We can make a stake, stick it into the sand. Should be enough to pull us out, in case things go awry..." he mused, planning.

"You can if you want," Argrave nodded. "But if you take too long... I won't be able to guide you. Place isn't exactly intuitive, though, I warn you."

Durran frowned. "What do you mean, 'not intuitive?'"

“Well...” Argrave began, then waved his hand. “All these questions,” he complained. “You talk more than me.”

Durran held his hands out, offended. “She asks innumerable questions—you don’t seem to have a problem with that!” he gestured to Anneliese.

“She’s an exception,” Argrave shook his head, then walked down towards the quicksand. When he reached the pit he’d pointed to earlier, his step didn’t even slow before he plunged his foot in, wading deeper. Already, he sunk. His two companions were just as unhesitating in entering after him. Even their pets, the light gray creatures resembling fennec foxes, clung to them as they sunk.

“Gods above...” muttered Durran. He was stunned for a minute, then he started to laugh. “Never thought I’d see the day someone made me look reasonable.”

He removed the reins from his wyvern and cast them to the ground. He removed the saddle, too, and threw it aside.

“Live well, girl. Hope my people treat you better than they did me,” he said as he put his head to its face. With a deep breath to gather courage, he turned. Argrave was already leg-deep into the pit.

Durran took slow, steady steps towards the pit. If it were a normal pit, he suspected they’d already have stopped sinking by now—instead, they kept drifting lower.

“You coming?” Argrave called out, chest covered. “Water’s nice and warm.”

“You have no idea how much I want to pass,” Durran shook his head, but eventually stepped out.

Argrave lifted his head up as the pit covered his neck. “Joke’s on you. This was all an elaborate murder-suicide,” he left those words before he inhaled, filling his lungs.

Durran stared as Argrave’s face vanished. He started to laugh once more.

“This guy...” Durran muttered as he watched his body sink ever lower. Eventually, the pressure around his feet lessened. He could move his feet freely, he found. Despite that assurance, he couldn’t hold back the fear from the uncertainty. His wyvern moved closer to the quicksand pit, watching Durran disappear.

As his face vanished, Durran heard the roar of his wyvern—maybe it thought he’d died. Durran was half-convinced he did. Eventually, though, he kept descending, and dropped down.

Durran landed on his feet. He was surrounded by darkness. A light soon filled the room. They seemed to be incased in a cube of obsidian. On each side of the room, there was a portal containing a mass of moving sand—instead of downwards, though, it flowed sideways.

“I’m really wondering what Garm told you that you’d genuinely follow,” Argrave spoke to Durran.

“What is this place?” Durran looked around, awed.

“A path,” Argrave repeated his earlier claim. “What, that’s not obvious?” he said drolly with a smile on his face, then lowered his gaze to his compass. “Alright... follow me, people.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 145: The Alchemist

“Keep watch on Durran,” Argrave spoke to Anneliese and Galamon. “I told you before he’d be a good ally, but... he’s volunteering to carry Garm, he’s following us without reason... my scheme senses are tingling.”

“I was going to tell you,” Anneliese nodded. “I picked up the same... though without ‘scheme senses,’ granted,” she noted with an amused smile. “For what it is worth, I feel no malice from either.”

Argrave nodded. “Reassuring. But you don’t need to feel ill-will to put someone six feet under, just an abundance of ambition. I’d say the two of them could qualify.” Argrave put his hand to his chin. “Maybe they’re trying to probe for information, get the truth out of me... but damn, whatever happened to asking questions?”

“I’ll take the rear, then,” Galamon raised his hand.

“Right. Thanks,” Argrave nodded. Just then, Durran emerged from the portal of sand just beside them, holding Garm in his hand upright. The other hand held his glaive—he used it as a walking stick, somewhat.

“Took you long enough,” Argrave greeted.

“Why in the world did you send me off alone in this scary place?” Durran complained. “Here. Don’t know what this is, but I got it.”

Argrave received what Durran held out—it was a strange obsidian idol. “It deactivates some animated guards ahead,” Argrave lied easily. He had just wanted some time alone to speak with Galamon and Anneliese. “Unless you care to fight them?”

Durran was already looking around the new environment, barely heeding Argrave’s admonishment. He supposed he could not blame the man—the place they were in was ridiculous. The room wound about in ways that seemed to be geometrically impossible. Pillars of flowing black sand rose into endless abysses. The pathway ahead, which resembled polished obsidian, curved up to the wall, and then the ceiling further down the hallway.

“To reiterate—follow what I do absolutely,” Argrave informed Durran, his voice being the only disturbance in the absolute silence of the strange dimension. “Don’t ever run or jump unless I tell you to. If both of your feet are in the air at the same time, it’s over for you, most likely. Galamon might catch you—he’ll be taking the rear, just in case.”

Durran watched everything like it was seconds away from jumping out and biting him.

“This place is no petty illusion,” Garm noted. “All around, I see it—magic, twisting, writhing, dancing. I can’t even fathom its purpose. And its creator... Why was this built?”

“Cool scenery, maybe,” Argrave suggested, only half in jest. In the game, it had been only that: a neat, if simple, little puzzle to occupy the player’s senses. In reality... who knew?

The Alchemist knew, Argrave was certain. But the Alchemist wasn’t exactly an open forum.

Argrave and his two elven companions were not devoid of nerves, either. Argrave started to step down the pathway, trying to keep his breathing steady. He constantly repeated the advice he’d given Durran in his head as he started to walk along the wall.

Transitioning from walking the floor to walking along the walls was a powerfully disrupting sensation. One's body was accustomed to certain constants, and yet now, before its eyes, these constants were broken. It wasn't like his feet were stuck to the ground—no, rather, gravity itself seemed to move with the path. It was no illusion, either.

"Gods above..." Durran called out as Argrave walked further into the stretching hallway before them. "Though... the gods might not be 'above' in a second," he mused as he followed, with Galamon taking the back of the party just as he'd promised.

The silence of the dimly illuminated black landscape was marred only by the sounds of their footsteps—Galamon's metal boots, Anneliese's and Argrave's leather, and Durran's wyvern scale boots each made distinctive sounds. Argrave was hyper-focusing on his steps to ensure that none would be misplaced, but he felt that focus was making him all the worse for wear. Argrave's Brumesingers squirmed within his clothes, perhaps sensing his terror through the druidic bond.

I'm on the floor right now, Argrave told himself. Nothing strange, just floor. Don't look at the weird sand pillars. Just keep walking.

Yet his own thoughts felt like dogs nipping at his heels, and Argrave started to talk to ward them away.

"Durran," he called out. "A question for you."

"Can it... wait?" the man answered from further back.

"Why are you really here?" Argrave ignored, pressing onwards. "To follow someone into something like this—it's not something you do for answers, especially not when you don't know the value of them."

Durran didn't answer, and the five of them walked through the ever-twisting hallway. Argrave was about to demand an answer when the southern tribal finally broke the silence.

"Garm told me a lot. About Gerechtigkeits, about why you're here, about what you've done... so let's not act like the 'how' of these things doesn't have value," Durran answered back. "I'd have to be an imbecile to miss that there's something interesting going on with you. Considering I've been exiled—self-exiled, I guess—not like I have much better to do."

It was Argrave's turn for the long silence, now. That answer gave him a lot to digest. Garm had divulged much to Durran—the extent of his knowledge of Argrave, basically. Which begged the question...

"What spurred you to spill your guts, Garm?"

"What, you're mad at me now?" the head answered at once. "As I recall, just outside Sethia, you said you'd prefer to have Durran as an ally. I took a little initiative—what's the problem?"

The polished obsidian pathway opened up into a large square. As they stepped out into, the abyss seemed to extend in all directions. It seemed if one reached their hand out, eternal darkness would eat it. The pathway extended no further.

"And that's it?" Argrave questioned, stopping and staring Garm in the eye.

Garm stared back. "I know I kept something from you in the past... but I meant what I said. I will help you. All of you."

Argrave held his gaze for a while longer, studying Garm's expression. His black and gold eyes did not waver as they stared back, studying him in kind. He tried to see beyond... but they were just eyes, blackened or no. He could not see the thoughts in his head.

"Not what I meant," Argrave finally shook his head, diverting the conversation. "I mean, did you tell him about the Alchemist? That's another important bit."

"Told him a little. Not enough for your high standards of caution, I presume," Garm said with a smile.

"Let me explain... after we jump," Argrave looked upwards. He bent his knees downward, then jumped up, slightly rotating backwards as if doing a backflip. At once, true gravity seized him—or perhaps it wasn't true at all. He fell towards the abyss above. His stomach churned, and he felt like vomiting. He passed through the darkness...

And landed on his feet, perfectly. Though uneasy, Argrave was surprised by how smooth and comfortable the landing had been. Durran came next, surprisingly—he landed on his knees. Galamon was third. He'd rotated too far, and ungracefully collapsed on his back. He recovered quickly, standing before Argrave could offer help. Anneliese was last. She landed on her feet, though not steadily enough. She fell backwards.

Argrave supported her with his arm, keeping her from falling. He was flustered, but he said, "Careful now," as he helped her regain her balance. "How's that? Been working on the gallantry."

She calmed herself from the frightful fall, then laughed once she processed what Argrave had said. "With whom?" she questioned.

Argrave only smiled in response, then turned to examine the road ahead once he was content she was steady.

The place before them made the dreary blackness they'd come from seem a lie. Though the path ahead was the same polished obsidian, a vast jungle of uncountable different colors lay before them. All manner of life sprung from every corner of the place—the ceiling, the floor, the walls. It was only barely distinguishable they were in a cave.

"Should be safe, now," Argrave told everyone. "But don't wander carefully. Anneliese, Galamon, you know what I'm about to say... but still, make sure you listen, just in case."

"Never seen anything like this..." Durran said, awed.

"You'll get to know this jungle very well," Argrave assured. "All of you will be staying here. There's wildlife enough to sustain you. I will be in a bed... but I envy you, honestly. But enough about that. I'm to meet the Alchemist." Argrave looked back at Durran.

Durran pointed ahead. "One man made this place?"

"I don't know," Argrave shook his head. "But here's the thing, Durran. I know you like getting attention... but in front of the Alchemist, you want to be the least interesting thing in the world." Argrave walked up closer until he loomed over the man. "I expect you to stay outside. Do not talk to him, do not enter his house. Even if he wanders outside, ask him nothing. If he talks to you—don't see why he would—answer quickly, bluntly, and honestly. Be rude, be mean—I don't care, and he won't either—but be honest."

Durran nodded hesitantly.

"I'm not fucking around here," Argrave insisted, pointing at Durran. "He'll end you. Garm was right about the fact that I want you as an ally—I won't deny that. It's the only reason I let you come this far, dubious as your motives are. If you want to live, heed these words like they're the word of every god you hold dear," Argrave pressed his finger against Durran's chest.

"Anneliese and Galamon will make sure that you don't step out of line, even if they have to break your legs. Live like the dead. Capisci?" Argrave leaned down closer. Durran looked confused, so Argrave translated, "Do you understand?"

"I get it," Durran pushed Argrave's hand away.

"I'm serious," Argrave reiterated. "I'm not saying this for my sake. I'll be fine if you mess around. You'll be paste if you mess around. All of you will stay far away."

"You intend to meet this Alchemist alone?" Anneliese frowned. "You didn't mention this."

Argrave turned away from Durran. "Better this way. Less contact. Get in, get out."

She shook her head. "I want to come with you."

"Do my words mean nothing?" Argrave asked, exasperated.

"I know you're serious," she insisted at once, stepping closer. "And I know to listen to your words. But—"

"No," Argrave put his foot down. "You can come after the surgery, when I'm recovering... and when he isn't around."

Anneliese looked frustrated and concerned, but after a long time of silence, she surrendered with a nod that made Argrave feel bad.

"I'll be fine," Argrave assured. "Hell, doing this alone will probably make it easier." He took a deep breath, then turned over to the vibrant jungle ahead. "Right... everything's already in my pack."

At the most nervous he'd ever been, Argrave stepped away.

"Wait here. You can visit tomorrow, probably. This guy is quick if anything," Argrave waved.

Everyone waved back. The sight made Argrave feel hesitant to leave, and so he quickly turned, walking down the obsidian path before him.

The jungle ahead, with its constant noise, was just as bad as the unending silence of the distorted entryway. The sights before him were uncomfortably familiar. He'd come here time and time again. Usually, he was excited—this time, it felt like his task was so monumentally important, his excitement was buried beneath pressure.

A castle of sleek, sterile obsidian came into view. The architecture was foreign, almost alien—angular where one wouldn't expect a castle to be, round where it ought to be angular. The door itself was round, almost as if bulging outwards, and stood over thirty feet tall. Argrave paused at the door,

removed his backpack, and retrieved the things he needed. He gave his Brumesingers commands with druidic magic, and they took their place.

He scrutinized each in turn: the Amarantine Heart, the Wraith's Heart, the Crimson Wellspring, and the instrument of surgery—the Unsullied Knife. They were exactly as he remembered them. With them in hand, he pushed open the door. It took some effort, being as large as it was.

Argrave didn't notice the room at all—the sole figure within dominated his sight.

The Alchemist was standing, back straight, waiting. He must've been twenty feet tall. His black hair was like silk, and it extended downwards, forming robes around his vaguely humanoid shape. His ivory face was flat and squat, lacking a nose or nostrils at all, while his eyes were gray. He held his hands before him, crossed over each other. The tips of his fingers were palms, each with five digits of their own.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. *No pageantry, no babbling, Argrave—to the point.*

"I want to trade," Argrave spoke loud and clear, with a will tempered by the constant hardship he'd endured thus far. "I'll instruct you on how to perform a surgery that allows you to replace a human's blood with magic blood. I will provide the materials for said surgery. I will also provide a knife that allows for painless alterations of all physical and mystical. In return, you will perform the surgery I teach you... on me."

The Alchemist closed his eyes, then opened his mouth. Where teeth and a tongue had once been, one giant gray eye watched Argrave. Its eyes, too, both contorted into mouths. The eye focused on Argrave. The Alchemist's lips lowered, almost as if the eye was squinting, and he leaned in. After a long moment of observation, the process was reverted and his face returned to normal.

"Shut the door," he said, voice like splintering ice.

Argrave nodded, saying nothing, then turned to pull the door shut.