

Jackal 146

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 146: Apathy

The Alchemist living beneath the hot sands of the Burnt Desert was nowhere near as insignificant as his name implied. The master of this obsidian castle was not merely a practitioner of alchemy. He embodied it. Literally.

His body was alchemy manifest.

The principle of alchemy—fantasy alchemy, at least—was that of exchange. The most famous example would be turning lead to gold. In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ alchemy was dually a process by which potions were created, and a magic of conversion.

The Alchemist had displayed these qualities when Argrave had entered. His eyes and teeth had receded back into his head, whereupon they were alchemized within his body to form a single giant eye that better scrutinized Argrave. His body was a constant boiling ocean of alchemy, able to reform what he had into whatever body parts he needed.

Now, Argrave followed this hulking monstrosity through his abode of sterile obsidian. He was alone. The Brumesingers, Argrave’s companions—all were outside, idle.

The Alchemist’s silken black robe of hair sunk into his back as they walked, leaving a blank slate of ivory flesh behind. Slowly, lips formed, eyes just after them.

“You are a servant of Erlebnis?” he asked from the newly formed lips, voice harsh and loud.

The sight of the shifting flesh might have terrified Argrave had he not gone through the Low Way in the past, yet more disquieting was the fact he was being asked any questions at all. He was not surprised the Alchemist had seen through the Blessing of Supersession so easily, though.

“No,” Argrave answered, suppressing the urge to add extraneous details. *Answer only the question you are asked*, he reminded himself, repeating it mentally like a mantra.

The lips and eyes on the Alchemist’s back merged into one giant eyeball that shone with green light for but a moment. Argrave could see spell matrixes within the eye’s pupil. Argrave knew not what the monstrous figure was doing, and he didn’t dare ask.

Soon enough, the eye was replaced by the black robe once again, and Argrave heaved a sigh of relief.

There was much mystery surrounding the Alchemist. Argrave had dedicated weeks of research to writing the wiki’s article for this character. He had combed through countless in-game books, looking for references, even symbolic references, to link the Alchemist to anything—a faction, a religion, a god.

Argrave’s experience with ‘Heroes of Berendar’ narrowed things down... but gave nothing concrete.

Firstly, Argrave knew the Alchemist had associated with an ancient god. He didn’t know the details of this association, nor did he know which ancient god, nor any details beyond the fact that the two were linked.

Secondly, Argrave knew the Alchemist had once been mortal, and that his change was brought about by magic. Details were hazy on this end, too—some records claimed it was a hostile spell, others claimed it was a ritual taken willingly for the purpose of embodying alchemy.

Thirdly, the Alchemist was old. Millennia old, at least. Argrave knew he was aware of *Gerechtigkeit*. He could be enlisted for the final battle, something Argrave was sure as hell going to do.

Beyond that, the giant man before him remained a mystery. The Alchemist was not receptive to questions. He was more apathetic than cruel, but he was also entirely intolerant of the most insignificant annoyances, questions being foremost among them. Argrave's personal conjecture was that the Alchemist lived in such a secluded place to avoid people, and to avoid harming people—some of his dialogue expressed dissatisfaction with his rage, and guilt for wanton slaughter.

But that was just that: conjecture.

The Alchemist came to a giant set of polished obsidian doors. He did not need to raise a hand—the doors started shifting aside as he neared. Argrave knew what was beyond. He had come here time and time again. Even still, it had been months since he had seen it, and viewing it in-person was an infinitely more captivating thing.

Shelves of polished obsidian rose up one hundred feet into the air. The walls themselves seemed to emit a steady purple light, making the place seem infinitely gloomier than it already was. The shelves held books, and every single book, without fail, had a white cover. A great many of them had lettering on the cover—even more were blank. Spread out across the room were obsidian tables. They looked like altars, in truth, but there was no discernible religious significance to them.

Argrave had seen many libraries and studies of vast scale in his time on Berendar. He'd seen the libraries within the Order of the Gray Owl's buildings, the ancient library in the Low Way of the Rose, and the cold stone library in Veiden, managed by Rowe. None could compare to this place, at least not in scope.

The Alchemist stepped into the room. His arms stretched out as he retrieved many of the books with blank covers. The mini-hands at the end of his fingers served to bring precision—with it, he effectively had ten normal-sized human hands, with which he adroitly maneuvered books and writing implements.

Before long, the gargantuan robed figure turned to Argrave, five books held in his right hand with five writing implements in the other. Seeing the small hands on the tips of his finger clutch books and pens tightly was vastly disconcerting—so disconcerting, in fact, that he did not understand the Alchemist's meaning immediately.

"Explain your trade," the Alchemist instructed coldly once Argrave did nothing. He had already begun writing with two of his hands, perhaps noting his personal observations.

Argrave straightened his back at once and ran through his planned lecture. He stepped to the closest obsidian table and laid out his things, then inhaled, readying himself.

"This," Argrave pointed down to the gray, vaguely opaque heart. "This is the Wraith's Heart. It's a perfect mirror of a real human heart. Moreover, it has the capacity to take aspects of magical artifacts and embody them, if they are alchemized inside *your* body," Argrave pointed to the Alchemist. "The Wraith's Heart can be considered empty, at present."

The fell figure wrote down what Argrave said, each of his five small hands writing and moving diligently to inscribe on the blank books.

“To that end, these two items stand to fill the Wraith’s Heart emptiness.” Argrave touched the purple rock on the table. Sensing the enchantments near it, veins rose and linked to Argrave’s gloves. “This is the Amaranthine Heart. It extracts vitality... or life force, from anything that it links to. It can additionally sap magic. What it absorbs can be extracted as liquid magic.” Argrave pulled his finger away, and the veins of the Heart snapped, fading into nothingness. A single dot of black liquid appeared atop it, like a drop of perspiration.

Argrave stepped to the side and reached out for the Crimson Wellspring. “This item is called the Crimson Wellspring. It is capable of converting most organic matter into blood. Unlike most other artificial bloods invented in the past, this one is capable of sustaining vampires, meaning it possesses genuine vitality.”

Argrave took a step back and gathered his thoughts. “These two items, working in tandem inside the Wraith’s Heart, will serve to subvert some of my normal biological processes. Together, they can produce magic-imbued blood. You have achieved something similar with chimeras,” Argrave said, pointing to the Alchemist. “But the magic-imbued blood proved corrosive.”

“Yes. The body rejects false blood,” the Alchemist said—his first interjection.

“As such, we look to other creatures for a model,” Argrave continued, undaunted. “Creatures that have naturally occurring magic within their blood—dragons, wyverns, my pets the Singers of the Brume, certain species of elves... they all share one thing in common; their blood is not corrosive because their body creates it for them. It isn’t the magic that is being rejected—the blood is being rejected.”

The Alchemist ceased writing. He set some books down, then reached away, retrieving books that were not blank. Argrave barely saw diagrams of creatures—anatomies of the creatures he’d mentioned. The Alchemist studied them.

Argrave put his hand to his chest. “To ensure my body does not reject the magic blood... the third thing to be alchemized within the Wraith’s Heart is to be my own heart,” he explained, voice shaking somewhat. “And further, it establishes the necessity for the Unsullied Knife,” Argrave pointed to the scalpel on the obsidian table. “Crude tools could not extract my heart and replace it with the alchemized Wraith’s Heart without death. And that is the crux of the surgery—heart replacement. I know you are capable of that already.”

With those final words, Argrave exhaled. He reviewed what he had said, ensuring that nothing had been left out. The Alchemist said nothing, moving with purpose throughout the library as he examined countless texts and wrote in his blank books. The wait was insufferable, but Argrave could only suffer it.

The Alchemist finally stopped moving about and stared down at Argrave. “Will you tell me where you found these items?”

Argrave met the Alchemist’s gray-eyed gaze with his own. “No,” he shook his head.

It was pointless to answer. Gratitude and offense were both equally impossible from the Alchemist. Argrave gained nothing by answering, something that the player in ‘Heroes of Berendar’ learned quickly.

The Alchemist very rarely rewarded the player for doing anything. One would fetch him an incredibly rare item... and receive nothing in return.

"What do you believe will happen when this alchemized heart is placed within you?" the Alchemist questioned.

"It..." Argrave swallowed. The man sounded like a doctor, asking a leading question. "My body will have to reform itself to accommodate the magic within my blood. Everything within... will change, and morph. It will be very painful," Argrave finished.

"Yes," the Alchemist nodded. "It will. As such, I am establishing another condition to our trade. If your screams annoy me, I will take your larynx."

Argrave blinked. "Will I... get it back after?"

"No."

Can't you just make a ward around me? You're an incomprehensibly powerful mage! Argrave wished to ask, but he'd already pushed his luck by asking one question.

He nodded. "Okay."

The Alchemist raised a hand up, pointing to the door. The mini hand on the tip of his finger pointed, too. "Go. You will be led to a room on the outer wings of my castle. You will stay there during your period of change, so that I might observe these changes. I expect your companions to tend to your needs while you are here. They will be given access and informed of things." He lowered his hand. "Once you arrive, strip. I will come when I am prepared."

Argrave nodded once again, then turned. Beyond, the once-dark hallway had been illuminated with purple lights, leading him down its path. He had been expecting such a sight.

That conversation had been extremely disorienting and illogical, but Argrave felt that things had gone well. Though, perhaps it was because it was *only* logical that it felt illogical—it didn't match a conversation between two normal humans.

Though Argrave was carrying four fewer things in hand, his steps felt heavy. *Heart surgery*, he noted. *And my surgeon is a whack job.*

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Anneliese kept a close watch on Durran and Garm, sitting amidst the giant bushes some distance away. She held her knees with her arms, and as she sat there, she tapped one foot against the ground rapidly.

She hated this feeling more than anything she'd ever experienced, she was certain. Her gut writhed, her throat was clenched, and it felt like an ocean of nervousness raged through her chest. Beneath it all was a thin sheet of anger and betrayal.

All along the way, Argrave had expressed how dangerous this Alchemist would be, and how they would need to be careful. Then, at the end, he tosses 'they' to the wind, and goes to meet the man alone. Anneliese knew he was right about this. It was for the best. Even still, she felt the need to rush in, join him.

But... she wouldn't.

So much had been put into this. Argrave had toiled for months, grinding away at his own sanity, to achieve his goal. It was selfish, fundamentally—curing his sickly body—but there was a selfless purpose beyond it.

Anneliese would be certain that absolutely nothing went wrong. Maybe it was because it was the only thing she *could* do. Regardless, she kept focused on Durran and Garm, the jungle around her dulling her focus none.

Galamon touched her elbow. He held something out—meat, she noticed.

“Wildlife is abundant here. Argrave was right,” he said.

“I am not hungry,” she shook her head.

“You can only wait,” Galamon said coldly. “At least do it with a full stomach.”

She acknowledged his words with a frown and blinked a few times. Eventually, though, her gaze once more settled on the two ahead.

Anneliese did not pray often. She valued Veidimen culture over its religion. Now, though...

Veid, please protect Argrave, she prayed.

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Chapter 147: Baring Your Heart

Argrave recalled that he had once complained in an online forum about ‘fade to black’ cutscenes in video games. The screen would go dark, and then someone would narrate what had happened. ‘It’s lazy,’ he recalled writing. ‘Devs didn’t want to animate a surgery.’ Argrave was sure he’d been about fifteen years old when he wrote those nonsensical complaints.

Now, Argrave wished for nothing more than his vision to fade to black and a month to pass.

Instead, a twenty-foot-tall giant wearing robes made of its own hair rearranged furniture to prepare for Argrave’s heart surgery. He secretly hoped he’d have a panic attack and faint.

The Alchemist moved a table closer and placed a bowl of obsidian there. More and more things piled up beside Argrave, and his breathing started to quicken as he questioned what, exactly, each implement would be for.

Eventually, Argrave decided it would be best to stare at the ceiling. He saw the Alchemist eat something—a collection of herbs, it looked like. Then, the man’s finger retracted into itself, reemerging as a dripping rod of bone. The Alchemist held up a cup, filling it with a thin liquid the same color as the herbs he’d just consumed.

When the cup was filled, the Alchemist held it to Argrave. “Imbibe,” he commanded.

Argrave sat up. It was very difficult to refrain from asking what he was to be imbibing. When he drank, it tasted like a subtle, leafy tea mixed with cough syrup. He laid back down, distinctly aware of it travelling through his body.

The Alchemist stood over him, staring down. "Breathing will slow. Emotions will vanish. Blood will thicken," he commented, watching.

Should I be awake for this? He questioned internally. As if reading his mind, the Alchemist continued, "I would prefer you asleep or comatose, but I obtain more information if you are alive and conscious. Observe my actions. You will write a report when I am finished."

Argrave nodded, then waited. The Alchemist merely stood over him, staring down. It wrote on blank books off to the side. Argrave realized it was drawing a diagram of him. Minutes passed, and Argrave merely stared around at the obsidian ceiling and the ivory-fleshed monstrosity looming above him.

"You have the faintest blood of a feathered serpent," he said. "Vestigial remnants will change your period of adaptation."

What does that mean? Argrave questioned. Strangely, it did not panic him at all. It felt like it didn't matter, actually. He realized that his limbs felt very heavy. That didn't matter, either—he had no desire to do anything but lay here anymore. Even blinking was starting to feel cumbersome.

The Alchemist raised his hand up. One of his fingers grew an eye on its tip. He positioned it directly above Argrave's chest. It was eerily still, like it wasn't living at all. Off to the side, the Alchemist's other fingers prepared implements. Foremost among them was the Unsullied Knife. As Argrave watched, he put things together calmly.

Ah. He's using an eye like an endoscopic surgical camera, Argrave realized. And he mixed a potion inside his body that would suppress my functions, to make things easier for the surgery while allowing me to retain my consciousness.

The Unsullied Knife drew near his flesh. The white scalpel's red inscriptions shone all the brighter in the Alchemist's hands. Argrave felt nothing as it approached—fear, panic, all were gone. It touched his flesh, making the first incision.

Though, perhaps 'incision' was not the right word. His flesh moved aside, bunching like clay, revealing bone beyond.

"The tool puts living things in a state of minor stasis," commented the Alchemist. "Souls, flesh, blood: all suspended. It interacts with all realms of the world. This instrument could even excise the Blessing of Supersession that blooms within you." The man spun the scalpel about in the small hands at the tips of his fingers. "Provoking an ancient god in this manner could be very interesting."

Something cut past the dull haze that had obscured Argrave's emotions, and his breathing grew a bit faster.

"Stop breathing," the Alchemist chided. "My next action will not be further warning."

Argrave laid his head back against the table. The only thing he saw was the sleek obsidian ceiling.

If I keep staring upwards, it's like a really long fade to black, Argrave realized. He found some serenity in the constancy of the ceiling.

The serenity was broken when one of the Alchemist's fingers moved into view, a tong-like implement holding something white. It was placed in a bowl. Argrave turned his head, looking at it.

I think that's bone, he recognized.

"Refrain from observing distractions," the Alchemist commanded. "Direct all attention towards the operation. Firsthand experience and testimony add paramount details to all collected data."

Argrave lifted his head up, staring at the sight below. To say the least of the situation, he saw much more of the color red than before.

I think I'm going to have a nightmare about this later, Argrave reasoned. I'm sure this would be pretty disturbing if I had all my faculties.

"Your lungs have scarring. You should have been more careful."

Huh. Guess he does have some compassion, Argrave thought.

"You are a terrible subject of comparison," the Alchemist finished. "You deviate far from all human norms, making you a poor control. Tall, frail of bone. Weak, sickly organs. Yet... your body's adaptations to the magic integrating with your blood and flesh will be far more pronounced."

That sounds more in character, Argrave concluded.

Argrave watched his chest be ripped apart quietly, feeling neither intrigue nor disgust. As he sat there in his strange, emotion-free state, a thought came to mind.

What if Durran and Garm did something to the artifacts? The thought bounced around in his head for a while. Well, I wouldn't become Black Blooded. But I don't see how they could have done anything. What could he have done? Inject spirit-goo into them? Ridiculous. Yet... certainly, Garm was alone with them a few times... he's usually by the backpacks, after all. All of them, save the Amaranthine Heart, were kept inside the lockbox.

Argrave looked back to the growing pile of bones in a bowl beside him.

I wonder if the Alchemist would even put me back together if they didn't work, Argrave questioned. Well, they looked fine. But hell, I barely comprehend them as is. How would I know if something was wrong with any of them?

Realizing nothing could be done, Argrave turned his head back. *Oh. There's my heart. Bigger than I thought.* The Alchemist's finger-eye lowered into Argrave's body, while another hand conjured spell light. All the while, the Unsullied Knife grew ever closer.

I suppose I'm about to find out.

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Durran stepped out of the jungle, positioning his glaive to block the sunlight that buffeted his eyes. As the whiteness induced by sudden sunlight settled, what he saw beyond was not at all what he expected to see.

They must have been in a cave atop a mountain near its summit, for clouds were just below them, peaks jutting up above. The clouds were thick and dense, almost prompting one to try and stand on them.

Nonetheless, they concealed much of the environment ahead. Durran could only barely make out a field of green. They were definitely far from the Burnt Desert, despite where they had entered from.

He stepped closer, transfixed. A single giant tree hung out over the ledge, drooping down off the side off the mountain. Durran was close enough to the clouds that he could see them move, but he had seen moving clouds plenty aback his wyvern—instead, he watched beyond, staring at the fields of green.

Durran had heard tell of the northern lands... but he'd never seen them. He didn't know where this cave was. He didn't even know if the sight ahead was real. All he knew was that they were far from the Burnt Desert.

"Come look at this!" Durran turned around, calling out in his excitement. He was greeted by a pair of ever-watching amber eyes.

Anneliese clearly had not slept at all during their night in this strange realm. She took Argrave's directive very seriously, obviously. Durran couldn't help but feel a bit ostracized when their distrust was so blatantly displayed, but then... perhaps he had no right to complain, considering their distrust was warranted.

"We're far from the Burnt Desert," Garm noted from Durran's hands.

"I thought the same," Durran turned back around. "Lands of eternal green... I hope to see them some day. Poured sand from my boots enough times, now I'm looking to put my gaze on something new."

"You will," assured Garm.

Durran moved up to the edge and sat down, laying his glaive out. There was no wind at all, strangely enough—winds would surely be incredibly harsh this high up provided this was a normal place. Instead, things remained as pleasant as ever. The giant tree leaning out beside him resembled a willow. Even its branches were undisturbed.

He watched for a long while. Durran still had much disturbing his thoughts—the business at Sethia was one that couldn't be put to bed in a couple days. Fortunately, as things were shaking out, he was to be spending a month here.

With a final sigh, Durran rose to his feet. As he turned, he spotted something emerge from the jungle behind Anneliese. She must've noticed his expression change, because she turned quickly and stepped away.

A figure of dancing black smoke stood before her. It had no discernible features, but Durran could've sworn that it was looking around.

"Your companion informed me only one of you would suffice for dealing with him," a harsh voice echoed out, and Durran took a step back. "He said he would prefer Anneliese. Go. The lights will lead you."

The black smoke exploded outwards as though blasted by a great gale, dispersing into nothingness. Durran watched the tall snow elf breathe quicker, probably panicking. Without a word, she rushed out into the jungle.

Durran adjusted his position, calming himself. “Looks like the time is now...” he muttered, clenching Garm a little tighter.

Just then, Galamon stepped out of the jungle. One hand held his Ebonice axe, still dripping with blood. The other held a cat-like creature Durran had never seen before—it resembled a cougar, though with bizarre stripes and much more mass on its frame.

“What time might that be?” Galamon questioned.

Durran inhaled, then adjusted his footing. He bent down and retrieved his glaive. “You’re right. He really does hear everything.”

“Stop being a fool,” Garm chided. “Put down the glaive. That one is a monster beyond your capability.”

“Who decided that?” Durran stepped forward.

“Galamon,” Garm called out, and only then did Durran halt.

Galamon dropped the body he held, and it fell to the dirt below. The giant elf said nothing, waiting for Garm to continue.

“I think we should talk,” Garm continued. “Because what I wish to do... it can benefit you, if you wish it.”

Galamon took steady steps forward. “I don’t think you’ve learned anything about me, beginning with that. I am Argrave’s shield. I will tolerate nothing that subverts his goal. No boon will sway me, no opponent will deter me.”

“Hear me out,” Garm insisted. “I know you better than you think. I hope we can talk about this amicably, at the very least.”

Galamon stopped moving forward. “Fine. I should warn you, though... I am quite good at throwing axes. Try nothing.” He waved the Ebonice axe in his hand.

“I’m glad you’re the one left,” Garm smiled. “You might be the only one who would let me go through with this.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 148: Make an Effort

Anneliese stepped through the bizarre palace of the Alchemist, following the purple lights that shone without an obvious source. They guided her through the complex place. Typically, her eyes wandered at times like these, consumed with curiosity, but she was led forward now with a single-minded purpose.

She passed through a threshold into another room. The trail of lights faded. She saw a bed in the back of the room—it was a fancy one, a four-poster bed, hanging curtains of purple fabric with strange designs on them. Its fanciness seemed in stark contrast with the rest of the place.

Anneliese stepped forward towards the bed. She saw a pair of feet sticking off the end, and as she grew closer, she ducked low and looked.

Argrave laid there beneath purple blankets, holding a white book in his hands. It was blank, and he busied himself with filling it out. As she stared down at him, he looked up at her.

"You're here. Look at this," he complained. "The man couldn't even get me a bed large enough for my whole body. You'd think a giant like him would have some sympathy for the people on the taller end of the spectrum, but no. He makes me leave my feet hanging."

"Argrave..." she stepped closer. "What is... what is wrong with you? I can... I cannot..."

"Oh. He gave me some liquid," Argrave explained, voice without much vigor. "Not feeling very emotional right now, to put it simply. Should fade. I hope."

Her eyes darted around frantically, scanning him as she drew closer.

"Take a look at this," Argrave pulled down the blankets, revealing his pale, bony chest. "Not a scar in sight. You wouldn't believe how bad I looked not too long ago. I'm a little disappointed, honestly... wouldn't mind a nice scar, right down the center..." he traced his sternum with his fingers.

Anneliese sat on the purple bed just beside him, eyes locked on him. "But what... what did he... what exactly... how did it... how did it go?" she babbled.

Argrave shrugged. "I'm not sure, really. Apparently, the same potion he gave me to dull my emotions is stopping my new heart from doing its thing." Argrave touched his chest. "My new heart's a... I don't know... it's a magenta color, I guess, and it glows." Argrave looked up. "The Alchemist said he'd be back in a few hours when the blood starts pumping. He advised I eat plenty."

"But how do you feel?" she asked, her speech finally normalizing somewhat.

"Pretty weak. Can't move much. And I think... and maybe I'm just being delusional..." Argrave looked at himself. "I think I can already vaguely feel the pain coming. The changes." He shook his head. "Well, whatever. I have to write this report."

As Argrave raised the book, ready to resume his task, Anneliese practically fell forth atop him, hugging him fiercely. Just as quickly, she pulled away.

"Forgive me," she apologized. "No, forget that. I am not sorry for being glad you are well. But..." she sighed and lowered her head, white hair splaying out across the purple blankets. "I was worried. I still am."

"If the ivory man hadn't filled my veins with apathy-juice, I'd probably be a lot more worried than you are," Argrave noted. "Well, that sounds a bit dismissive. I'm glad you were worried." He paused. "That sounds worse, doesn't it?"

Anneliese laughed heartily, like all the tension built within was being dispelled with each laugh. She stood. "You said the Alchemist is to return?"

"That's right. Make sure everything is in order, that sort of thing. If I'm to be given a diagnosis of terminal death... it'll probably come then," Argrave nodded.

"I will stay with you," she said. "Who knows what will occur after such a strange happening? You need someone by your side."

"We discussed—"

"That was my decision. Save your words," she shook her head.

Argrave stared her in the face. Her amber eyes were steady and determined. He could see how tired she was, yet nonetheless... he sighed, then set his book down.

"Alright. If I start moaning and groaning when my body begins to accept the new blood, don't make fun of me, okay? I don't need any shame with the pain."

She knew he was only joking and smiled as she made for the door. "Write your report. I will get you food, as the Alchemist advised."

"This brings me back," Argrave called out, picking up his book once again.

"To what?" she paused at the threshold.

"Me, sick in bed. You, taking care of me, going to fetch food," Argrave reminisced. "This time stands to last a bit longer than our time in Veiden. Bringing dried meat again?"

She stepped back into the room a little. "Would you like that?"

Argrave raised a brow. "Anything's fine, little lady, don't trouble yourself."

"Hopefully this is the last time I need do such a thing," she commented. "Though... I have no problem with it."

"I'll be as hale as a hare when this is done," Argrave assured. "Galamon coming, too? The other two?"

She shook her head. "Presumably. I am unsure. I ran off possessed once I was informed of things," she shook her head. "I will keep an eye out."

Argrave shook his head, then said in faux sadness, "You learn who your friends really are on your deathbed, looks like."

"Please do not joke about that," she shook her head.

Argrave laughed, then picked up his book. "Ought to get back to the slave labor. By the way, could you grab that bronze hand mirror? It's in my pack just outside."

Anneliese nodded and moved away.

"Thanks, Anneliese," he called out.

She waved as she left. Argrave opened the book, trying to find where he'd left off writing.

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"Anneliese will not be pleased," noted Galamon, sitting cross-legged. "Your protection is bound to her by honor—a contract."

"Honor, is it? She won't care that I'll be dead?" Garm laughed, stuck in the dirt just beside Durran. They sat around a fire, cooking the striped cat. "Whatever. I make my choices. Me. Not her, not our newly Black-Blooded friend. This has nothing to do with Argrave. It's MY choice. Mine. I will not allow them to interfere in that."

"She'll care," Galamon nodded. "Argrave will, too." He shook his head.

"You won't?"

"I understand what it's like to crave death," Galamon said as he stared into the fire. "Was never brave enough to go through with it."

"Hahahaha!" Garm laughed. "Shown up by a talking head."

"Why do you do this?" Galamon asked.

"Because I'm a burden," Garm said contemptuously. "I know what it will take for me to gain a body that I'm satisfied with. It would be as difficult as becoming Black Blooded, I suspect—months of work, all to give me a barely-passable body, with not an iota of my former power. I'm deadweight."

Galamon crossed his arms. "Yet you're selfless enough to go through with this?"

"My whole life, people have disappointed me. My parents. All my friends. My teachers, my students. They never made the effort I made." Garm looked at Galamon. "And now... I've met some people who wouldn't disappoint me. I'm certain all of you would do as much for me as I am willing for you."

"Found what you wanted... so you'll end it all, without reason?"

"There's reason," Garm refuted. "Argrave fights some ancient calamity. He needs no deadweight, least of all a snarky bastard like myself." His golden eyes turned to Durran. "At the very least, he'll have a bitter bastard like Durran, who can carry his weight... and then some."

Durran scratched his cheek. "Yeah. Fighting a god. Fun hobby, looking to try it out," he nodded.

Galamon ran his hand through his white hair. "What's your plan for this Alchemist?"

"Argrave probably doesn't know this... but I know about the Alchemist, too. Some High Wizards engaged with him, at some point. Plenty of writings about the freak." Garm closed his eyes. "My existence is special. A sentient necromantic creation. He'll have interest in studying me, I'm sure."

"Is it enough to ask what you intend of him?" Galamon adjusted his sitting position.

"I'm sure he'll be eager to test out the Unsullied Knife more," Garm reasoned, opening his eyes once again. "If worse comes to worse, the Alchemist won't let me transcribe every spell I remember. But I'm certain I can bind my soul to Durran's."

Durran rubbed at his chest at the mention of 'souls.'

"The soul's not in the chest, idiot," Garm rebuked. "Don't act all terrified."

Durran lowered his hand. "Just nauseated, thinking about merging with you, that's all," he shot back.

"Yeah, yeah," Garm coaxed. "Let it out, tough guy."

Galamon looked to the fire. "What will happen?"

"When souls merge... one dominates the other," Garm explained. "It's... eaten, more or less. Very risky thing for two souls of equal power to go at each other—it's a game of chance and will at that point, and

the loser is erased utterly. This situation is incomprehensibly rare. Fortunately for Durran, my soul is damaged. Quite badly. That bodes ill for my future.”

Durran crossed his arms. “Yes, you’re damaged goods. That much is obvious.”

“Then what is the benefit?” Galamon tilted his head.

“Memory,” Garm succinctly explained. “When a soul overwrites another, vestiges remain. If it’s a swordsman’s soul that’s eaten, the winning soul will learn the sword very, very quickly, until you catch up with the person’s skill. In the case of spells... any spell I’ve learned, or any tier of magic I’ve breached... Durran will have an easy go of things. Handheld through all the challenges in life, like a kid with rich parents.”

“Sounds useful,” Galamon crossed his arms. “Why’s it rare?”

“Well, souls are fleeting things,” Garm continued. “Need something like the Unsullied Knife for stability. Things that can facilitate such a procedure are rare, and closely guarded. And not all souls are compatible. If there’s a drastic difference in personality... well, it’s about as useful as doing nothing at all.”

Galamon nodded as though things fell into place. “I’ll help. But I’ll come with you. If either of you requests anything untoward of the Alchemist... I’ll end you there, even if I perish. My primary duty remains protecting Argrave. I sympathize with your plight, but I will not compromise on his safety.”

“Yes, yes,” Garm said dismissively. “I understand. On the front of Argrave... if you could, I’d like to write a letter. To him, to Anneliese...”

Durran looked like he had something to say but refrained.

“I can do that,” Galamon nodded. “You should write of the soul, and merging souls, to Argrave. He... the soul in his body is not the body’s original. I believe he could gain something from your wisdom.”

Garm raised a brow. “I’d ask more, but a dead man doesn’t need to know much of anything. Alright. I can do that,” Garm confirmed. “Another thing, Galamon. About that benefit I mentioned.”

“What?” the vampire questioned, rising to his feet.

“My eyes,” he began. “They’re valuable. I was an A-rank mage, once. They can see things—people’s magic strength, for instance. And they can better discern illusions. No illusion magic will affect you, should you inherit them. Not to mention... my vision is damned flawless. Do you want them?”

Galamon frowned, staring at those black and gold eyes all too similar to those belonging to the abominable creatures within the Low Way. “I’m a vampire. That may cause problems.”

“You’re a vampire?” Durran repeated incredulously. “Is no one in this—”

“Not now, Durran,” Garm dismissed. “It shouldn’t cause problems, not if the Alchemist fixes things. Your eye color won’t even change. It might take a couple months, but it’ll correct itself, and you can keep those shining whites you have.”

“I don’t want your eyes,” Galamon shook his head. “Another could use them better.”

“Alright,” Garm pursed his lips. “Guess I’ll offer them to Argrave or Anneliese.”

Durran looked utterly flabbergasted. “Boy,” Garm called out, pulling him from his thoughts. “My soul is to become a part of you. Moreover, you’ll inherit my spell collection, provided the Alchemist allows me to write it out. Yet allow me to make one thing clear—even if I’m gone, bits of me will remain, like a lingering ghost. If you act against Argrave, or Galamon—if you hinder them... I’ll tear you apart from the inside. You will support them with all you have until Gerechtigkei is dead and gone.”

“Not even sure this mythical being is real,” Durran countered. “What if it’s all bogus? What if Argrave’s lying?”

Garm laughed. “I thought like you, once. Argrave will change that thinking quickly enough. If he doesn’t... I’ll let you leave.” Garm took a deep breath and exhaled loudly.

“Alright!” he shouted. “Time to end this miserable existence.”

“Are you sure you wish to cast your life away?” Galamon questioned.

“I died six hundred years ago. I was merely trapped until now,” Garm answered coldly. “I always thought about freedom, trapped as I was. I longed for it. It became an obsession. When I thought of freedom, I thought of flying. But I have flown aback Durran’s wyvern.” Garm closed his eyes. “Now I think of freedom... and dream of dying.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 149: Unpredictable, Insurmountable

Argrave laid in bed, staring up at the bronze hand mirror he’d once so loathed owning.

Traits: [Tall], [Black Blooded], [Intelligent], [Magic Affinity (High)], [Insomniac], [Blessing of Supersession (MAX)]

Skills: [Elemental Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Blood Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Healing Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Illusion Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Warding Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Druidic Magic (C) {LOCKED}], [Inscription (E)], [Imbuing (E)]

Two accursed traits that had plagued him ever since he’d arrived at this place were now completely absent. Something else had taken their place—something glorious and black and bloody. He might’ve been alarmed by the giant words reading ‘LOCKED’ beside every rank of magic he’d learned but he’d been expecting such a thing. His magic pool had diminished significantly—he was only capable of casting spells of D-rank, now.

“What does it say?” questioned Anneliese.

“It says things that make me very, very happy,” Argrave answered, setting the mirror beside him on the bed. “Hot damn. I want to dance.” He cleared his throat. “When marimba rhythms start to play, dance with me, make me sway,” he sung.

Anneliese smiled. “You are just as bad as singing as last time.”

Argrave laughed. “I know, I know—I’ve got no talent, I’m flat. But do you know what I *am* talented at? Or rather, will be?” Argrave pointed a finger.

"I can think of some," she nodded.

"Flattering statement, little lady," Argrave lowered his finger. "Henceforth, I will grow as a mage with *ridiculous* speed. Unprecedented. My magic will replenish faster than you can blink. I can diminish it just as fast, repaying that massive magic debt I accrued at Sethia. I suspect that'll happen before we even leave this place. Each time I do this cycle, it'll grow a little larger, a little larger..." Argrave held his fingers close together, and then widened them. "Before long, I won't even need the Blessing of Supersession. My magic pool will be larger." Argrave paused, then recanted, "Alright, that's one hell of an exaggeration. But still!"

Anneliese moved to sit on the bed. "Your emotions are returning. Does that mean...?"

Argrave nodded. "I wasn't being delusional. I feel it coming on. It's like..." Argrave paused. "You remember, when you were young, you'd feel this weird aching, throbbing, in your legs? Growing pains, some called them."

She looked to her legs, thinking, and then nodded. "I think so," she confirmed.

"Well, it's like that... but all over," Argrave moved his hands around, touching various places. "And... it's getting worse."

"Things have only just begun," a voice echoed throughout the room.

The Alchemist stepped inside. Argrave clammed up immediately and focused his gaze on the returned giant. Anneliese stood from the bed, coming to attention, yet remained quiet otherwise. The bed shook with every step he took.

Soon enough, he came to stand over Argrave's four-poster bed, his upper half concealed by the bedframe. He held his hand out, and the fingers retracted within. A great eye opened on the now-fingerless palm. The gray pupil shone with spell matrixes, darting about and scanning Argrave's body. Anneliese stepped back, startled, then bravely stepped back and sat beside Argrave.

"If I were to open your chest once again, we might see the heart working. Blood enters it normally and exits changed. Insignificant, now, but in time it will all be replaced. Black Blooded."

The Alchemist walked around the bed. "You must eat much. If you do not, you will be eaten from within and die. Avoid biting your tongue from the pain—be cautious of seizures, too." The Alchemist rubbed his fingers together. "In addition, waste will be forcibly expelled from the body. At the peak, I suspect you will begin sweating, vomiting, and defecating blood. It will leave no lasting damage, I suspect. In addition, your skin, hair, and nails may fall off, regrow. I am uncertain of this. All test subjects and chimeras die by this point, generally."

Argrave swallowed.

"Your bones, organs, muscles, et cetera, will all adapt to the changes in time. Bones will grow larger, gain strength. Your muscles will exhibit no visible changes, but they will morph as well. Your organs will become much more efficient as magic permeates throughout your body." The Alchemist stepped to the bed's nightstand and retrieved Argrave's report.

"In essence, everything your body does will become better. Exemplar, muscle growth: the same effort will produce tremendously improved results. Alcohol, poisons, and many potions will dissolve from the intensity of the magic in your blood." The Alchemist flipped through Argrave's written report, reading as he spoke. "Infection and disease become impossibilities. Wounds will heal better, and faster," he continued. "That same principle wards away aging to a large degree."

The Alchemist shut the book with a light *pop*. "Sufficient," was his sole comment for the report. "I tell you this because I expect you to keep noting these things. You will describe what occurs within, daily, and continue to be subject to my scrutiny. In return, you will receive my continued tolerance of your presence within my home and garden. Elsewise, you and yours will be banished."

"I agree, then," Argrave nodded. "Any rules to note for my stay?"

"Do not pester me needlessly. Beyond that, my other condition remains in place."

Argrave nodded. The Alchemist set the book back down on the nightstand and left, his exit jarringly abrupt. The both of them sat in stunned silence for a long while. Eventually, Argrave took a deep breath and sighed.

"Surgeons aren't much better than lawyers in terms of arrogance."

"What other condition?" Anneliese questioned, ignoring his little quip.

"If I scream too loud, he'll take my larynx," Argrave explained, staring at the blankets atop him.

"Larynx?" she repeated.

"Throat... thing," Argrave held a hand to his throat. "Let's me talk. Breathe, too, I think. Not sure."

She stared at him. "How loud is 'too loud?'"

"Uhh..." Argrave trailed off. "Loud enough to annoy him."

Anneliese sighed. "A simple enough thing to combat. I will make sure no sound gets out. Still, what a terrifying man."

"I'm curious... what did you feel from him?"

"It is not... a feeling, per se," Anneliese explained. "It is more of reading their body, their face, than something external. I cannot read animals, nor things drastically different from humans or elves. The only reason I was able to read those creatures in the Low Way was because their basis was human. And... I cannot read him. His movements are all far too foreign."

Argrave nodded. "That's fine. Still, I was hoping for something to make this nonsense less nonsensical."

"Do not be nervous," Anneliese reassured. "I vowed that absolutely nothing would go wrong. And I will be sure of that, even now."

Argrave did feel reassured by that, knowing they were more than empty words coming from her. "No sight of Galamon or Durran?"

She looked frustrated. “No. I saw nothing of them. It is a vast jungle, granted, but I did not think it dangerous. And I did not think they would not care about your wellbeing...” She shook her head. “I will go look for them, if you wish it. I can fetch more to eat, too. It would be good to stock up.”

“I mean... I got what I came here for. I don’t think they can take that away,” Argrave clenched the blankets tight. “But Durran and Garm were definitely being shady.”

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“I refuse,” said the Alchemist, plainly and loudly, voice ever-grating on the ears.

Garm stared up at the gargantuan man, his pupils shaking. Durran and Galamon stood within the vast library that Argrave had discussed his surgery in, Garm held in Galamon’s hand. Though the area had been clean and tidy when Argrave left barring some misplaced books, it was now strewn with innumerable books containing diagrams and long paragraphs of data—some of them seemed to be wholly numbers.

“Why?” Garm questioned against his better judgement.

The Alchemist raised his nose up into the air, and vague cracks echoed out around his neck.

“I will not be party to killing something that I have interest in,” he said plainly, though his voice was noticeably lower in pitch. “A necromantic creation that retains its sentience, retains its soul in toto, barring foolish, unnecessary damages that seemed to have been self-inflicted by a B-rank spell—that is interesting indeed. Worthy of study, certainly.”

Galamon shifted on his feet, looking to Garm in his hand.

“But I told you—I’ll allow you to study me.”

“Until the Black Blooded one recovers. A process taking a month at most. Insufficient time to draw my interest enough to do as you wish,” the Alchemist concluded, staring down at Garm.

“I have other things to offer,” Garm continued. “Spells of the Order of the Rose.”

The Alchemist turned around and walked back into the library, saying nothing in response. It was clear he had no interest in further conversation.

“What would it take, then?!” Garm called out.

Cracking bones echoed throughout the obsidian library, as though the Alchemist was popping his neck or fingers. He came to a stop. Rather than turn, the hair on his scalp receded within, and a face identical to the one on the front took its place. His frontside carried on unaffected, staring down and writing into a book as he spoke from the face on his back.

“Surrender yourself to me, completely,” the Alchemist said, voice another pitch lower. “And refrain from this foolishness of merging souls. I can still deliver your eyes to the Black Blooded one. I will allow you to write down what spells you know. In return, submit. The tests will last some years. Depending on how they go, I may allow you to die when they are finished,” he finished apathetically.

Durran lowered his gaze to the ground, raising his brows and shaking his head as if resigned to things. Galamon remained patient, staring down at Garm.

"But I... I'll do things myself. Then I'll be gone forever—no opportunity for anyone any longer," Garm threatened, desperation very evident.

More cracking and popping filled the room. The book the Alchemist held slammed shut, echoing throughout the library. The face on the back of his head sunk away, replaced by hair, and the Alchemist turned to face Garm.

"How sad," the Alchemist said, voice now as deep and guttural as Galamon's, though magnitudes more powerful.

"Garm..." Galamon cautioned, already stepping away towards the hall.

"You have to help," Garm said resolutely.

At once, the odd cracking of bones turned into a deafening noise, like the sound of a giant tree finally breaking and splintering. The Alchemist's movements were barely discernible, and he arrived before the three of them in not a second. His hair rose and writhed as if alive and his rigid back bent down, face contorting into one giant eye that stared at Garm while shining with green light.

A mouth opened on the Alchemist's stomach, wide enough to swallow Galamon whole and with teeth the size of Garm himself. A black mist poured out of his ears, eye, and mouth, dancing up into the air. His hair surrounded Garm, each strand like threatening needles.

"Why is that?" the Alchemist asked, each word spoken slowly and deliberately. His voice could be likened to the devil itself, so terrifying it had become.

As the needle-thin strands of hair poked at his skin, drawing blood, Garm's gaze remained steady.

"Because you want to stop Gerechtigkeits as much as anyone in this world. And Argrave stands to be the vanguard against him," Garm answered. "I want to help him. This is the best way I have. Besides, you get to use the Unsullied Knife more. Doubtless you're eager to."

The Alchemist became still for a moment. Then, he began to pull away. "Gerechtigkeits," said the colossal mouth on his stomach, emphasizing the harsh portions of the word. The mouth groaned loudly, then slowly, the lips sealed shut, fading away into flesh until naught but ivory skin remained.

Durran had fallen to the floor at some point, and he slowly stood up, head moving about frantically. Even Galamon had shied away.

"Get out," the Alchemist commanded. "Begone. I must..." he trailed off, his speech hesitating for the first time any present could recall.

All were eager to obey this directive, exiting as quickly as their feet would allow. The Alchemist looked up to the ceiling. He stared silently for a long while, then let out a long, contemptuous groan.

"Annoying," he said, voice returned to its normal pitch.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 150: Blood, Bile, and All Things Vile

"Garm mouthed off to the Alchemist?" Argrave questioned while rubbing his chest, taking deliberate and heavy breaths. Anneliese had placed some accommodations in the room—the end of the bed had a chair to accommodate Argrave's dangling feet, and she had placed a large couch just beside the bed for herself. In addition, some food was ready and stocked.

The pain was beginning in earnest. It was a constant dull ache, rising ever upwards in intensity. It had been manageable at first—ignorable, even. But it kept growing and growing, becoming all-consuming. It reminded Argrave, strangely enough, of having eaten something incomprehensibly spicy. The pain appeared tame for a time—half a minute, maybe. But the fire would keep growing, consuming one's throat, one's mouth, with such a steady pace that the moment seemed to last forever.

Unlike a hot pepper's spice, there was no respite from this pain. No milk, nothing to offer temporary relief. It was just an ache rising ever higher, like a room slowly flooding. The worst part was that Argrave saw no ceiling in sight—it stood to keep growing, eating away more and more at all other sensations. The uncertainty bred nervousness, fear.

A month of this, Argrave told himself mentally. This is nothing. First step on the stair. Gotta be better.

"...and so they refuse to enter," Anneliese said.

Argrave looked at her, realizing she'd been talking while he'd been lost in thought. "Sorry, got lost in my own world," he confessed.

"They ran into the Alchemist, and he told them to get out of their sight after some words," she summarized what she had said quickly. "Now, they fear retribution, so they stay far from the castle."

A stab of pain seized Argrave's head, and he inhaled through clenched teeth, veritably hissing.

"Useless imbeciles," he said loudly, his own voice echoing in his head. "What good are they?"

Anneliese looked off to the side, saying nothing.

"Damn it all," Argrave cursed. "No... they're not imbeciles. Pain... pain makes your irritable. Forget what I said." The stabbing subsided in his head, and once it did, he interrogated further, "What the hell did they say to the man?"

"They avoided the subject," Anneliese crossed her arms.

"Christ. I might be pissing blood soon, and they're playing about with our local twenty-foot-tall psychopath!" Argrave stroked his head, his shouting making his headache worse. "I can't catch a break? Even now?!"

Anneliese stared at him patiently. "Is there anything you need?"

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "Choke me until I'm unconscious, see you tomorrow," he gave a salute.

She lowered her head, unamused by his joke.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Maybe you... maybe you shouldn't be here. I'm just going to be a moody prick for days on end. No one deserves to be subject to that, least of all..." he shook his head. "Just go, join Galamon."

"I made up my mind, Argrave," she said simply without a moment's hesitation. "You expect me to leave you to fend for yourself? Could you? We know not how bad this will get," she pointed out.

"But—"

The Alchemist entered. His steps seemed heavier than normal, somehow. Argrave tensed, quieting and sitting up in the bed. Wordlessly, the Alchemist came to stand before Argrave. He held his hand out, an eyeball forming within his palm once more. His gray eye shone with spell light.

Like this, the Alchemist stood there, as still and shiny as a nightstand lamp. Argrave stayed silent, doing his best to make even his breathing quiet as he waited for whatever the Alchemist was doing.

"Mmmm..." he groaned for nearly a minute, voice low. "I see it now. You descend from that golden serpent. Vasquer. She had a union with a man. Hideous thing."

The Alchemist began to walk around the bed, hand remaining stationary. It reminded Argrave of the way a chicken's head could stay totally still as it moved. After a long while where Argrave cast uncertain glances at Anneliese, the Alchemist finally closed his hand.

A finger extended towards Argrave. The mini hand on the finger's tip grabbed Argrave's cheeks, and his eyes widened in surprise. The Alchemist's skin was surprisingly rough, despite being white and smooth-looking. Argrave tried to keep his face firm, but his cheeks were soon squished by an indomitable force—not enough to hurt, but enough to move him, certainly. Not that Argrave could notice if it *did* hurt, what with the all-consuming pain of his Black Blood integrating with his body.

Anneliese stood and stepped towards the bed, her expression morphed by surprise. She looked concerned but hesitated to act.

"You talk frequently. The muscles in your face—signs of non-stop chatter, laughter, smiles," the Alchemist noted. Argrave felt some strain on his neck as he was lifted upwards somewhat. He raised his hand up, hesitant to stop the Alchemist. Before he could make up his mind, Argrave was released suddenly, falling back to the bed. "Every time I listen to this room, I hear your babbling. Inane complaints. Witticisms. Delusions of grandeur made grander by gullibility."

Argrave stared indignantly with brows furrowed and eyes wide, massaging his face in confusion.

"Words, words, words—there are too many in the world," the Alchemist said. "Words fail half the time. What good are words in a battle?"

Silence filled the room for a while. Argrave figured it was a rhetorical question, and so he stayed silent.

"Stop thinking. Answer," the Alchemist commanded, and Argrave scrambled in the bed.

"Words..." Argrave trailed off, before finishing, "...got me here."

"A lie. You have feet, legs, all connected to a brain by systems so complex your words fail to describe them. *They* render you ambulatory, not words. You walked here. Words, be they on paper or spoken, carry no one anywhere."

I really don't need this right now, Argrave thought, brain dancing to find the answer.

"It's a metaphor," Argrave rebutted.

"Useless things," the Alchemist stated, voice a pitch lower—this alarmed Argrave very much, because he knew it was a sign of anger. "Words are a veneer—metaphor is yet another façade atop this veneer, another step to remove and obscure the purity of the mind's thought."

Argrave noted the irony that the Alchemist had used a metaphor to disparage metaphors, but he focused on what the Alchemist meant.

"The purity of the mind's thought," Argrave repeated. "There is no other method of communication so universal and sophisticated as words." Pain shot up Argrave's arm, and he winced, but kept his thoughts focused on the titan looming above his bed. "Words are the best way for the common and the grand to understand each other's thoughts. And universal understanding—that's a powerful thing," Argrave finished through clenched teeth, gripping his arm tightly. "Words foster that."

"Nnn..." the Alchemist groaned once again, a vast mouth on his stomach opening up. Black smoke started to rise up into the high ceiling. He walked to the wall. It parted like burning twigs twisting from a flame, revealing the jungle beyond.

Argrave started to worry that he was about to experience an elaborate eviction because he lost a debate he didn't understand.

"I hate talking most of all," the Alchemist said, pure contempt showing on his voice—a rare divergence from the constant apathy. "No different from assault. Why must I suffer your thoughts? I have my own to deal with—thoughts infinitely more important."

Not wishing to make the same mistake as last time, Argrave answered, "Why n—"

"Be silent," the Alchemist interrupted. "Talking is an assault. Yet it is the strangest form of assault, doing no genuine harm. The spoken word plants itself within your mind like a parasite, worming and changing and feeding on the valuable thoughts within. Corrupting. Morphing. Violating the sanctity, the purity, of the hallowed thoughts within."

The Alchemist turned and the wall shut, hiding the jungle away once again. "The spoken word is an insidious killer. Harmless, fools say. But in time, the words batter at the mind, until the 'you' that once was is only a memory, and your thoughts of the past become foreign. It kills that 'you' that once was."

Recluses go to any lengths to justify their lifestyle, Argrave thought drolly, finding some amusement amidst the tense atmosphere and pain wracking his body.

"But when the time for words has passed, and mindless hordes charge each other, spite in their gut... everything blends into the song of war, and true mettle will be tested."

The Alchemist walked back to stand before Argrave's bed. He stayed there for a long while, doing nothing. Argrave could not relax his vigilance. He sat there, alert and awake, preparing for any eventuality.

Without another word, the Alchemist turned and walked out of the room. Argrave stared at the threshold like the man might reemerge at any time.

A minute passed. Another. Finally, Argrave collapsed back into the bed, feeling exhausted.

"What in the god damn was that about?"

"Argrave..." Anneliese came to sit in the bed. Argrave kept his eyes on her. She reached out, then touched the back of his neck.

When she pulled her hand away, blood was on her fingers. Argrave kept his eyes on that for a long while.

"He said it would happen," Argrave said grimly. "Sweating blood. I guess... time to find out if I'd crack under torture," Argrave concluded.

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Argrave was certain of only one thing—time had passed.

As the pain grew worse and worse, it became difficult to note anything beside the passing of time. Every moment felt eternal. The symptoms ascended beyond mere pain, and Argrave felt like he was losing his mind.

All that the Alchemist promised would happen, did. All that and more. The once-clean room became a disgusting mess, but Argrave was too consumed with simply getting by. With more pressing concerns, Argrave could not be appalled by his own state.

He was beset by a constant hunger, eating at him. He drank water and consumed food so frequently the taste of anything became nauseating, but his body never rejected what he ate—indeed, it seemed to desperately take it in. If he didn't tend to it, the hunger and thirst became another source of pain.

With everything going on, sleep became an impossibility. Argrave laid in his bed, shivering, beset by strange cold sweats. He raised his fiercely trembling hands to the dim light in the room. He saw that his nails were black and blue—he suspected they'd fall off, soon enough.

There was something else constant—or rather, someone. Anneliese. She rested on the couch, taking the time to sleep.

"Anneliese," he called out, voice still steady despite everything.

She roused at once, head lifting up and eyes coming to attention like she wasn't sleeping at all—perhaps she wasn't. "What is it? Do you need something?"

"You should... go outside," he said, interrupted by a shiver.

"Why? Do you need something? Take it slow," she urged, moving off the couch to kneel by the bed.

"I don't... want you here," he managed through clenched teeth.

Despite the harsh words, she remained steady. "Why?" she questioned.

"Hate being seen like this," Argrave growled. "Most of all... by you, of everyone in the world. Never want *you* to see me like this."

Anneliese laid her head on the bed and waited for a few silent moments. Then, she lifted her gaze once more. "Argrave. Do you know what I would hate?"

Argrave shook his head. He wasn't sure if the gesture was conveyed, because he was shaking enough it might be ambiguous.

"I would hate letting you remain like this, alone, miring in your own misery. I cannot abide that."

Argrave closed his eyes when she said that. After all that had happened, he was finding it a little difficult not to cry.

He felt a strange tenseness in his hand. He feared a new symptom and opened his eyes to look. Anneliese held his hand, offering silent support.

"Empty your head of these emotions of embarrassment, shame," she shook her head. "Focus on yourself. Forget about the world."

Argrave turned his head away from her, staring off into the room. Nothing needed to be said, by his estimation. She would know what he felt. And he wasn't sure it would be especially well-received from one covered in blood.

At least, that was his excuse.