

Chapter 181: Flower in the Wetlands

With Argrave tapping into the power of his Black Blood with the use of blood magic, what was a pitched battle quickly inverted in their favor. Argrave had a keen aim, and the constant biting of pain distracted him none—indeed, it only sharpened his focus, tuning him like an instrument to be dead set on his task at every second. He seldom missed. There were too many targets.

Argrave advanced alone, leaving the protection of his companions to give him a better vantage point. He knew the tricks of these Sentinels—even if they were fast enough to attack, he was more than able to guard and dispatch them... yet few did manage that, and he slaughtered the malformed animals one after another.

Something grabbed onto his arm, and he very nearly retaliated before he recognized that it was Anneliese. He dispelled the [Waning-Cycle Bloodmoon], the thread dissipating into nothing. She dragged him back, shouting something, but his ears were ringing terribly and he could discern nothing.

He tried to advance back onto the frontlines, but Anneliese stopped him, repeating something. As the ringing faded, it slowly came into focus.

“..stay here. Stay here. Stay here!” she said, time and time again.

“I get it,” Argrave finally responded to her. “I’m good. I’m good,” he said, half to himself. “Let’s finish things up,” he commanded, getting ready once more.

Though he said that, there was little to finish up. With Argrave single-handedly wiping out one side of the bridge, Durran and Galamon had cooperated ably with Anneliese’s support to make way on the other. The Sentinels were not all annihilated, but they were routed—Argrave could see a great many of the larger beasts retreating to the center of the vast crater of rushing water. The final confrontation would be there, without a doubt.

As Argrave glanced around, a voice cut into his thoughts. “Remove your glove,” Anneliese said, the speed of her voice masking her worry.

Argrave leaned against an archway adorned with rose-colored leaves on the bridge they stood, adrenaline slowly fading. Durran collapsed to one knee. He threw his helmet off and held his face as though nauseous, and Galamon knelt down beside the tribal. The elven vampire cast a glance at Argrave. The vampire’s expression was largely hidden beneath his helmet, which covered only his eyes, but Argrave knew that look wasn’t worry alone. Awe, maybe. Or so Argrave hoped.

Per Anneliese’s direction, he took off the glove. It stuck to his flesh, and he felt skin tear as it came free. His hand had cracked all along its surface, beginning from his fingers. Blood dripped from these cracks, swelling in tandem with his heartbeat. Argrave rolled up his sleeve. The cracks continued up his wrist, his forearm, past his elbow... stopping just below the shoulder. His whole arm was pale, appearing somewhat dead.

Anneliese clenched her teeth and locked gazes with Argrave. Then, she held both hands out. She cast the C-rank [Mystic Suture], her hands following along the cracks in his flesh. Blackness appeared along the edges of the wounds, and the flesh itself seemed to sew together without seams.

She stood once the last crack had faded in his flesh. "...the blood loss will still trouble you," Anneliese said quietly. "That cannot be healed. Not with my magic, at least. You will be anemic for a time, but considering your unique constitution... not as long as most."

Argrave rolled down his sleeve and gave her a quiet nod. He tested his arm. Now that the adrenaline was gone, it felt stiff, numb, much like one's fingers when left out in the cold.

"Thank you," he said, moving away from the archway.

"I do not like having to do that. But I always will," she returned. She tripped over a root, clearly exhausted, and Argrave caught her before she could fall.

With Anneliese held in one arm, Argrave called out, "We've bought time. Small break, gather ourselves, and then... press to the center."

Durran looked up and nodded, then quickly lowered his head again as though the act made him more nauseous. Argrave looked towards the center of the crater, where the jagged bolt of rot marring the beautiful landscape rushing water seemed to strike a target.

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After the time taken to rest, Argrave and his company proceeded onwards across the wooden platform. His arm regained its mobility after a few dozen minutes, but his whole body felt heavier, sluggish. Barring the sounds of rushing water, the landscape was eerily quiet—the Sentinels left alive had made their retreat, and now they were holed up in the center of this place.

As they neared, what was in the center was made clearer. One might expect a grandiose palace of sorts, but this was not a place built for man—indeed, it might have been built *before* man. But perhaps 'built' was the wrong word.

Once, perhaps, a great tree had stood there. Now, there was only a great circular building of rotted black wood, half-caved in. Piles and piles of rot and dust lay around this circular building, meshed with masses of disgusting and wax-ridden plant matter. The upper half of the tree had collapsed, and a great log thicker and taller than any skyscraper was buried beneath the ever-rushing waters of this serene place opposite where they had entered. Its fall had destroyed many of the wooden platforms and plants growing atop the serene place.

"This will be my time to handle things," Argrave looked to Durran pointedly. "Defend me as I do things—nothing more, nothing less."

Durran did not even muster indignance at being so blatantly signaled—he gave a quiet nod and took a deep breath to steady his hand. He had obviously been affected by the seriousness of the situation.

Anneliese looked discontented, so Argrave added, "There'll be no blood magic."

She nodded, but he could tell his words were not entirely dispelling her sentiments. "I scouted ahead. We know what is within. Whenever you are ready," Anneliese gestured towards Argrave.

Argrave felt trepidation and anticipation both. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Galamon," he looked to his companion, then stepped ahead without another word. The elven vampire took his place by Argrave's side, greatsword held at the ready as they walked forward.

"Should have brewed those potions we used at the druidic camp," Argrave said, trying to draw upon humor to ease his nerves.

"Considering your blood, they wouldn't work," Galamon pointed out.

Argrave snorted, keeping his eyes wide and alert. As he neared the vast opening on the rotten stump ahead of them, Argrave triggered the Blessing of Supersession. That familiar feeling of an ocean welling up within consumed all of his thoughts, and the sole thought occupying his mind was his duty.

Argrave took steady, even steps into the sanctuary of the god within this vast crater. One hand was held towards the sky, and the spell matrix for [Electric Eel] whirled time and time again, sparking constructs dancing up into the air. The other was outstretched, facing the enemy.

The first to leap at Argrave was a giant lynx. It came with claws first, a waxpox-ridden stinger shortly behind. Argrave cared not what it was—he saw it move, and he cast a C-rank spell, [Wargfire]. A maw of flames emerged, catching the lynx in its teeth. The second enemy came, a dragonfly—he met it with a spell of wind.

His right hand became a shield, and his left became a sword. He warded away all comers with large, powerful spells, while the left conjured the eels of electricity dancing in the air. When enough had conjured, he would send the prepared attacks towards his enemies. Dozens of the lithe bolts of lightning striking at once left most foes dead, and those that lived still stood at death's door, spasming in agony.

What few enemies made it past his shield of spells or his ever-vigilant companions, Argrave dispatched with a spell cast from Garm's eyes. Like this, great or small, all before him fell. What had been a desperate struggle not an hour ago became an overwhelming defeat for the Sentinels of this exalted land.

Argrave felt himself drifting away into the feeling of overwhelming power in his hands, as he had times before. It was recognizable, now, like a pull beneath his mind, threatening to consume him. He realized there was something more to this ocean of magic, something deeper. His greater mastery of magic enabled him to see that. He wished to look down, using Garm's eyes to see the magic within... but he feared what was there. He feared 'Supersession' had more than one meaning.

To combat the tugging, the pulling, he conjured images of Orion. The man would shrug these spells off as though they were nothing, then crush Argrave's skull with his bare hand. The thought helped in sobering him. Argrave cast one final spell, then lowered his hands. His breathing was as steady as it was when he had walked in here.

Things were quiet, still. Argrave glanced around, paranoid and rattled, power still surging from within him.

"Drezki the Coward is further back," Argrave urged, stepping ahead while the power still sprung from within him.

Argrave pushed past the horde of dead and dying, not even sparing a glance behind. Galamon kept pace with him, and he heard his companion's footsteps further back.

As they moved deeper into the rotten stump, it stopped making sense—they walked for far too long without ever meeting a wall. Argrave was not concerned, but he was disconcerted to experience this place in person. The sound of rushing water filled his ears, growing in intensity until it was a low roar consuming all sound.

Argrave's feet met shallow water, and the scenery changed once again. They were in a deep pit washed in sunlight. Vast waterfalls towered above them in a ring, flowing down to the ground. They all formed one giant spring heading to a great blooming flower of pure water. The water shone like emeralds and sapphire, but nothing could be seen within it.

A lone figure waited before the great flower, kneeling. Argrave did not waste time to admire things—he stepped forward, the Blessing of Supersession still surging within him. Both of his hands worked diligently to conjure electric eels, and before long, a great horde of them surged above his head. With every that joined them, his steps grew more confident.

The figure turned her head back and stood. It was a woman. She was short and squat. She looked afflicted with jaundice, but Argrave knew she was not—she was one of the swamp folk. One of the last, that is. They were a short, squat people, with colorful yellow-green skin tones and mostly brown hair. They were technically human, much in the same way Veidimen and the southron elves were both technically elves despite their drastic differences.

"One of the Plague Jester's servants, come to put an end to my Lady and Light," she said, grabbing at her thighs. She pulled free two sticks—Argrave knew what they did, though, and could not call them simple.

Drezki's body was malformed. She wore armor made of wood. Parts of her were missing and had been replaced entirely by wood like a puppet patched together with improper materials. She did not look a dangerous foe—certainly no more than those animal abominations they'd just put an end to—but Argrave knew better.

"On the contrary. I've come to put an end to the Plague Jester. To do that, I need Silvic's help," Argrave explained, even though he felt this battle was inevitable. He watched for every movement, knowing Drezki's speed. "So let's get this started, Drezki."

Drezki was rattled, but she held her sticks at the ready. Her feet braced, and Argrave's whole party braced in turn.

"How do you know us?" a voice echoed throughout the vast waterfalls.

Argrave shifted on his feet, shallow water splashing beneath his boots. "What?" he questioned, genuinely surprised.

"How do you know us?!" the voice came again, doubled in volume. Argrave almost grabbed at his ears. Drezki hesitated to rush forward.

"Reasons," Argrave said simply. "That's you, Silvic?"

No reply came for a time. Then, the blooming flower of water behind Drezki began to spin outwards, fountaining into the shallow water below as though unravelling. The flower flowed back into the water at their feet, dissipating... and as it faded, a humanoid figure stood there.

Though Silvic could not be called man or woman, it leaned towards the latter. She had a great crown resembling a stag's, but it was made of writhing tree roots, half of which had been afflicted with the waxpox. The left half of her body was like a vibrant tree, surging with dancing liquid lights. Much of its right half was the same... but even more had been rotted away by the disease they'd seen all too much of, lately.

"You speak truly? You are an enemy of the Jester?" Silvic questioned.

Argrave realized when he heard those words that he might've been too fatalistic about the inevitability of this battle.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 182: Spirit of the Wetlands

"I do speak truly," Argrave confirmed, placing his hand to his chest and lowering his head slightly in a display of deference. "I intend to stop the Plague Jester."

The swamp god Silvic stepped forth, her radiant body glowing with liquid light. When she spoke, her face remained still. Her voice was decidedly feminine. "And you believe one already infected with the rot the Plague Jester has conjured will be of use to you?"

"My Lady and Light, please do not waste words on those present," Drezki said, stepping forth. "They have slaughtered your guardians."

"We were attacked first," Durran pointed out, stepping forth in turn to stand beside Argrave. He gazed at Silvic with distrust. Argrave knew Durran trusted no gods or any faith given what his people had endured at the hands of the Vessels. His distrust was wise, or so Argrave believed.

Drezki brandished her twin sticks. "Because you do not belong in these hallowed lands! They should be forbidden to all save the servants of my Lady and Light!"

"But we can enter your sacred land," Argrave spread his hands out. "Because the waxpox has broken your power completely."

"The waxpox?" Silvic repeated as Drezki bristled at Argrave. "...No, I see," she followed up after a second, placing the name. "You say my power is broken by what you call the waxpox—it is true. So I ask again—why do you seek my aid against the Plague Jester, if you believe I lack power?"

"Because you can help me motivate someone who has power to act," Argrave explained, remaining still. "I'm sure you've felt his presence in the edges of these wetlands, where one of the fortresses of the invaders once stood," Argrave said, lowering his voice as he spoke.

"The one whom the gods of the serpent kingdom have given their blessing?" Silvic questioned, and Argrave nodded. "And what is my role in motivating this human, hmm? I have no treasures to offer, no artifacts for humans. I am merely an old spirit of the swamps who watches over the fools that would mar this beautiful land," Silvic spread her wooden arms out, and the liquid light flowed within her body.

"My Lady and Light," Drezki spoke once again. "Even now, this man keeps an attack ready. Please—retreat. I shall stall," she implored.

Argrave gazed at the electric eels still dancing in the skies above. "...the man you speak of—his name is Orion, and the last thing that he would want is any treasure you might offer."

"But the men outside these wetlands are greedy," Silvic tilted her head. "That is why they invaded this place, built their monstrosities of stone and planted their flags atop our soil. Avarice is what divides people like Drezki from you. And it is why I have protected these wetlands for six hundred years."

"Might be," Argrave conceded with a nod. "I have some of that avarice you talk about, I'll give you that much, but not all men are the same. All this man wants is the prosperity of his religion," Argrave shook his head. "Orion wants his religion's propagation, the protection of its people... and right now, this plague stands as the biggest threat to that. He is ignorant about the Plague Jester. But you... I'm sure that you can convince him. He'll have no love for you, but he will trust you."

Silvic stepped forth, coming to stand before Argrave... though not far enough to attack, he noted. She had two slots in her face where the liquid light in its body flowed especially thickly, and Argrave fixed his gaze on them like they were eyes.

"Yet you are the aspect most concerning," Silvic's head lowered, scanning him. "I sense the seed of something ancient within you, something far more powerful than everything in this meagre corner of the world. Do you do its bidding?"

"I do my own bidding," Argrave protested at once. "The continent is falling apart. I have to patch it up to keep myself alive... well, myself and those I care about," he amended. "Things older than you or I stir. They corrupt the land, and they corrupt the people of the land. Something like this happening... it's not the natural order of things."

Silvic stepped away. "One who merely intends to stay alive would not know so much of these swamps. My name, the Plague Jester... you are foreign."

Argrave reached into the mind bank, pulling free an old excuse. "Erlebnis knows."

Though she possessed a wooden body, Argrave swore Silvic shuddered. "...I see. Then your presence... I am illuminated, yet more confused than ever before."

Silence fell, and the sounds of the vast waterfalls at every edge were the only noise that persisted. This conversation had gone vastly different from how it was in 'Heroes of Berendar.' The player was sent here to investigate the strange landscape, and it led them into the Marred Hallowed Grounds. Once there, Drezki ordinarily died combatting the player, and Silvic ultimately revealed the source of the plague before helping the player.

The differences didn't unease Argrave as much as they might've before. He was not the player. This was not 'Heroes of Berendar.' And he was sure that things were going well.

"Very well. I shall assist you in enlisting this man blessed by the gods of the serpent kingdom," Silvic turned back.

"My Lady and Light, I must counsel you," Drezki interrupted at once, kneeling before the old spirit of the swamps. "Please, think of the lives lost here today, and make your decision once more."

"They were corpses walking, and more yet live," Silvic refuted. "My grief for those who have fallen is real, but I can set aside my enmity for the sake of this land. These wetlands are our home, and they are sullied by vengeance and its consequences. If I do not put a stop to that, I have failed as one of this land's guardians."

"If you step beyond your domain, my Lady and Light, you may die," Drezki continued to counsel, undeterred.

"I will die regardless, child." Silvic stepped up to its guardian, holding out her arm afflicted with the waxpox. "Look at my arm. Persisting as I do would be just that—persisting."

Drezki looked off to the side, obviously not quite satisfied, but she did put her two sticks away. Silvic looked over at Argrave once again. "My answer remains the same."

Argrave clapped his gloved hands together. "Wonderful," he said with a smile. "I am very glad that this ended amicably."

"As am I," Silvic nodded. An awkward silence passed between the two of them. "...you may unready your attack," she pointed out.

Argrave looked up to the sky, where hundreds of electric eels sparked. He felt their connection in his mind. He wanted to cry a little as he realized he'd probably need to dispose of them all. Briefly, his mind pondered ludicrous ways to put them back in the bottle, so to speak, but his mind produced nothing.

So wasteful, he lamented.

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Mina stared at an extraordinarily tall man with wavy obsidian hair, kept somewhat long. It was *not* the black-haired man she thought she would set her eyes upon, but they did share the same father.

Prince Induen of Vasquer sat at the foot of the grand banquet table, and opposite him was Mina's father, Count Elgar of Veden. Like his daughter, he had golden hair and golden eyes, though that was their primary shared feature. He was a tall man, clearly a warrior. Mina shared most of her features with her mother, who sat just beside the count.

Mina's mother was the count's second wife, taken not a week after his first had died. Her mother, Louise, was a commoner—the daughter of a merchant—and the marriage had been made to settle a grand debt. Her mother's lowborn status coupled with the large number of other siblings from the first marriage made Mina's prominence in her house very low.

Yet now, Mina, her father, her mother, and the Prince ate at the table alone, none of her siblings present. Her father had come to trust her enough to have her present with a meeting with the prince. It was an honor, ostensibly, but Mina felt far from it.

"We are delighted to host the prince," Count Elgar said, voice somewhat higher pitched in its flattery. Countess Louise murmured something of the same note.

"Are you?" Induen mused, eating some of the food arrayed before him. "Strange. I don't recall seeing any soldiers from Veden joining my father's armies."

Count Elgar shifted. "Considering recent troubles, it is impractical. My entire land would fall victim to plague, and our food stores for the winter would be rendered useless... plus, the winter makes things..."

Count Elgar rambled on and on, excuses coming from his lips so quickly that they must have been prepared in advance. Induen ate in quiet, staring at her father. Mina was greatly unsettled.

"You may relax," Induen eventually interrupted, holding one palm out with a fork between his fingers. "I am not here for any stern rebukes. No, my purpose is much different."

Mina tensed further upon hearing he had a different purpose. After reports from other knights, she knew Argrave had passed through here. Despite the strange report of his eyes, the rest of his party matched with what she had last seen of him, barring an additional party member. He had headed into the northwest. Induen appearing might have something to do with him.

"And what might be your purpose here, Prince Induen, if you do not mind my inquiry?" Count Elgar continued. "You've called my daughter here, even..."

Hearing that, her gaze briefly jumped to her father, but she was a good enough actor to betray nothing more than that. Inwardly, she felt an urge to run. Prince Induen was a horrible man, she knew.

"Yes... I did," Induen nodded, placing his fork down. "I heard that Mina was the one that devised the idea for those camps outside the walls. As such, I wished to speak with her... and with you, her father, who put the plans into action."

"You see," Induen continued, placing his hands before him. "I plan on making this place my base for a while. Veden stands as one center between the north and the south, where many rivers converge... a veritable hub of activity. I intend on making it a bulwark against the plague, to stop it from spreading into the north as it has the south." Induen smiled. "I hope you two might be of assistance in this matter."

Mina didn't believe those words for a second. Induen's blue-eyed gaze fell upon her, and she felt the need to squirm.

"For now, let us enjoy this dinner," Induen said, picking his fork back up. "Afterwards, I hope the Count and his daughter will indulge this plan of mine."

"Of course," Count Elgar agreed immediately, speaking for his daughter. Mina kept her mouth shut. It was a learned skill. "We will aid in whatever way we can."

"I won't threaten your neutrality, fret not," Induen assured.

Her father did not reply to that, but he did look relieved. Other thoughts were running through Mina's head.

Chasing after Argrave... it was just a whim, before, but now it seems like a necessity. He'll have some inkling of what's going on here. He always knew what was happening. He knew everyone's secrets.

Another thought persisted in the back of her head—a more personal matter. It had stung at her every day for months. She was greatly afraid... but she had to know.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 183: Coward's Choice

Argrave and Anneliese sat in their tent, which had been pitched in a relatively dry spot of the wetlands. Argrave leaned up against Anneliese as she read, feeling a little exhausted. Galamon sat atop one of the crooks of the tallest trees, keeping watch vigilantly, while Durran read a book just beneath him. The two of them had separate tents just by each other.

There were two other guests—one anticipated, and the other wholly not so. Silvic laid down on the ground, doing nothing but merely existing. And Drezki the Coward... Argrave scanned their camp, looking for the woman.

“What will happen to my Lady and Light?” Drezki questioned, somewhat surprising Argrave. She stood just off to the side of the entrance to their tent, holding her sticks in hand. Up so close, Argrave could see the sticks she bore. Their core had been hollowed out and filled with the same glowing liquid light that resided within Silvic. To be struck with them was to be struck by an aspect of an elder spirit of the wetlands—that is to say it would hurt very badly.

Argrave gazed at Drezki, then cast a glance at Silvic. “I suspect... Orion will bring both of you along to aid in the expedition through the wetlands, and the fight against the Plague Jester. He may be zealous, but he isn’t stupid. He’ll know your help is important in traversing the wetlands, dealing with whatever enemies might abound.”

“And after?” Drezki insisted.

Argrave said nothing, searching for the right words.

“I will be killed,” Silvic answered before Argrave could say anything. Outside of the Marred Hallowed Grounds, her voice did not have the all-encompassing power it once did, but it was still bizarre.

Drezki whipped her head back. “What?!”

“Drezki, sweet child... if you had the opportunity to kill any of the gods of Vasquer, would you take it?” Silvic questioned, unmoving.

The woman stepped slowly to Silvic, wooden armor clanking. She knelt down, then collapsed to her knees ungracefully before Silvic. Though the wetland spirit did not move, the roots themselves curled out of the ground, bunching around Drezki’s legs as if in comfort.

“Silvic...” Drezki muttered, not quite crying but verging on that point.

“Would you rather I succumb to this disease of the Plague Jester, what the human calls the waxpox?” Silvic questioned, voice almost amused. “Let me die in service of the wetlands. This disease ruins all. That it came from this glorious land is tragedy enough. I must do what I can to right this wrong. It is not the natural order of things.”

Argrave was glad to be spared answering that question. Drezki grieved silently for a time, then went to sit elsewhere not far from Argrave's tent. He felt sympathy for the woman of the swamps, yet he could not deny being mildly annoyed that he was denied privacy with Anneliese.

"I apologize for earlier rudeness," Drezki finally said.

Argrave shook his head at once. "Rudeness doesn't bother me. And we had not met under the best of terms. Were it something avoidable, I would not have slain those I did." The words came easy because they were the truth. It wasn't as though he had compromised his morals in killing Silvic's guardians, but he generally did not like fighting. It was risky, and it hurt.

"Why do they call you 'the Coward?'" Anneliese questioned Drezki after a long amount of time had passed.

Drezki wiped something away from her yellowish eyes, then turned to Anneliese. "'They?'" she repeated. "I call myself that. How do you know of it? I never mentioned it."

"I told her," Argrave closed his eyes. He had neglected to inform Anneliese of the background for the nickname, largely because it wasn't important. It seems her curiosity spurred her to learn, anyway.

He heard Drezki shift, then answer, "It's to remind me of what I am."

"Usually nicknames are for other people, not yourself," Argrave pointed out tiredly, and Anneliese nudged him with her shoulder in slight reprimand.

"Remind you of what?" Anneliese continued, trying to suppress Argrave's comment.

"When the men beyond the swamp invaded, with gleaming metal armor and spells that tore apart the very land... I did not fight in defense of my land. I ran, as a coward. I let my family die alone," Drezki said. The words had weight, but she had moved past her grief enough to say them without shaking. "My Lady and Light welcomed me into her hallowed land. She protected me, sheltered me. She taught me. When the waxpox came and ate away my flesh, she imbued her own body into me to prevent my death," she noted, pointing to patches of her body that had been replaced with wood.

"I vowed not to make the same mistake with my Lady and Light. I vowed to defend her to my last breath. And so, I call myself 'coward,' because it is what I hope to prove I am not."

Argrave opened his eyes again, looking at Drezki as he leaned against Anneliese's shoulder. Willingness to die for something... on his first day here, that sentiment might have been foreign to him. He was beginning to understand it, though. Maybe it was because he was around people who would die for a cause—people like Titus, Orion, or the southron elves. Or maybe it was because he had something to value in this life beyond himself, now.

Just as the somber tones were beginning to set in his head, Anneliese tilted her head and rested it against his. It was a simple act, but it made him feel warm.

"...if the waxpox is cured, you don't need to die," Argrave said slowly. "You can still escape, Silvic."

Drezki looked towards the wetland spirit with hope, but Silvic said at once, "You make it sound like escaping this man you call Orion's grasp will be something easy," it pointed out. "The wetlands

themselves balk in fear of him. I fear I am powerless before him, even were my power not waned by this rotting disease.”

Drezki looked greatly dispirited.

“What is your purpose?” Anneliese inquired of Silvic. “Why do people worship you?”

“I am simply the wetlands. I am the advocate of the water beneath us, the trees around us, the beauty and ugliness all. I simply wish to see it prosper, as it always has. I am but a manifestation of the desires of the folk who once lived in this swamp. I am the *spirit* of the wetlands.”

With the emphasis on the word ‘spirit,’ Anneliese nodded as things fell in place.

“That is another reason I am not afraid to die,” Silvic added. “In time... centuries, perhaps... so long as this land persists, another of my kind will be born. Perhaps it will be different from me. Perhaps it will not be called ‘wetlands’ any longer. There is something special to this land, you know.”

Maybe the wetlands will progress into coal forests, Argrave mused, recalling useless geographical knowledge.

“And this plague uses what is special of this land to sow discord,” Silvic said. “That is why it must be stopped.”

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Mina of Veden entered deep into the wetlands, riding alone. She wore nothing to identify herself as the daughter of Count Elgar—it was a double-edged sword, she supposed, but she did not wish to announce her presence to any and all who looked. But just because she rode alone did not mean she was alone.

Golden-armored knights escorted her. Mina watched them ever warily. She could see that their flesh had been afflicted with the waxpox, and though it was covered by bandages, she had no strong desire to contract this disease. Despite their affliction, these knights seemed as capable as any of the royal knights she had seen before.

As they neared a fortress, the royal knights stopped. “This is as far as we will take you, lady. This is the camp of our Holiness.”

Mina stirred, holding her horse steady. Though she had come here searching for Argrave, having heard from her father’s knights that he’d gone this way, the only reason she risked coming here was because Orion was not near as dangerous as the other princes. Yet seeing his knights and hearing their address... she wondered every second if this was a mistake.

“May I meet Prince Orion?” Mina nonetheless asked.

“Any and all may meet the prince, so long as they are willing to wait for him,” the knight said plainly. “He resides within his keep.”

Without another word, the knights parted, and Mina looked towards the keep that they had pointed out. She drove her horse a bit closer, mindful of the great bulk of people wandering. Though she had thought Veden was bad enough, seeing this place now gave her chills. This disease was brutal beyond compare.

In the ruined keep, a great horde of people gathered. Between their zealous cheers and their praises, they seemed more a religious congregation than a camp of refugees. In the back, towering over all of them, was Orion of Vasquer. He was free of the disease, and yet he mingled without fear. The people reached for him like he was the most precious gemstones, clutching at his armor. He embraced all of them, speaking and touching and tending to them.

Mina struggled to keep her horse in line as she pondered this scene. She looked up towards the sky. Night was only just beginning. She looked at the vast crowd, biting her lip and debating herself fiercely. Something drew her eye—more golden-armored royal knights—and she spurred her horse towards them.

“Excuse me,” she greeted them. They had seemed normal enough, but once they turned their head, Mina saw they were as disease-ridden as those she had seen before. She tried not to display her disgust outwardly. “I’m looking for someone. Can I ask some questions?”

“Please, my lady. The gods demand we be open and honest,” the knight said, voice a low rasp.

Mina clenched her reins tighter, uneasy. “Has a tall man with black and gold eyes come through here? Argrave, he goes by.”

The two knights exchanged a glance. “Why do you seek him?”

“I’m a friend of his. I need to talk to him,” she said, trying to put urgency in her tone to coax information.

“You must consult Orion,” one of the knights held his palm out. “We dare not betray our Holiness’ brother by giving away information laxly.”

Mina nodded, then looked about the camp. She turned her head back to the road, then back to the large congregation.

“You’re looking for my brother,” another voice cut in, even and dead. Mina pulled her horse’s reins and it stepped backwards.

Once Mina identified who the voice belonged to, she kept leading her horse away. It was only once Magnus stopped a fair distance away did she allow herself to relax somewhat. She didn’t know much about Magnus, but she had not heard good things about him. He was the true shame of Vasquer, wandering the continent and engaging in the most base pleasures.

“I want to talk to him,” Mina repeated.

Magnus put one hand to his clean-shaven chin. “He was here. He’ll return, too, given he left his horses here. Orion has it guarded, but he was sharing a room with his fiancée.”

Mina blinked quickly, trying to hide her surprise. “His... fiancée?” she questioned, keeping her tone neutral.

“You say you’re his friend, yet you don’t know this much?” Magnus took his hand off his chin. “Curious.”

She felt a complex array of emotions at that moment. The matter of Nikoletta resurfaced again, even though she’d been trying her best to avoid thinking about it.

“Who was it?” she demanded, more harshly than she intended.

Magnus raised a brow. “Oh? Maybe my little brother is not so in-love with that stupidly tall elf if a pretty girl comes seeking him, growing angry at the mention of a fiancée.”

Mina glared down at Magnus before softening her features. It seemed she’d be staying after all.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 184: Testimony of the Divine

Argrave stepped into Orion’s camp in the ruined fortress, walking past the vast tents and buildings full of refugees. His stride was confident, but the Brumesingers walking at his feet were somewhat frenzied, betraying his true nervousness. Everyone watched him walk—this time, not because of his imposing height, but because of the two following behind: Silvic and Drezki.

His entry into the camp was like a great ripple that intensified rather than weakened. Though the sick could not be bothered to stir, those tending to them did, and soon enough, near half the camp was bustling with activity. Nothing would ever abate the nervousness of being the center of attention, Argrave thought.

Two golden armored knights rushed up before Argrave, drawing their glimmering swords from their scabbards. Argrave stepped out to meet them, holding his arms wide as he yelled, “You will stop!” His authoritative words did slow them, but they kept proceeding, forcing Argrave to add, “I am Orion’s brother!”

With their Holiness being invoked, the Waxknights did indeed draw to a sliding stop not two feet away from Argrave. Already, mist from his Brumesingers danced in the air, ready to attack if anything threatened him.

“Orion sought proof,” Argrave began, gaze alternating between the two Waxknights. “I have brought it.”

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The camp remained bustling in the time that passed since Argrave had brought Silvic to Orion’s camp. A retinue of twelve Waxknights guarded them. Everyone able enough to walk in the refugee camp gawked at the humanoid wetland spirit. Silvic remained largely silent and still, but the sight of her wooden body flowing with radiant liquid light was awe-inspiring even when she did nothing. Fewer stared at the short and squat swampland woman Drezki with her greenish skin and yellow eyes, but her presence only intensified the scrutiny placed upon them.

Anneliese looked greatly discomforted by the attention—she had once confided to him large crowds were difficult for her—and so Argrave did his best to keep her at ease while they waited for Orion. Regarding his other two companions, Galamon was ever unflappable while Durran somewhat enjoyed the scrutiny of the crowd, all but striking a pose for those watching.

It was easy to notice Prince Orion coming. He himself stood a foot and a half above the taller people in the crowd, and the people parted for his coming like the Red Sea had for another prophet of myth. Argrave kept his gaze on him as he walked closer, Argrave’s dark golden eyes meeting Orion’s gray the whole way through. Eventually, Orion strode past the Waxknights, ordering them to put their swords away with a simple gesture. They obeyed without question and knelt before him.

Prince Orion stood before Argrave. His eyes were markedly colder than their first meeting had been. Argrave was glad to be spared of a back-breaking embrace, but that was about the only good feeling swirling around in his chest at that moment. Orion stood above him, above even Galamon, and seeing the anger writ in his face was like having the roaring jaw of a Kodiak bear near your throat.

“What profane thing have you brought into this camp of followers of the faith, Argrave?” Orion questioned, his voice cold and unsympathetic. The affectionate calls of ‘brother’ were gone.

Argrave kept his composure despite his fear—he was growing quite adept at that. “You asked for proof, brother. I brought it before you.”

Orion looked past Argrave, staring at Silvic. He stepped around him, looking down and locking gazes with Galamon briefly. After, he took heavy steps that seemed to shake the earth. Drezki stood between Silvic and Orion, posturing like a child trapped between two adults. She was only barely to Orion’s stomach, but she stood strong nonetheless.

“Rest assured,” Argrave called out. “I would not have brought Silvic here were she a danger to everyone.”

Orion turned his back to Silvic, his white robe brushing against the muddy ground below as his gaze fixed upon Argrave. “What is it?”

“I am Silvic, one of many spirits of the wetlands, and a god to the swamp folk,” Silvic answered, her voice without an obvious source emanating from all directions causing a great stir in all of the people present.

Orion turned his head back to the wetland spirit ever so slowly. His fists were clenched tightly enough to trigger the protective enchantments on his gauntlet, and they shone brightly, barely preventing the metal from folding in on itself.

Argrave stepped forward. “She’s here for the same reason you are, Orion. She wants to stop the plague. If you care about the followers of the faith, I hope you will hear her out. If you listen, you will learn,” he implored Orion boldly.

Orion’s head remained fixed on Silvic’s form. Slowly, his gaze turned back to Argrave. The insane frigidity in his eyes had faded somewhat, making his expression seem less threatening... but Argrave still noted his fist was clenched tightly.

Prince Orion gave the smallest of nods, and Argrave let out a sigh of relief just as slight.

“Then, should we go discuss this?” Argrave gestured towards the keep where Orion had taken him, Anneliese, and Magnus. Orion put one hand on his hip and shifted his feet, considering what Argrave said.

“That which is to be shared—is it something that needs to be kept secret from the people?” Magnus chimed in, pushing his way past. The crowd did not part for him as it had Orion, evidently, and indeed, it seemed he had little goodwill among the people here. Even though Argrave thought it was a reasonable enough sentiment to garner support, few in the crowd expressed their backing for it.

“That is true,” Orion said, though, very obviously swayed.

Anneliese put her hand on Argrave's shoulder, drawing his attention. This was another signal they'd devised in private, much the same way she would tap his foot if someone lied—if she had something to note about the emotions of those present, she would grab his shoulder.

She did not have time to say what she needed to say, though. Orion spoke again, asking, "Then tell me, brother, why do you consort with such profane things, such heretics? What can it convey, that should spare it from righteous judgement by the gods?"

Argrave swallowed, trying to discern how best to maintain control of the conversation. With a crowd of zealous followers around and Magnus whispering in Orion's ear, the odds felt stacked against him... but the fight yesterday had been at a disadvantage before Argrave turned it around. At least, that was what he clung onto to bolster his confidence.

"You're right," Argrave agreed with Magnus, seeking to mitigate his influence. "The people have every right to know why they are wrought with this disease. They should understand what Orion and I will fight against!" he said boldly. His words drew in support from the crowd.

As the crowd murmured and cheered, Anneliese whispered in Argrave's ear, "Magnus is desperately terrified. Of what, I cannot say."

The words were somewhat difficult for Argrave to process fully—too many possibilities abounded in his head—and so he chose to shelve them away and focus on Orion.

"Silvic has come here to seek Orion's aid in fighting against a great evil that has taken root in the wetlands," Argrave preached. "This evil was born of evil—it was born of the extermination of the people of these swamps, when Vasquer conquered this place decades ago." Argrave turned on his heel. "Silvic. Please, tell all of how this plague came to be."

Magnus stared down Argrave like he was a fool, while Silvic placed her wooden, rooted hand behind her back in an almost polite, human fashion.

"Some years ago, the many spirits of the wetland took in those people of the swamp that survived the invasion by Vasquer," Silvic explained. "Many of the spirits had died in the invasion... and of those that persisted, one sought revenge against Vasquer for the deaths of many: Rastzintin, the strongest of us wetland spirits. He collaborated with one of the last great shamans of the swamp folk. She had been taken in as an amusement by humans—a jester, they are called.

"At first, they struck at the stone fortresses the men of Vasquer constructed," Silvic continued, none daring to interrupt. "One after another they fell, each House established succumbing in a multitude of ways. If you seek proof of the truth of my tales, I will show you the magic they weaved to turn this fortress we stand upon to ruins," Silvic declared.

Argrave listened patiently, watching the crowd. They were growing a bit incensed, he noted, but they did not seem at risk of exploding anytime soon. Magnus twitched and rubbed his hands together as Silvic spoke, glancing about paranoidly. His distress perplexed Argrave.

"Yet once all of the fortresses collapsed, Rastzintin was content. The jester did not agree with this sentiment. She betrayed him and used his power to conjure this plague. I, and many other spirits of the wetlands, attempted to stop this folly. Yet Rastzintin was always the strongest of us all, and in my

endeavors, the Plague Jester struck me and others with her fell disease, leaving me as I am now," she noted, rooted finger tracing the waxpox marring her body.

The crowd took in her words well. There was an element of sympathy to things—seeing even a so-called god marred as they were by the waxpox surely stirred some emotion in them.

Orion stalked up to her, arms crossed. "You can prove this fortress fell to this Rastzintin's magic?"

"I can," Silvic confirmed.

"And you swear before all you hold dear... that you speak only truth?"

"I swear before the wetlands themselves I speak the truth. If I do not, may the world itself burn me and all I hold dear," Silvic vowed.

Orion looked back to Argrave. His gaze was complicated.

Magnus strode up beside Orion. Argrave watched him carefully, ready to interject at anything the prince might try.

"It seems there is no room for argument," Magnus conceded, spreading his arms out.

Argrave furrowed his brows, taken aback by the support. Magnus leaned in and whispered something to Orion's ears, and Argrave shifted uneasily.

"Argrave," Orion said, lifting his head from Magnus' whispers. "What has Silvic informed you of regarding this... heretical god, Rastzintin, and the jester?"

Argrave stepped a little closer. "Much and more. I can tell you everything you need to know, brother," he said confidently.

"Then that settles things." He turned his head to Silvic and Drezki. "Will the two of you accept the gods of Vasquer as your own?"

Drezki shook her head fervently. "No."

"I am of the wetlands," Silvic responded.

Orion turned the rest of his body and lunged out at Silvic with inhuman speed. Drezki, ever alert, moved to guard her Lady and Light, drawing the twin sticks at her side. She swung them at the approaching Orion. He raised his forearm to block. When they cracked against the metal, blisteringly blinding light and force enough to conjure winds split across the air.

When things had settled, Argrave ran forward without hesitation, adrenaline already pumping. Orion seemed undamaged—he flicked his arm out and Drezki staggered away. He lunged forth again, Drezki his target this time. He grabbed her face, obscuring it completely, and slammed her into the ground. The earth split, and her body left a crater her shape in the muddy earth.

After, he squeezed. Her head seemed to offer as little resistance as a ball of hollow paper.

The Prince lifted his hand slowly. Blood that glowed gold dripped from his forearm—not from Drezki, but from the wound she'd caused with her weapons. As Silvic stepped back apprehensively, Argrave finally managed to place himself between Orion and the wetland spirit.

"What are you doing?!" Argrave shouted.

"Doing as the gods demand—ending the heretics that refuse to accept Vasquer," he said calmly. Blood dripped from the spot where Drezki had attacked him. His blood suspended midair... and then retracted back within his body. Almost as though shutting the door behind it, the wound closed just after the last bit of blood retracted back within. The enchanted gauntlets he wore had been completely blasted apart by Drezki's fierce attack, but already the wound disappeared.

"Were you not listening? She has much to offer to help!"

"Knowledge you claim you have," Orion tilted his head, confused.

"Silvic has yet to prove the magic Rastzintin cast!" Argrave shouted. "And she can help us through the wetlands with her power, that we might strike at the Plague Jester all the easier, without a great loss of life!"

Orion's face brightened. "That... is a fair point, brother," he conceded at once. He lifted up his hand, covered in blood and gore. The redness bubbled and steamed as though boiling. "I was overeager, it seems." He moved his hand forward, resting it against Argrave's cheek. "Fortunately, you reminded me before something important could be lost. I am glad of it."

The Holy Fool stepped away from the scene of carnage casually, shaking his hand free of the viscera. "I am glad you brought this to me. To wallow in ignorance as I have, for so long..." he sighed and shook his head. "Such a tragedy. Argrave," he called out, stopping.

Argrave faced him tensed, saying nothing.

"Have a rest. You seem to have endured much to bring this to me," he said, genuinely compassionately. "Though... ensure the heretical thing causes no trouble."

As Orion walked away, Argrave felt like he was going to collapse to the ground. He kept his legs firm, thankfully enough. Eventually, his gaze locked on someone skulking away from the still-staring crowd: Prince Magnus. That man had been the cause of all of this. Whatever he'd whispered to Orion had set him off like that.

He looked to Anneliese. "Let's go back. But... it seems we can't rest."

They started to walk away. Argrave turned his head back to where Drezki lay dead. As he stared at the corpse, something unpleasant welled up within him. He quickly turned away, blinking rapidly. Durran put a hand on his shoulder, staring at the corpse alongside him.

With silent grief for their brief companion, Argrave's companions and Silvic headed for the keep.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 185: Left Behind, but Catching Up

Argrave told Galamon, Durran, and the very out-of-place Silvic that he and Anneliese intended to check up on their books before rejoining the party to discuss what needed to be done. Silvic asked to bury Drezki, and his companions saw to that task alongside her so that no issues would arise with the Waxknights or other residents.

“Was almost like things correcting themselves,” Argrave mused as he pushed open the door, stepping inside. “Drezki... god damn it. Why did it have to end like that? I should’ve...”

“Should have what?” Anneliese pressed.

Argrave stopped beside the half-open door. “I don’t know. Should have known better. Should have taken measures.”

“People tell you time and time again that way of thinking leads nowhere. When will you heed that lesson?” she questioned.

“Lot easier to say that than to do it. Don’t deny you ask the same thing,” Argrave refuted.

Anneliese just grabbed his wrist, giving it a solemn squeeze. It reminded him he wasn’t the only one affected by the things that happened around him. He flashed a bitter smile, then said, “Hopefully that little display helps keep Durran cautious.”

“Durran is different than he was before,” Anneliese said. “I don’t think he will cause trouble as he did in the Lionsun Castle.”

“I definitely hope not,” Argrave shook his head, stepping within the room and glancing about. He took a mental inventory of all within. Everything was as neat and orderly as it had been left. Then, his eyes fell upon something he had not been expecting to see—a human figure, greatly distorted by illusion magic.

At once, Argrave raised his hand up and formed the matrix for a fast-acting lightning spell, the C-rank [Skysunder]. With a yelp, the person threw themselves behind Argrave’s bed, shouting, “Wait!”

Argrave kept his hand raised, but said tentatively, “Mina?”

Anneliese stepped within the room cautiously, coming to stand shoulder to shoulder with Argrave.

Mina gingerly raised her head above the bed, and Argrave lowered his hand with mouth agape. “What in the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Last time it was a book, now you nearly throw a spell at me?” Mina said incredulously, rising up a little further.

Mina of Veden had changed a great deal from when Argrave had last seen her. As ever, she looked like a cat, but some maturity shone through on her face. Her once shoulder-length yellow hair had grown much longer than that, and her yellow eyes seemed tired.

“I never expected to deal with this situation a second time,” he shook his head. “I’ll ask again—what the hell, Mina?”

“I’m sorry, I am! It’s different this time. I was expecting you to come back, wanted to talk to you!” Mina said urgently.

Argrave scratched his cheek. "Yet you still use an illusion spell, just the same as ever."

"Because I thought I'd win, this time," she shook her head. "Gods be damned."

He briefly recalled their little game of whether or not she would surprise him and snorted. Argrave stepped away and looked around, and seeing no one was present, shut the door. "Why aren't you at Mateth?" he began, stepping back into the room. "Why are you *here*? Looking to follow the current trend, catch a life-threatening disease?"

Mina's yellow eyes gazed up at him. "You don't know, do you?" she questioned, then shook her head. "Hah. I guess it's my world, but really, no one knows besides me." She shook her head, then looked up at Argrave. "I thought I changed a lot, but you... you changed *a lot*," she noted, sizing him up. "You look... healthier. Scarier," she admitted.

Argrave waited patiently. He could tell she was dodging the question because she found it painful to answer. That alone was answer enough, he supposed.

She stepped around and sat on Argrave's bed, arms crossed. "Why do people say you call her your fiancée?" she gestured with her chin towards Anneliese. "Why are your eyes all... all wrong?"

Argrave sighed, and Anneliese conjured a ward that the three of them might speak privately. Mina watched her warily.

"I remember her," she pointed. "She's the elven woman you brought from the land of the snow elves."

"'Brought' is a poor choice of words," Argrave said as he nodded. "Her name is Anneliese, in case you forgot. And yes, for all intents and purposes, we are engaged. I've answered one of yours, now time for mine—why aren't you at Mateth?" He came to stand over her.

"You said you were never wrong about these things," she said bitterly, her throat seized up. "Nicky sent me away. She said that... it wasn't right, and that she was sorry."

Though Argrave wasn't exactly blindsided by her answer, it did make him feel much worse than he expected. The fact that Mina was desperately trying to stop herself from being emotional about it made it strike all the deeper, he found.

"And here you are," she continued, sniffing once. "With a fiancée, whom you spend the whole night with, keeping the whole keep up with... moans, and..."

"Hey, woah woah woah," Argrave held his finger out. "I don't know what kind of twisted fantasies are brewing in that head of yours, but put them out of your mind. If there's anything 'heated' going on in this room at night, it's heated talks about magic and history," he pointed to the books around the room.

Anneliese hid her face with one hand despite the fact that it was covered by a mask and shook her head. Argrave was still sure he saw a faint smile of amusement, though.

"Please. Magnus seemed to have mistaken me for your spurned lover, and so he divulged everything about you two," she shook her head. "He was trying to turn me against you, I know. He's a rude bastard..."

“Magnus,” Argrave lifted his head up and nodded, face blanking as his half-brother’s name came out once more. Argrave spared a glance at Anneliese, and she nodded as though she knew what he was thinking.

It was very obvious that Magnus was trying to impede Argrave at every turn. It went against what he knew of Magnus—as far as he knew, he and ‘Argrave’ had no animosity between the two of them. It was clear to him that something needed to be done about this. He just wasn’t certain what, yet.

Argrave turned his head back to Mina. “You know, Anneliese and I spent one night in this keep. And... well, whatever,” he finally surrendered. “Think what you want—I can’t stop you. But why did you come here, of all places? You don’t appear ill. Not yet, at least...” he glanced around the room. “You ought to wear one of these masks... keep your health up...” he stepped around, searching for the solemn white Humorless Masks.

“Induen came to Veden,” Mina disclosed, looking at Argrave. “I figured you might have some answers about that whole situation.”

Argrave turned back to Mina slowly, face taut. “I think we ought to spend some time catching up, then. It seems there’s a lot to talk about.”

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Argrave and Anneliese had a long conversation with Mina of Veden. As things proceeded, all of them loosened up a great deal—misunderstandings were resolved, animosity was put to bed, and mutual understanding was established. Despite everything, Mina knew that Argrave alone could not be held responsible for Nikoletta’s choice. She appeared to be placing her position as the heir to the Duke before her own desire for happiness.

Knowing it was Nikoletta’s choice didn’t make Argrave feel less guilty, of course. He felt like he’d ruined something. He didn’t tell Mina, but he resolved to repair what had been broken.

Their conversation lasted the entire night. At first, they spoke of Mina’s situation. Apparently, the time she’d spent with Nikoletta and Duke Enrico in a city devoted to trade and administration had enlightened her about the importance of proper management, and she used the lessons about order and efficiency learned to solve the refugee crisis at Veden.

But inevitably, Argrave had to explain how he’d changed, and what he’d done to do so. That took up the bulk of the conversation, and though Argrave felt it was a somewhat disdainful waste of time to recount something that had no bearing on what they were to be doing, he did so. Not without complaint, though.

That topic led them to why Argrave was here, something he disclosed readily. Apparently, Nikoletta had long ago informed Mina of his fight against Gerechtigkeith. He resented that Nikoletta could not keep a secret, but Mina told no others, and it was not genuinely harmful if rumor of it did spread. It was, ultimately, one of his long-term goals to propagate information about the coming calamity.

Eventually, Argrave arranged a place to stay for Mina alongside Durran, Galamon, and the wetland spirit Silvic. He gave her a spare Humorless Mask of Anneliese’s. They agreed to discuss things tomorrow, when both were better rested.

Once things had settled, he was finally alone with Anneliese, a fact he was glad of.

"You say Magnus was scared, terrified earlier?" he asked her, sitting on his bedside.

"Desperately so," Anneliese confirmed.

Argrave lowered his head, thinking in silence for a long while. As his brain spun for explanations, he half-hoped Anneliese would interject. She always had bright ideas—things that he'd missed, perspective he lacked. But she stayed silent, offering no further insight.

"Considering the possibilities..." Argrave began, leading the conversation. "Elenore's an option. A likely option, too—she has the resources to make Magnus move. Plenty of money, plenty of non-monetary assets. Yet..." Argrave shook his head. "I don't know if she could terrify him as you mention. Magnus is... fearless, despite everything."

"Induen, then? Or the other brother you mentioned, Levin? Even Felipe?" Anneliese continued his train of thought.

"Induen... well, he is nearby," Argrave conceded. "Levin is pretty ruthless, with a certain low cunning to him. Felipe is probably too busy rallying the north and keeping his court in line, but maybe he could. Even still, once again, could they terrify Magnus? And what would be their motive to have him impede me, specifically? On top of all of that, I can't picture how they would know I'm here. No—Magnus was doing something here before I arrived and wants to stop because I'm interfering."

"I suppose that is all that fits," Anneliese nodded. "Yet what would be his motive to continue the plague?"

"I don't know. He could just be worthless trash, human scum, that kind of thing..." Argrave rubbed his mouth with his hand, losing himself in thought. As a stray thought came to him, he laughed.

"What?" Anneliese looked at him expectantly.

"Maybe it was Gerry," Argrave posited in jest. Anneliese looked at him blankly, so he clarified, "Gerechtigkeit."

Anneliese did not join him in laughter, but rather genuinely considered it, tilting her head.

"Come on," Argrave said at once. "Just a joke."

"...you must admit it does fit," Anneliese said in quiet ponderance.

"Yeah, that's why it's funny," Argrave nodded. Seeing she was still on this point, Argrave gave an exhausted sigh and rose to his feet, walking around. "I don't know... Gerechtigkeit doesn't really work with collaborators. He just destroys and ruins things at the right time so everything falls apart. He demolishes the most essential pillar in a building, and the rest crumbles naturally."

"In your experience," Anneliese pointed out. "Why else would Magnus be so diametrically opposed to everything you do? Why else would he be terrified? You claimed the man is a psychopath—he does not feel much of anything, searches out for anything that spurs emotion at all—what else could terrify that gray slate he is more than a god-like entity?" she spoke quickly as though a theory formed in her head.

"That's... verging on paranoia," Argrave shook his head a little and then pointed at Anneliese, walking close to her and kneeling right before her face where she sat. "If we take it there, let's take it further back. Titus. Too much off-course happened in the Burnt Desert for that to be some ripple effect from the little beating of my butterfly's wings."

Anneliese furrowed her white brows. "Do you... is that... is that even possible?" she questioned. "Can the calamity play such a heavy hand in this world before his advent?"

"I don't know," Argrave admitted. "I don't know the extent of his influence. I don't know what he can and can't have a hand in. That was never clearly defined, and all of his schemes in 'Heroes of Berendar' began before the game started. That's part of the reason I never considered it. Gerry was never reactive. I'm not even sure if this is possible. All of it might just be a red herring, useless paranoia."

Anneliese nodded, processing his words. "Then... what has he done? What do you know?"

"All I know about his influence on people, specifically, is that he's responsible for a lot of the craziness in the royal family. The first queen dying in childbirth—that was him. The second queen's insanity—all of this was specifically tailored to ruin Felipe's mental state, cause Vasquer's decline," he explained. "You might argue he affected people's minds. But why would he go after Magnus instead of me? Why wouldn't the big G use 5G to fry my brain, personally?"

"What are you saying?" Anneliese said, losing the thread of the conversation.

"I've got no idea," Argrave stood up and paced around. "Alright. Alright. Ultimately, we're just fumbling around in the dark."

"Come here," Anneliese tapped the side of the bed, and Argrave obediently walked over and sat beside her.

Argrave took some time to relax. It felt like a gray curtain had washed over him—mounting stress that had reached its breaking point. "I'm at a loss, Anneliese."

She wrapped one arm around his shoulders. "All we have presently are suspicions," she said slowly.

"That's right," he nodded, listening intently.

"Yet we have a method to confirm those suspicions," she continued. "Magnus is still here, within the camp. And given his dogged interference, it would be prudent to deal with him before we set out on this expedition. He is but a man, even still. We need not look for the backer when the agent is in arm's reach."

Argrave's bleak outlook grew a little brighter with Anneliese's counsel. Eventually, he nodded. "Yeah. Even if it is urgent to deal with this plague as quickly as possible, it's also best to do it right. I'm sure it'll take some time for the expedition to get ready... and even if not, I can get Orion to delay. I have to make sure we do it perfectly. This isn't something we can afford to muck up. If the Plague doesn't end, we can say goodbye to any chances of an easy victory. And while we're dealing with Magnus, we can identify other factors that might impede the whole thing."

"Precisely," she nodded.

Argrave looked up towards the ceiling. "Gerechtigheit... I wonder if he's listening." Argrave cracked his knuckles. "That'd be an interesting turn of events. He gets to listen as I shoot his damn plans into the dust."