

Jackal 191

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Chapter 191: Coerced Confessions

Orion pushed Durran forward. The tribal moved with the push, turning and sitting on a chair ahead of him. The chair tipped to one side from the force, but Durran put his foot down and got his balance quickly. The prince stepped around Durran as he sat there, catching his breath.

Durran stayed quiet as Orion walked around him, turning his head to ensure the prince was always in his sight, even if only just. There was one thing that life had taught him—you could always say more later, but words spoken can't be taken back. He stayed quiet, waiting, despite the fact his insides were turning with nervousness. The image of Drezki's skull being crushed played in his head again and again, and he found himself watching Orion's hands.

Orion had taken Durran into one of the deepest parts of the abandoned keep. Here, much of the walls had collapsed entirely, but overgrowing plants gave the illusion that they were still inside. He could hear dripping water somewhere, but beyond that, there was only his own breath and Orion's steady pacing. Some water had flooded the place, causing the occasional splash as the prince's feet fell.

Time passed like this for what seemed like an eternity. Orion simply walked around Durran time and time again, gray eyes staring down at him coldly. Durran thought nearly half an hour had passed, but he still stuck to his plan of saying nothing.

The prince knelt down before Durran, placing his face so close he could feel his breath. It startled him, and Durran reeled back his head.

"Did you kill my brother?" Orion asked simply, voice a low whisper.

Durran tried to speak, but his voice failed him. After swallowing, he said, "No."

Orion moved his hand forward slowly and wrapped it around Durran's neck. His fingers were uncomfortably long. "I can feel your blood flow. Every beat of your heart. It will tell me if you lie. I'll ask again: did you kill my brother?"

"No," repeated Durran, neck tight in apprehension.

"Did you have anything to do with my brother's death?" Orion pressed, fingers steady as steel.

"No," Durran said again. He swallowed, Adam's apple pushing against Orion's hand unpleasantly.

Orion stared straight at Durran's eyes, and both held their gaze unflinchingly. The prince's stare seemed to be piercing into his soul. Orion's fingers straightened, releasing Durran from their grip.

"I couldn't actually tell anything from that," Orion confessed in a dire whisper.

Durran blinked in a mixture of confusion and shock.

Orion put his hand on his knee and remained kneeling in front of Durran. "Are you truly a faithful of Vasquer?"

Durran hesitated only a beat before answering, "Yes," with a slow, steady nod.

The prince's jaw clenched. "Were you always?"

"No," Durran answered quickly.

Orion stood, staring down at him. "Why did you abandon your old faith?"

Durran stared up at the prince, blinking as he considered his answer carefully. "...because of Argrave," he said, hoping to use that man as his saving grace.

Durran was hanging on by a thread, it felt like. Argrave had told him of some of the gods of Vasquer in case he had to interact with Orion, but the information didn't stick well. He knew little of the Vasquer faith, any of its gods, or its religious practices. He barely knew his own people's gods. All he knew was that Fellhorn trampled upon his people, and the gods were not his friend. All he could hope was that Argrave's name might keep this man's wrath away from him.

"What did Argrave say to you?" Orion grasped Durran's chin, angling it upwards.

Durran took more time to think, then answered in staccato speech on account of his held chin, "Not what he said. What he did."

Orion pulled Durran forward, and the tribal strained, standing up off the chair. "What did he do?" Orion insisted.

Durran put his hands on Orion's wrist and managed to loosen his chin enough to speak normally. "He killed a herald for the strongest god in the Burnt Desert. Fellhorn, the god of rain and floods. An ancient god. And more than that, he saved my life."

The prince released Durran, and he collapsed back onto the chair ungracefully.

"Who did he kill?" Orion questioned.

"Quarrus, the Lord of Silver," Durran said honestly. "He also got others to kill yet more. The Lords of Copper and Gold both died by him, even if indirectly."

"Yet *why* did you abandon your faith?" Orion knelt once again.

"Because I lost faith," Durran said quickly.

"If it is lost already, you cannot be a true faithful now," Orion growled.

"Argrave brought it back." Durran leaned back. The words came easily, unlike the other lies about his faith. But then, Durran thought it might not be a lie after all. The man had defended him so readily against Orion, even saying he was like family. He had faith Argrave didn't want him dead, at the very least.

Orion stared down Durran. "How? What did he say? What did he do?"

"Too many things," Durran shook his head.

The prince kept his stare steady for another uncomfortably long while. Then, he sat down, uncaring of the slightly flooded floor beneath him.

"Tell me," Orion commanded.

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Durran did not return that day.

Argrave's shame at being incapable of stopping Orion from doing whatever he pleased clung to him like a disease. Though the prince had said some time ago he envied Argrave's ability to persuade people, the reality remained that this weapon had failed him entirely. Durran was taken elsewhere because of something that Argrave had wanted him to do, and he could do nothing to stop that matter.

Worry made him nauseous. Though he floundered about for a time after, searching for solutions that did not exist, only one thing eventually offered him any comfort—studying the B-rank spell [Bloodfeud Bow]. The past few days' eagerness to breach the barrier to a higher rank of magic morphed into an obsession, fueled by his feelings of humiliation, self-loathing, and powerlessness.

Argrave sat just outside Orion's keep, the spellbook in his lap as he studied the matrix it conjured. Though Galamon and Anneliese both attempted to pull him from the task to seek rest, he stubbornly refused to listen. After a time, even Anneliese gave up the idea of persuading him, and merely stood guard as Argrave studied. The day passed, and then the night, but he refused to move.

The Waxknights and the refugees seemed to interpret it as a protest, or a proclamation of innocence. Argrave didn't care what they thought of it.

The morning came and continued on into the noon. As Argrave mired himself in angry thoughts of all kind, Galamon standing a fair distance off to the side, someone emerged from the keep. When he saw golden tattoos, his head swam with haze. His tired eyes could barely stay focused, but he recognized the man.

In one motion, he cast aside the book and ran towards him. His eyes checked many spots, searching for injury.

"Durran, you... what the hell did that guy... I mean, what...?"

Durran held both of his hands out. "Do not put a damn hand on me. If some giant moron with big hands touches me once more, I'm going to lose my mind."

Argrave frowned, perplexed.

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"He's insane. Something... something that makes humans human is just missing with that guy," Durran pointed back towards the keep. "Good gods. All night we talked. All night I kept thinking about Drezki's skull getting crushed."

"What did he ask about, then?" Argrave pressed.

"Your travels, mainly," Durran pointed towards Argrave.

"My travels?" Argrave repeated, perplexed. His gaze went to Galamon, then Anneliese. "He might talk to you, next, then. Corroborate the story."

Galamon crossed his arms, nodding. He seemed ready.

"He has insisted I come to him daily for lesson on the Vasquer pantheon," Durran crouched down by the mud. "What did I do to deserve this?"

Argrave looked down at Durran, feeling great sympathy for the man. Then, his reason resurfaced.

He stepped over the crouching Durran. "Did you have anything to do with Magnus' death?"

Durran looked up at him. "Do you think I have soup for brains? I hope you're saying that because you're tired, otherwise I'm going to bash my head against a rock until I pass to this promised land Orion speaks of."

"So, no," Argrave concluded.

"Of course I had nothing to do with it," Durran stood. "If I'd known things would end like this, I would never have agreed to this stupid request, finding out Magnus' stupid motivations."

Argrave put his hand on his hip. "You offered to do this, as I recall."

"Choke on your tongue," he threw his hands up in frustration and stepped away, shaking his head rapidly.

Argrave watched Durran's back as he paced about, kicking stray leaves and stones in frustration. He looked to Anneliese. He felt the urge to hold her, like she was a feather that could be blown away by any stray wind. This event served as a reminder that he was still fallible, and he needed to learn it well.

"Durran received the harsh treatment—not me," she reminded him.

Argrave sighed, nodding. He was not content inside, though.

Never again, that thought ran through Argrave's head again and again, like some mantra vested in him. *Never again. You must have the power to say 'no.' If Durran died because of me... Galamon... or Anneliese? I don't think I could go on.*

Argrave had been repaying the debt to Erlebnis diligently, and he suspected he'll have fully repaid the debt in two more days. Still, even if he had that power back then, he would have been powerless before Orion.

Things ended without incident... this time. Orion returned Durran without harming him. But Argrave had another goal, now. He had to make sure something like that could never happen again. He'd been too lax—too content. He had gained much, and that had led him to rest on his laurels. He had to ensure that nothing could take from him.

Argrave's gaze refocused, his tired golden eyes lit with a veritable flame as steady as a pilot light. He looked at Durran who still fumed and questioned, "What did you learn from Magnus?"

"What does it matter now? He's dead." Durran turned his head back.

"Durran," Argrave said patiently.

Durran turned around. "I found out that nearly everyone should be glad he's dead. I found out a bunch of knowledge about your family. I found out some very uncomfortable things, like which mushrooms in

this swampland make you hallucinate. Beyond that?" Durran threw his hands up once more. "Nothing. Not a peep of your Gerechtigkeits. What am I, a mind reader? How am I supposed to find that out?"

Argrave said nothing, thinking of the implications. Too much was amiss here, and much of it felt like active sabotage. The fact stood, though, that there was nothing Argrave could do presently to weed out the truth.

With his mind settled, Argrave nodded. "Alright. I don't know what this means for the expedition, and I suppose all we can do is wait. Ideally, things will proceed as planned. With Orion... I don't know if that will happen." Argrave shook his head. "I'll try to press him into hurrying this along. If word of this reaches Induen, he might come out here. For now, we should stay near Silvic, ensure that Orion—"

Argrave trailed off as he spotted a flash of gold outside their ward. One of the Waxknights roamed about the camp, clanging a ladle against a pot and shouting. It was muffled from beyond the ward, and Argrave dispelled it at once.

"Gather in the square! Gather in the square! Our Holiness, Prince Orion, wishes to speak! Gather in the square!" the man shouted again and again.

A wave of nervousness passed through Argrave—it seemed that Orion had come to a conclusion. Considering they had not been seized, that spoke well of his half-brother's decision. Argrave gave a gesture and led the four of them towards the square before Orion's keep.

A great gathering of people already waited. They could not exactly blend in with the crowd—when people noticed them, they moved away. It was a great irony that the diseased shied away from touching them, but Argrave was not complaining.

Soon enough, Orion emerged from the keep. He stepped to the head of the crowd, though the cheers that met him were not as unanimous as they always were, like some heavy anticipation had set over the crowd.

Orion's gaze wandered the crowd, and soon enough, all grew silent. His gray-eyed gaze lingered on Argrave for half a second, then jumped away.

Prince Orion stepped back and shouted, "People! Yesterday, my brother, born of the same father, born of the same mother, was found murdered!" he declared.

Silence met his words.

Orion held his fist to his mouth, and he appeared to be holding back tears. Then, his grandiosity returned as he moved around, shouting, "There are some who have come to this camp recently, that many believe may have had a hand in this."

Again, Orion's gaze stopped on Argrave for a passing moment.

"But... I listened to them. I listened to those who were accused. I listened to the gods, communing with them all through the night..." Orion bit his knuckle, falling silent. Then, he said quietly, "The gods told me to ask who benefitted from this. And what I came to..."

Orion stared at Argrave directly, this time. "Our enemies sought to sow disunity. They sought to throw us into disorder, to cast our unbreakable will against the earth that it might shatter! Indeed, I say it

plainly: our enemies are behind my brother's murder! They fear the wrath my brother and I bring upon them!"

The crowd came alive for the first time, some cheering.

"I will not allow the grasping tendrils of the enemy worm itself into our burgeoning crusade. The sum of their efforts will be delaying our righteous wrath by a mere day." Orion held his hands up and decreed, "Tomorrow, my brother and I will lead a force into the depths of the wetlands. We will strike down the enemy, and all of you will be freed of the great malevolence which wracks your bodies even now!"

As though given permission to cheer, the crowd frenzied. Orion stared up at the sky.

When the prince spoke again, his voice seemed to split the air, so loud it was. "And as for my brother!"

Orion strode towards Argrave. The crowd had moved away from them, and so there was nothing preventing him from doing so. Argrave stepped ahead of his companions, coming to stand just before Orion so that they were not so near to him.

Orion stared at Argrave, gazes locked. The man was still larger than him, still as intimidating as ever. Yet for the first time, Argrave felt no fear.

The prince fell to his knees. Then, he bent forward, slamming his head into the ground. He was kowtowing, Argrave realized.

"Brother! I apologize for my distrust!" he shouted, voice splitting the air even still.

As Argrave stared down at him, he could not deny he felt some of the emotions that had been brewing the past twenty-four hours urging him to step on Orion's head. But...

Argrave sighed, then knelt down. He grabbed Orion's shoulders and corrected his posture.

"We have work to do, Orion," he said levelly. "It's an early day tomorrow."

His words were those of peace. But as Anneliese gazed down at Argrave, concern was evident on her face.

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Chapter 192: Foolhunt Begins

Argrave slept little that night—enough to function without issue, but not much more. All of his time was spent studying the spell [Bloodfeud Bow]. The 'how' of things still eluded him—the B-rank matrix felt fragile, and his attempts to put it into motion simply made it break. It felt like he was trying to pick up a house of cards and move it elsewhere. It didn't matter how he distributed the force, or if he applied it evenly across the whole thing—to set the spell matrix into motion was to break it.

Despite his failures, he was not discouraged. Never again, he repeated mentally time and time again. He could never again relax, never again fall into contentment. Everything could be taken from him in a heartbeat if he was not adequately prepared.

The expeditionary forces were rallied early in the morning. Orion brought with him ten of his Waxknights, and Argrave brought his three companions, plus Silvic. In total, that placed them at sixteen.

All had plenty of rations. Orion brought a weapon along. It was an ornate flanged mace made of black metal and gilded with snakes on the shaft, and thoroughly enchanted.

Orion distributed backpacks full of rations to all, including Argrave and his companions—they had been diligently gathered and preserved. The Waxknights accompanying them were C-rank mages, one and all, and seemed to be skilled with their blades.

The morning was spent by Silvic—in truth, Anneliese—scouting out a proper path. The obfuscation was paranoid caution on Argrave's part, concealing some of their abilities in case they needed them. Anneliese marked the trees in the vast wetlands ahead with her Starsparrow. Argrave repaid some of his debt to Erlebnis—the first hours of the journey would be safe, he knew. He would likely regain his ability to use the Blessing of Supersession the next morning.

After their preparations...

"If you stray too far from me, my power wanes. Barring Orion, perhaps, all will die. The wetlands themselves will consume you in hours, and none will find your body," Silvic cautioned.

"How dangerous can it be for knights of the faithful?" a Waxknight rebuffed.

Silvic turned her head towards him. "I will not make you believe me. I see no reason to stop you from killing yourself."

Orion crossed his arms. "Heeds the spirit's words. We are allies against evil," he commanded.

"Then we may go whenever you are ready," Silvic directed.

Orion stepped away, peering through the trees into the vast wetlands beyond. A cold morning mist blocked much vision ahead. This fog seemed different, somehow—the wind did not affect it.

"Oh gods," Orion sung. "As I walk through hardships, protect me, your Lordships..."

Orion stepped ahead first, heading into the wetlands. Argrave pulled his gloves a bit tighter and then walked forward just after him. Soon enough, the whole party disappeared into the cold morning mist, heading for the foul Plague Jester.

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As they pressed towards the first fortress, the unnaturalness of these wetlands was made readily apparent.

Silvic seemed to possess a boundary of protection she could extend. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' it had been an annoyance—the player would follow by the side of this slow-moving character, staying within the safe zone as they moved to the first fortress. Now... things were different, death was reality, and Argrave was tense. He and his companions stayed near Silvic, the Waxknights forming a loose circle around as Orion led them.

The difference between that within Silvic's protection and that without was visible and tangible. A cold mist surrounded them just outside a boundary as though they were trapped in a bubble. This mist writhed and twisted into shapes, faces, and let out muffled screams that were horrifyingly intense.

Beyond that, the wetlands themselves twisted and writhed and bubbled, mud and water stretching and contorting like taffy made of rot.

The first few hours, the howling fog shrouded them as though it were solid, and the light of the sun faded. The Waxknights were forced to light the way with spell light. The waters rose, and before long, everyone waded through knee-high muck. Well, mostly everyone—Argrave was glad to be tall more than ever as the ice-cold waters stung at his shins. Experiencing this place firsthand made the Waxknights take Silvic's directions very seriously.

Yet as the hours passed... the enemy started to come.

The first to press through the boundary were the leopards. Their element of surprise was ruined by Silvic's presence, who warned their party long before they came. Even still, their assault was a formidable thing—they came from the trees, jumping down from above, and simultaneously attacked from the ground. The Waxknights on the perimeter intercepted them, but Orion dealt with the bulk.

If anyone saw Orion fight, they would all probably think of the same thing: he can do whatever he wants. His talk of being blessed by 96 gods was no delusion. It was fact, and that was made wholly evident through the first fight alone.

As the leopards stalked through the high waters to get at them, Orion raised his foot up and stamped the water. His foot did not sink back in the water—instead, it met something solid, and he stood up out of the water. In not seconds, a wall of ice formed around their party, isolating the leopards that had jumped down at them from the trees. The Waxknights treated this as the natural order of things, dispatching the large cats quickly with their enchanted blades.

The wall of ice abated some of the assault, as all of the cats needed to climb over it to get at their party. Argrave attacked sparingly, making good use of his escort. He had instructed his party members to do much the same.

After a time, the ground began to shake, and Silvic said, "The rockhides come."

"Hippos coming!" Argrave relayed, but none treated this as seriously as they should have—most didn't know what hippos were, probably.

But the shaking grew in intensity, and the waters stirred. A great noise split the air, and Argrave was pelted by chunks of ice. A hippo broke through the barrier of ice Orion had established, bringing with it a tidal wave of water. Its skin was black, reminiscent of volcanic rock. It slammed into two Waxknights in its charge, tossing them aside with ease. It must've been 10 tons of pure mass, towering above all. It pressed towards Silvic, where Argrave and his party waited.

"Anneliese, Durran, let's—" he started, stepping backwards and preparing spells.

Orion stepped forth. He held one hand out and caught the top of the hippo's open mouth. His legs stayed firm, appearing indomitable. His elbow bent as it received and halted the hippo's charge, enchantments sparking as they protested the great force pressing against them.

"And though the wicked may be strong..." Orion said, a foul anger in his tone.

The hippo loosed a deafening noise like a groan unique to its species, but the prince slammed its jaw shut with one hand, pushing it back in the same motion. His mace whistled through the air in an uppercut. It struck the hippo on the bottom of its jaw. It was powerful enough to send its titanic head into the air, and its front legs rose up out of the water. It collapsed back into the ice wall, its jaw out of its hinges. It was alive, but badly wounded from one strike.

“The righteous always win,” Orion finished. He reached out his hand and finished the hippo, pressing through its eye to destroy the brain. Once he pulled his hand free, he looked beyond the breach in the ice wall, where two more of the gigantic creatures approached. Orion stepped atop the corpse of the rockhide he’d just ended, moving to meet both alone.

Argrave looked away, content that Orion would be able to handle all comers from that side. He spotted something atop one of the ice walls, and his gaze locked onto it. A black gibbon as large as a man hung from one of the trees, one of its too-long arms clinging to the branch. The other held a stick that hummed with liquid light.

The gibbon had a pouch on its neck—it inflated with air, letting out a quaint sound as it turned pinker. After, it let out a staccato call, several high-pitched *hoos* that filled the air. Argrave tensed, and as the gibbon called, the apes descended on them en masse, swinging from the overhanging trees so adeptly it was impressive despite the danger.

Recognizing the threat, Argrave used [Waning-Cycle Bloodmoon] immediately. A thread of his blood formed a circle before his hands as the Waxknights confronted the apes, immediately proving his caution warranted. The apes swung their light-imbued sticks with intense ferocity. Their arms were six feet long and pure muscle. These humble sticks blessed by wetland spirits cut through enchanted armor easily.

Yet the Waxknights were not mere knights. Their waxpox-ridden skin was as hard as stone, and they felt no pain. What few blows they did not parry with their enchanted blades were returned twofold, and the gibbons fell one after the other. Though they stemmed the tide somewhat, it was not sufficient to stop all.

Anneliese conjured a B-rank ward—her own magic, this time, and not from her ring—to confront the tide of apes that hunted them. The sticks slammed against the golden ward as the apes cried out angrily, and after not a second, they broke past, screaming “HOOHOOHOOHOO!”

Argrave stepped ahead of his three companions and greeted the apes with blood magic, sending crescent blades of his dark blood towards each and all that pressed further. It was an overwhelming slaughter, and Argrave did not need to use even a quarter as many as he had against the Sentinels in the Marred Hallowed Ground. A good thing, too—receiving a single blow from the gibbons’ weapons could break bones easily.

When the last gibbon fell, Argrave turned his head about, searching for more foes. Just then, a hippo barreled through the ice wall. Argrave prepared to fight, only to see the hippo scrambled away on its back, feet swinging through the air as it tried to turn and run. Orion stepped forward, planting his foot on its stomach. He pressed his foot down and bashed his mace against its head relentlessly, each blow causing the water to stir and yet more ice to break.

When it finally stop struggling, Orion stopped swinging. His breath was not labored at all, and he glanced around, giant black braid matted with blood. He looked at his mace—it had bent slightly, and he corrected it with one hand.

“The faithful cannot be stayed,” Orion concluded. “We eat, rest, and then press onwards. No more than fifteen minutes.”

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In their first battle, one of the Waxknights very nearly died from that hippo’s charge—his spine was broken, and he barely avoided drowning before being rescued. A broken spine was a damning thing on Earth, but magic proved its differences from modern medicine. The broken spine was healed by one of the Waxknights.

Orion spoke to Durran as he ate, telling him about the Vasquer pantheon—even now, the prince did not forget his promise to give the tribal lessons on the pantheon. Argrave listened to Anneliese as she disclosed something, and then Argrave stepped away, coming to stand on a tree’s root that was above the water.

“The fortress is an hour’s walk away,” Argrave called out, drawing all’s attention. “There’ll be another fight waiting there. The Corpse Puppeteer, Waqwaq.” Argrave looked around, then pointed to Orion. “Like the name suggests, this thing controls the corpses of those fallen. We’ll be fighting against those that conquered these wetlands years ago—powerful warriors all, and with numbers no less than the army that took this land.”

Orion crossed his arms, listening intently.

“I’ll need you to stem the tide, Orion,” Argrave explained. “You and your Waxknights are the only thing capable of holding back that horde of the dead. What’s more, you need to remember this—if your comrades should die, crush their skulls. Elsewise, they’ll rise again, and fight you.

“Meanwhile, my companions and I will deal with Waqwaq. Silvic will help us make a path,” Argrave placed his hand to his chest, the other waving to his allies. “If you go, Orion, I’m sure the enemy will try and flee. Can’t have that happen.”

“Can you be trusted with this task?” one Waxknight argued.

“Of course they can,” Orion said at once, slamming his giant hand against the knight’s back. “I trust my brother and his companions. Look! Look how he bleeds for us! He uses his own blood to stay our enemies!” Orion moved to the slain gibbons, where he’d used blood magic to fell his foes. “They have faced fouler and come away fine. Would that you knew of their deeds...”

Argrave frowned, staring down at Orion. As much as he wished Durran had not disclosed everything, he could not blame him for doing so.

“I shall obey,” Orion placed his hand to his heart. “I look forward to seeing this Waqwaq’s head.”

“It has no head,” Argrave shook his head. “But you’ll get what you want, I suspect.”

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Chapter 193: Puppet Show

Swamps were never intended to accommodate grand fortresses. That fact became apparent as they pressed onwards into the mire of misery, the screaming mists and twisting grounds stayed only by Silvic's protection. The wading water lessened, and they planted their feet upon dry ground—or at least, as dry as mud could get.

Once they saw stone bricks, the harrowing fog around them began to dissipate—that did not diminish the lightlessness, though, and when Argrave looked up, he spotted branches of a towering tree above. The tree dwarfed skyscrapers, even. It was a verdant thing with bright green leaves. The leaves had patterns on them that looked vaguely like faces. Closest to the tree's trunk, long and thick vines descended, bearing bright red fruits that looked full of juice.

Though the crying fog had been a source of great discomfort, its sudden absence was just as unsettling. They passed by wreckages of stone; one tower sunk into the mud so completely only its top could be seen, and its ballista had been consumed by algae and other growth. Soon enough, the fortress itself came into view. Its walls sunk and rose in random places, some towering thirty feet while other portions were barely a step above where they stood. The gate to the fortress was crooked, and its iron portcullis looked to have been ripped apart by something.

Argrave could barely see roots beyond the crooked gate. Orion, who'd been leading, stopped, and Argrave caught up to him.

"I can feel it. The evil in the air. It's so thick I can smell it," Orion growled.

"Ideally, you'll be able to see it and kill it soon enough," Argrave consoled him.

Orion looked back, and though the words had been a jest in part, they seemed to make Orion only more eager.

Argrave took a deep breath and clenched his fists. He still felt a little anemic, both from the battle on the Marred Hallowed Grounds and the confrontation with the gibbons earlier. Nevertheless, there was no time for him to wallow. He was sure he'd be fine.

"Anneliese, Galamon, Durran..." he looked back, but his question caught in his throat. They were ready, all of them—Durran with glaive in hand, Anneliese with hair braided back for combat, Galamon with his Giantkillers held tight in each hand. He could rely on them.

But they had to rely on him, too, he knew. *Never again*, came that mantra once more, ringing in Argrave's head. *Never again let your incapability endanger them.*

"Let's go," Argrave said instead of his question. "Silvic, stay out of the fighting. I'll need all your help to get to Waqwaq. We'll wait for Orion and his knights to thin the foes... and I'll look for an opportunity to rush in."

Silvic nodded. With that confirmation, Orion and Argrave passed beneath the crooked gate to the fortress, where the trunk of the tree towering above them waited. Their party deposited their packs on the dryland, preparing for combat. The entire interior of the fortress had been subsumed into this great tree—the keep, the detached houses, all of it. Roots small and large marred the central square. And as soon as Argrave's foot brushed against a root... the tree came alive.

The round, red fruits up high exploded outwards in clouds of red mist. Bodies fell like corpses cut from nooses, tightly packed and uncountable. They landed on the ground, truly dead... but the roots across the central square writhed, piercing deep into the fallen bodies.

Then, they rose, all of them. They were steel-armored knights, mages bearing robes with gray owls embedded on their shoulder, and elite archers, each and all undecayed as though they'd died yesterday and not years ago. One would not think them undead, for intelligence still gleaned in their eyes, and their movements were still natural.

Orion stepped ahead of their group, holding his mace before his face. "That our enemies deny them even peaceful death..." the shaft of the mace grew red-hot, then the mace itself burst into flames. "The fires of Gael's justice will burn you through, my brothers and sisters, and I will cast your ashes to the wind. When I am finished, all will be as it should be."

Don't burn the tree down. I'll be in there, Argrave wished to say.

The battle did not begin with a roar or a screech as that with the animals had. Instead, the blood that had exploded out from the fruits preserving the dead began to rain upon them, and the battle began with nary a sound. The puppeteered mages threw fire, ice, and lightning upon Orion as he pressed forward. The archers, too, rained arrows upon him. The prince dodged the attacks with inhuman finesse. Even those spells he could not dodge—namely, the lightning magic—did not slow him in the slightest. The prince did not seem capable of pain, just as the knights who followed him.

Orion danced past their onslaught, and the vanquished knights of an invasion past rushed forth to confront him. His aflame mace seemed to trivialize his foes. Their shields of steel would crumple like thin tin when struck, oftentimes tearing their arms free outright. Despite this, they only died when their heads were severed or crushed.

The puppeteered knights swarmed over Orion, a tide of steel and sound that never once seemed able to overcome the terrifying prince blessed by the gods. They were too many to count—to say a thousand would be to underestimate their numbers, and more joined every second, pouring out from the buildings of the keep or the roots of the trees.

Yet the Waxknights joined the fray. They were royal knights of House Vasquer, chosen from the best knights of the kingdom and given equipment enchanted to the highest possible modern standards. They were more than that, too—the waxpox made their skin as hard as stone and numbed their pain utterly. More than that, they had been blessed by Orion. Like echoes of their master, they joined the battle.

Argrave waited and watched, staying far from the conflict with his companions close at hand. The battle raged louder and louder as more joined. They quickly dealt with what few targeted them, looking for any opportunity to press past the tide of the dead.

Then, Argrave spotted a thin in the constant trickle of dead pouring from the roots. "After me," he shouted, stepping forth. "Waste no time. Speed is our sole objective!" he commanded as his walk transitioned to a sprint.

The puppeteered dead were not simple undead—they had a sole strategist behind them, and as Argrave and his companions neared, that strategy changed accordingly. A wing of troops trying to engage Orion

and his Waxknights broke free, attempting to confront them. Yet Argrave and his party moved too quickly, and they surged past before they could be blocked.

Mages assaulted them as they kept running. Argrave and Anneliese dealt with the slower-moving spells, using their rings to conjure wards freely—as for lightning magic, Galamon caught them all with his Giantkillers. Lightning magic was the perfect counter to other mages, yet they had a lightning rod—and more than that, one that benefitted from their attacks. His azure daggers glowed all the brighter as he caught attack after attack.

Durran was hit by a stray arrow in his helmet's cheek, and he stumbled. Argrave slowed for his companion, but Galamon grabbed him beneath his armpit and hefted him up, and the tribal laughed as he picked up the pace.

"Stings!" he shouted. "If not for those enchanted things you gave me at Jast, might be I'd be bleeding."

That brief moment of pause allowed the dead rising from the roots of the towering tree block them. Argrave looked to Anneliese. She understood his meaning without words, and she prepared a devastating B-rank spell...

Yet before Anneliese could, roots dancing in tandem with liquid light writhed and twisted out of the ground in snake-like spirals, casting aside the crowd of dead with ease. Argrave looked back in time to see Silvic pulling her arm free from the ground, roots retracting back within. He gave her a quick nod, then resumed his sprint.

They made it to the plethora of tangled roots at the foot of the towering tree. "Silvic! Now's your time," he called out.

The wetland spirit stepped forth, placing her arm uncorrupted by the waxpox against the tree. The ground began to shake, and the tree itself cried out as though resisting whatever force was being exerted upon it. Then, the roots, the largest of which were twice as thick as Galamon, started to coil. They whipped about, scattering dirt and stone everywhere, and bored through the earth towards the depths of the towering tree ahead.

When Silvic finally freed her hand, a great tunnel that looked like a path of woven wicker stretched on into darkness. Argrave conjured spell light, then said, "Move quickly. Once we're in, the dead will flood behind us."

"They're already flooding," Durran shouted, the first to press into the tunnel. Argrave chuckled despite the situation and ducked low, following just behind him.

Their party barreled through the tunnel recklessly, practically falling over each other in haste. Argrave slammed against walls and ceilings time and time again from the chaotic and uneven path. He could hear the clanging of steel behind him as the knights pursued them every bit as disorderly as they ran.

Argrave and Durran both came to a steep point, and the two stumbled down the wicker tunnel, bouncing and bumbling their way down. They met air, and both collapsed into a mound of dirt and roots. Argrave's spell light illuminated the area, and at once, Argrave recognized this place. As he turned his head about, deadly sore from that fall... he saw Waqwaq.

Waqwaq had once been human—one part of it, at least. Now, it could never be misconstrued as such. It was a mass of roots stemming from a heart with an eyeball on it. Each of the roots formed myriad hands which dug into the trunk of the great tree around them. The fingers moved, each and all commanding the soldiers which Orion confronted outside.

The eyeball focused on them, then widened and danced about its heart-like body in frenzy, growing bloodshot. Argrave rose to his feet and grabbed Durran, pulling the tribal back. Just as he did so, a great fruit lying above the heart exploded, and seven bodies dropped down. At once, the Corpse Puppeteer took control of them, and they rose.

A noble-looking man with black hair and gray eyes rose first, standing tall—he had Vasquer ancestry, evidently. Four knights with the symbol of an eagle rose up, standing to guard him, while two mages stood just behind the lordly man.

The lord of this fortress and his retinue—now, the honor guard of the Corpse Puppeteer, Argrave recognized.

Galamon and Anneliese descended with considerably more grace than Argrave and Durran had, falling just behind them. Silvic was last, and she was lowered down, carried by roots.

“Waqwaq... a human who consumed Predniz,” Silvic said in shock.

“No time for talk. Seal the tunnel, Silvic,” he directed.

The wetland spirit wasted no time in doing so, and roots sealed the tunnel woven of wood and dirt so that their pursuers would not so easily make it to them.

“Excellent! Everything’s going swimmingly,” Argrave roared, pleased. “As we discussed—killing minions is only a waste of our time!”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 194: Flawless Show

There was a simple principle in many RPGs, action or otherwise—don’t kill what the summoner summons, just kill the summoner, and then all the problems will go away naturally. Their strategy hinged on that simple principle.

There were obstacles, of course. There always were.

The puppeteered lord and his two mages stayed near the vast heart that was Waqwaq. At once, their party of three conjured wards each and all—B-rank, judging from the golden color alone, and working in tandem to create multiple layers. It served as a great protection against ranged attacks.

Yet Argrave and his companions did not blindly rush forth. The tunnel they had entered from had been sealed by Silvic, and they had time. Instead, they stepped backwards, heading for the edge of the room. Galamon discarded his wind-enchanted greatsword and pulled his bow from his back, nocking an arrow quickly. The three spellcasters of the party prepared spells, and attacked the lord’s honor guard of four knights, unprotected by the wards.

Though the elven vampire still had enchanted arrows made in Jast, he used mundane ones—deliberately so. Argrave, Anneliese, and Durran all used spells of lesser ranks, some even E-rank. It was a simple onslaught of attacks that could not be considered deadly but was nonetheless unignorable.

And the knights did not ignore it. All four rushed towards Argrave and his companions in a side-by-side pursuit, as dogged as the dead could be. While they pursued, their party's attacks continued as ever, barely denting the well-made armor of their opponents. The gleaming enchanted blades of their opponents grew ever closer...

"Now's a good time," Argrave called out levelly, an iron focus on the scene before them.

Silvic placed her uncorrupted arm to the ground, and the roots in the ground spurred to action. Two hands of roots burst into the center of their small formation, then pushed them aside as though opening a curtain. The knights were thrown aside a great distance, entirely disrupted. A clear path led to Waqwaq and its mage guard.

No one needed a command to begin the charge forth. Galamon discarded his bow, kneeling to the ground and dropping it as he rushed forth while pulling free his Ebonice axe from its loop on his belt. He tossed it to Durran, who caught it while setting down his glaive in one smooth motion. With both hands freed, the elven vampire drew the Giantkillers once more, still slightly sparking with electricity from defending against earlier assaults.

Anneliese and Galamon slowed—she charged the Giantkillers with potent lightning magic, firing again and again. Durran and Argrave moved forward. With one hand, Argrave conjured the D-rank [Gore Scalpel], and blood from his wrist formed a knife. With the other hand, conjured [Electric Eels] jumped to the sky.

Durran slammed the Ebonice axe against the first B-rank ward—it cracked heavily, golden chips of light scattering, but did not shatter entirely. Argrave finished it with his Black Blooded [Gore Scalpel], and then the tribal carried onto the next barrier, roaring mightily with each blow. Once the second broke, roots descended from the ceiling, wrapping around the heart-like body of Waqwaq and lifting it up into protection ever-so-slowly.

Once the third ward broke, the puppeteered lord of this fortress drew a rapier at his side, lunging straight for Argrave. He could only fall on his back to dodge. The pair of mages chose to attack Durran. The tribal narrowly dodged a spear of ice, but a ball of fire struck his helmet, casting it off. His hair and much of his face caught aflame, and he fell to the ground screaming.

Argrave willed all of the electric eels he'd conjured to attack Galamon—the elven vampire received them with his Giantkillers and sprinted forth towards the retreating Waqwaq. The puppeteered lord moved to intercept him. The tip of the rapier attempted to impale him with his own charge, but Galamon nimbly dodged and planted his foot on the lord's shoulder. He used the dead man as a springboard and launched up towards Waqwaq.

Both Giantkillers struck home. All of that potent electricity surged through the foul Corpse Puppeteer, creating a spark so blinding that Argrave felt he'd lost all sight. His ears hurt terribly, and he could hear nothing. Seconds passed, and only then did things begin to fade. His vision was stained white, yet slowly recovered.

The heart-like body of Waqwaq had been burnt so badly that charred flesh and roots alike collapsed down onto Galamon, who clung to the Giantkillers while shielding his eyes. Argrave saw Durran still writhing in agony as the flames spread across his head. Though he could barely feel his limbs, he knew how to move them—he rushed to Durran, removing his duster and smothering the flames.

Argrave looked around, still unable to hear, his vision stained white from the blinding light. The seven puppets they'd been fighting had fallen to the ground, well and truly dead. His gaze jumped from companion to companion, ensuring all were at least alive... and so they were.

Exhausted, Argrave settled his head against the ground. As adrenaline faded, pain set into his bones and his skin earnestly. But he was well used to persisting through pain. Argrave was the first to rise to his feet, still deaf as ever. He pulled his duster off Durran and set to work healing the burns.

It seemed the first day was over.

#####

"I'm the smallest one here, yet I get hit the most. Why is this?" Durran questioned bitterly. The wounds on his face had healed, but much of his hair had been burnt away, leaving him with half a bald patch on his otherwise perfect set of locks.

"Maybe take comfort in the fact that you're alive, and the burns are healed. Two died," Argrave reminded him.

The five of them rested separately from the Waxknights. An improvised funeral was being held—Orion held one of the fallen knights in his hands while the corpse was aflame, drifting away piece by piece as ashes lost to the wind. The other Waxknights knelt before Orion, hands clasped together as they knelt in prayer. Their two golden sets of enchanted armor had been set aside in a safe place—armor was always custom-made, and it could fit no one else that did not already have one. It was to be retrieved as they left.

"Three died," Silvic argued. "My friend, Predniz... consumed. I cannot make sense of it," Silvic shook her head, voice with a rare display of emotion.

"All of the other wetland spirits are dead," Argrave told Silvic. "Each and all, consumed by the Plague Jester's loyal servants, their power inherited. Barring you, actually."

Silvic lowered her head, crown of stag-like roots moving with it.

"I don't understand his strength," Galamon commented in frustration as he watched Orion.

"Join the club," Argrave returned, still cleaning dried blood out of his ears. His hearing had returned. Anneliese had to heal his ruptured eardrums, though.

"He is only human. I know this to be true," Galamon crossed his arms, shaking his head.

Argrave looked up at Galamon, then sat against a tree root. "He's blessed by gods. His strength isn't his own."

"My strength is not my own, yet I am still vastly weaker than him," Galamon pointed to his chest, referring to both the enchanted crown embedded in his helmet and the vampiric beast in his blood.

Argrave looked to the ground. "That'll change, if things go my way."

Galamon looked to him. "You have yet more items to give?"

Argrave rubbed his hands together. "In time, the boundaries between this realm and... and *other realms*... will weaken."

"Meaning?" Galamon pressed.

"Gerechtigheit is judging gods, going by your culture's name for him," Argrave pointed to him. "But the gods get their own defense, even if it isn't an active form. Once the boundaries weaken... Orion won't be the only one to be blessed by gods. Already, I have my thing, Orion has his blessings..."

Galamon stepped over to stand above Argrave. "You mean to say..."

"Yeah. That's the plan for you and Durran, when the time comes. Got plans for me and Anneliese, too."

Galamon stepped away, lost in thought, then turned back. "I will champion none besides Veid," he declared.

"I know," Argrave nodded.

"I'm not as picky," Durran contributed. "As long as nothing is expected of me, of course. Don't fancy playing toady to some tyrannical god just so I can toss aside large rocks with ease."

Argrave stretched his legs. "Put it out of your mind. This is all far away. It's why I never brought it up."

Anneliese said nothing as she stared at Orion's improvised funeral—he had already told her of this long ago.

"We did well today," Argrave rose to his feet. "Things went near as well as they could have. Nevertheless... considering Magnus' death, and the near active sabotage going on around us... it'd be good to stay alert. Silvic, everyone—when the time comes for sleep, let's stick closely together, and with our company in sight," he concluded, gaze turning to Orion.

Everyone tiredly agreed. Only one day had passed, yet already these wetlands wore away their spirit.

#####

The day had not yet concluded. Argrave sat a fair distance from Silvic, leaning against Anneliese as he gazed upon the matrix for [Bloodfeud Bow] even still. Galamon tended to his armor, which sorely needed maintenance after their trek through the wetlands.

Silvic's displays of power today were not without cost. The waxpox had spread across more of her body, consuming parts of her wooden neck and nearing her face. It had begun to encroach upon the uncorrupted side, too.

He sat near Silvic mostly to ward away Orion. Yet as he read, he heard footsteps. Durran and Orion walked through the square of the castle, Orion fervently explaining something to the tribal, who seemed miserable beyond compare, an effect that was only increased by the sad-looking bald patch from his recent burns.

“...I will repeat the names back to you tomorrow, and I expect you to respond in kind,” Orion said. “This is but the foundations—how will you memorize scriptures if you cannot remember the names of the gods?”

“Okay,” agreed Durran, hollow and dead. Argrave made a mental note to do something nice for the tribal very soon.

Orion patted Durran’s back, sending him towards Argrave like a child sent off to school. Argrave watched the towering prince warily as he walked towards them.

“Brother,” Orion began, tone cold. “I had questions.”

Argrave closed the book and gestured for Orion to ask without words.

His gray eyes jumped to Silvic for half a second. Then, he asked, “A Corse Puppeteer, a Plague Jester—no mere coincidence, is it?”

Argrave furrowed his brows. “It isn’t, but... I didn’t think you’d care.”

“You know the truth of things, then? I would hear it,” Orion insisted, coming to sit cross-legged before Argrave.

Argrave adjusted his legs, and then set the book for [Bloodfeud Bow] aside. “Alright... well, sure. Sure. Let me think for a moment.”

Argrave tapped his chin as he thought of how to frame the story.

“The conquest of the wetlands didn’t end once these fortresses were made,” Argrave began, gesturing to the walls around them. “The swamp folk refused to be subjects, refused to abandon their customs and faiths, and refused to integrate into Vasquer society. And so... the newly anointed lords of this area undertook a second conquest. A conquest of spirit.”

Argrave rubbed his hands together, thinking more. “The lords butchered the swamp folk by the hundreds, making violent examples of all troublemakers. Community leaders... community leaders received a different fate. Shamans to the wetland spirits were mostly killed. Some, though... they were taken in as amusements to the Archduke of this land.”

“Waqwaq, for instance, was forced to play out puppet shows of the conquest of the wetlands, reliving things time and time again,” Argrave looked to the tree that still stood tall, where the Corpse Puppeteer had once lived.

“There were plenty of others,” Argrave continued, looking back to Orion. “A jongleur, a bard, a mummer, a troubadour... we won’t fight them all, of course. Just enough to get to the ringleader. The jester.”

Orion nodded, then locked his gaze upon Argrave. “Is there no room... for other options?”

Argrave raised a brow. For ordinary people, that might mean ‘diplomacy.’ For Orion, it surely meant, “Getting them to convert?” When Orion nodded, he continued, “That option... it was lost long ago. Violence begets violence. The moment you veer from persuasion and debate to open attack, neither

side will return until the other is defeated.” Argrave pursed his lips in hesitation, then said, “There’s a lesson in that, Orion.”

Orion stared at the ground, gray eyes distant. Then, he looked to Argrave, saying simply, “Rest well, brother. Lady Anneliese. Durran. Galamon.” His gaze fell to Silvic. “And... and you, Silvic,” he said, though the words sounded forced.

Argrave watched Orion leave, perplexed.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 195: Grappling the Powerful

“At this point, the main challenge is confining the infected to the camps,” Mina spoke to Induen, staring out over the city of Veden from the castle. “People that catch the disease spread it indefinitely. Some people, when it stops spreading, resume mingling into society. Like this, the outbreaks never really stop.”

“Just use force,” Induen shook his head disapprovingly. “It isn’t so difficult.”

Mina looked to him. “Do you think this tiny county has the manpower to force more than half of its residents into refugee camps or within their own homes? And even then, the last thing we wish is for our military to be infected with this disease. That would only exacerbate the disaster.”

“Who said anything about confining them?” Induen’s blue eyes locked with Mina’s, veritably shining.

“Yes, we can kill anyone that disagrees with us, become the rulers of corpses. It’ll be harder to get them to tend the fields that way, I’m sure, but at least we’ll have gotten what we wanted,” Mina challenged him.

Induen’s jaw clenched as he stared at Mina, eyes narrowing with anger. Then, one corner of his mouth split open, and he started laughing dryly.

“You’ve a lot of bravery for one so small,” he noted as his laughter trailed off. “I’ve killed for less.”

Mina stared back at him, not flinching at all. Then, she nodded. “We established this already. You want to kill people for getting sick.”

Even Induen was flabbergasted by her boldness. He only laughed once more, then turned back to the city, watching out. He could not be both amused and angry, and he was more amused than anything.

“Fine. Fine...” he conceded, crossing his arms and leaning against one of the keep’s pillars. “People that resume their tasks despite their sickness—it’s a selfish act, so they’re selfish people. Give them incentive to stay inside, they’ll fall in line. Greed is an easy, base emotion to satisfy.”

“You mean... pay them? Veden is not... exactly...”

Induen considered for half a second, then said, “Promise exemptions from taxes. It’s not an immediate boon, but the promise alone will convince many to obey. You don’t even need to uphold the promise,” he looked to her.

Mina nodded, eyes distant as she considered his idea. “No... no, it’s a good idea. Exemptions will be sorely needed after the devastation from the plague, anyway.”

“It’s the promise that matters—promises enough to get them to do what you want.”

Mina walked over to her desk, then retrieved quill and paper. “Nikoletta told me something, once. Even if you view people as tools, well-maintained tools perform a task all the better.”

Induen bit his lip, a bit displeased at the mention of Nikoletta. He stepped towards Mina, arguing, “If people know there are consequences, they’ll work hard.”

“They’ll only work as hard as they need to avoid consequences,” Mina quickly rebutted. “If people love their ruler, they’ll do what they need to and more. People crave to rise, and as they do so, they’ll bring you up with them. All they need is opportunity and reward.”

Induen stared down at her, but she turned to the document in front of her and began writing in it diligently. The prince opened his mouth once more, but someone entered the door. Induen turned his head back, spotting one of his knights. He strode forward and pushed the man on his chest.

“You don’t knock?” he said coldly.

“An urgent matter, prince,” the knight knelt. “Forgive me.”

Induen stared down at the kneeling knight, then cast a glance back to Mina. Almost bitterly, he said, “Speak, then. Stop wasting time.”

“Prince Magnus is dead, my prince,” the knight relayed, bowing all the lower. “Forgive me.”

Induen took a deep breath of surprise. “What? That wandering fool?”

“He was murdered, my prince, in the wetlands to the northwest.”

Induen frowned. “Where Orion is?” He heard Mina set her quill down behind him, paying closer attention.

“Yes, my prince,” the knight confirmed.

“Any more details?” Induen inquired, the only genuine emotion on his tone that of perplexment.

“The news is only just now being spread, my prince, forgive me.”

Induen scratched the bottom of his clean-shaven chin, turning away and walking about in thought.

“Mina. Do you think you can handle things? I should probably return to Dirracha.”

Mina blinked quickly, then looked to the papers before her. “It is... I mean, I see no reason why...”

“Then I’ll go,” Induen interrupted in her, his interest lost once he heard her bumbling. He stepped away, heading for the door.

“You’ll leave as soon as things get challenging?” she called out, almost urgently.

Induen paused at the door, then turned around. His eyes were frowning, but his mouth was widened in a grin. “What did you say?”

She blinked quickly, obviously flustered, but she kept her yellow eyes fixed firmly on the prince nonetheless. "I think you heard me," she said.

"You think this is challenging?" he questioned coldly.

"One of the options you always use is off the table," Mina said, her voice steady. "If that isn't a challenge, what is?"

Induen started laughing once more, placing one gauntleted hand to hide his mouth. "You seem determined to face repercussions of some sort. I wonder why that might be?" He stepped right up to his desk, and the two of them endured a long, tacit staring contest.

The prince turned back to the knight. "Send word to Dirracha I'll be preoccupied with something for a time."

#####

"Why have you been working so frenziedly lately?" Anneliese questioned as they sat together in the darkness of night. It felt like they were alone, but in truth, Galamon and Silvic both were close enough to hear. Durran was the only amongst them sleeping—a well-deserved rest, by Argrave's estimation.

Argrave gazed at the matrix for [Bloodfeud Bow] with his golden eyes distant, as though hesitating. Then, he said, "Durran being taken away for interrogation put things into perspective."

Anneliese sighed. "I knew it was that. Yet even still... if you overstrain yourself, you will suffer more in the long run."

Hearing that, Argrave bit his lip in contemplation, yet he did not shut the book. "I've got a different sort of bad dream, now, Anneliese. Not about my death. Not the Low Way, not Induen. But..." he sighed. "The thing I fear most, now, is watching the suns set alone."

Anneliese grew silent, before noting, "Sometimes, I question if you are simply too sweet, or if you merely know precisely what to say to stop me from dissuading you."

They both laughed quietly. After, Argrave looked to her and questioned, "Do you think you can help me out? Mentor me, maybe?"

She paused, glancing at the book. "Blood magic..." Anneliese noted, trailing off.

"It's just the one I've been studying most," he assured her.

Anneliese pushed away and moved to sit across from him as quietly as she could. Sitting cross-legged, she gestured towards him. "Try and cast it," she directed.

Taking a deep breath, Argrave gave one last look at the whirling matrix conjured from the book and then closed it. He set it aside, then held out his hand. He had seen the matrix enough that it conjured as quickly as any spell might've. It hovered in the air, inanimate and ineffectual. He tried to set it into motion in the same moment he willed magic into it, making it whole...

It shattered after not half a second. Argrave sighed and lowered his hand, while Anneliese's amber eyes stayed locked on where his hand had just been. Her face was as steady as stone for a time, and she said nothing. Eventually, her eyes met with his and she commanded, "Again."

Argrave did so. Once again, it shattered nearly identically.

Anneliese leaned back, supporting herself with her arms. She spaced out, lost in thought and contemplation. Argrave waited patiently, hands on his knees.

"You are not moving it from every direction you can," she finally said. "It resembles... it is like if you had a tower, and you tried to move only the first floor. You neglect pushing the tower above. It all needs to move at once, lest it fold and collapse."

Argrave frowned. That was the last thing he thought she'd say. "But what angle am I missing? I feel like I'm applying the force evenly."

She scratched her forehead. "I cannot say. The force applied is invisible—I can only comprehend it when I am the one using it."

"Would it help if I did it again?" Argrave pressed eagerly.

"It would help if you rested, finally," she concluded, moving back. "I will. I hope you do the same."

Argrave watched her leave, heading to where they slept. Argrave bit his lip, considering joining her.

Never again, came that voice, fighting against the promise of comfort and fulfillment he knew he'd feel if he joined her.

With a sigh, Argrave opened the spellbook, eyes bloodshot but still burning with a steady flame of ambition.

#####

After a long time with no results, the night passed and morning dawned. Argrave had not slept at all, and he was the only besides Galamon and Silvic awake this early. He stared up at the branches of the tree that Waqwaq had resided in dully. Despite persisting for so long, his Black Blood enabled him to function on a relatively normal level. The reasons why he obtained it, least of all his near exponential magic growth, counted up day by day.

He ruminated on what Anneliese had advised him time and time again, the book long ago discarded. The matrix was not his problem—his method was the problem, plainly enough. He held his hands out and tried to emulate how to move the entire matrix in bizarre motions, then clenched his hands together in embarrassment.

But then, after a time, Argrave grew still. His brows slowly lowered, his vision narrowing, as he pondered dimensionality and exponentiation. To have something in one dimension could be represented by one number. To have something in two dimensions could be represented in two: 2x2, for instance. For three, this trend continued—2x2x2.

He rose to his feet, Anneliese's analogy of his attempts to move the first floor of a tower finally ringing in his head. He strode away from his party, ignoring his own advice for them all to stick together, and moved to an isolated place in the fortress' courtyard. Galamon watched him go, perplexed.

Argrave had always viewed himself as something existing only in three dimensions. Maybe it was fact—he wasn't so sure, anymore. But the fact remained that the tool that he used was beyond that, and the force that he had to exert upon the matrix had to be beyond that, as well.

With this new perspective, Argrave held his hand out and conjured the matrix once more. He tried to set it into motion, yet also acted upon that imperceptible, imperceivable fourth dimension to things. It set into motion...

And then shattered. Argrave stood there hollowly for a moment, then looked at his hands in disappointment. His bitterness slowly morphed into a stubborn anger, though, and he held his hand out once more, confidence in his idea renewed.

The matrix formed, and then whirled... Argrave started to breath faster as it persisted for more than half a second, yet then it shattered once more. He looked at his hand once more, yet not with disappointment—instead, his eyes were eager and hungry.

"Have to memorize the path, now..." Argrave muttered as he ran off, retrieving the book for [Bloodfeud Bow] once again. He studied not only the matrix, but the *way* it moved, and the path it took. With that, he closed the book, and held his hand out once again.

The matrix formed. It began to swirl, persisting. Argrave willed his magic forth... and instead of meeting a wall as it always had, the matrix *accepted* it. Then, as though it never was, it dissipated. Argrave was panicked for but half a second before pain seized his arm. Twin spirals of blood pulled free of his arm, moving into position.

The twin spirals formed a recurve bow in his left hand. He felt power brewing in his other hand, his blood bubbling just beneath the skin. He raised the hand up, and a string descended. An arrow formed, perfectly nocked but small, pumping blood ever so quickly.

Argrave quickly wrenched his hand away and dispelled the magic, clutching his head as his vision grew white and his world spun with dizziness. The bow fell to the earth, nothing more than mere blood, now. He took a few moments to collect himself, and the dizziness and lightheadedness slowly faded as he breathed quickly.

Argrave stood straight once again, then looked around. He turned his head every which way, looking for anyone that had seen that. Finally, his gaze fell back to his hands, and he collapsed to his knees. He held his hand to his mouth to muffle his laughter for a time, then wiped away flowing tears once the laughter had faded.

Once that was done, he took a few moments to collect himself, steadying his breathing and clearing his face. He cursed again and again in a low whisper, triumph and heartache both making his voice shake.

Only once he had calmed down entirely did Argrave gather himself, returning back to where his companions were with only a slight grin on his face.