

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 196: Stoked by Righteous Winds

Argrave disliked looking at the bronze hand mirror. With something—or someone, rather—to find solace in, he didn't need to use it for motivation much at all anymore. Now, though, the day had passed, and he stared down at its surface in the early morning light...

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

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

Seeing that 'B' just beside blood magic made him feel quite satisfied. Unfortunately, Argrave had underestimated himself, and brought no B-rank spellbooks with him besides that for [Bloodfeud Bow]. He felt like he was wasting precious time that could be spent learning more and more B-rank spells, yet even still...

His rate of advancement was quite exceptional. Between his high magic affinity, his black blood, that [Intelligent] trait, and his own diligence in studying, maybe it was to be expected. He felt some fulfillment. His rate of advancement was not unprecedented, lore-wise, but it was quite fast.

Orion's presence culled what might've been a seed of arrogance, though. With [Bloodfeud Bow], a single-projectile attack with the potential for power far outmatching near all spells, Argrave could seriously injure Orion now. That was assuming the ridiculous possibility the man would stand still and let him charge it for minutes, naturally. The Holy Fool could still crush him and all of his companions without much issue. Fighting him personally was a long way off.

Yet with B-rank magic at his hands... he could start planning for the future in earnest. His advancement to A-rank would be as significant as his visit to the Alchemist, he knew. A-rank was when a mage more closely integrated with magic—rather than merely using it, they would assimilate into it. It was a vague description, yet the innumerable processes to become A-rank were so varied that only a vagary sufficed for describing it.

Argrave stowed away the bronze hand mirror and rose, doing brief stretches before he emerged from the tent. Anneliese sat on a large root not too far away, cleaning and braiding her long white hair back in preparation for travel.

Anneliese turned her head towards him yet remained focused on her task. "Good morning."

"Is it? I'm not so sure," Argrave questioned, blinking his eyes as he raised his hands to his face.

"You are pale," Anneliese noted as Argrave wiped away his tired eyes. He'd gotten a few hours of sleep, but his current state of fatigue made him question if he'd have been better off staying awake the whole night.

"I always have been," he answered quickly.

“No. You had a healthy pallor not weeks ago, yet you keep...” she trailed off. “Why are you so pleased with yourself?”

Argrave’s subtle grin broadened into a smile. “You’re a good teacher—anyone ever tell you that?”

Anneliese’s amber eyes grew wide as she placed things. “I see now. You—you broke into B-rank with that blood magic spell. That’s why you look so terrible, so tired.”

“Well, that’s the demerit,” Argrave brushed off the remark quickly.

She stood and moved forth, running her fingers through her half-braided white hair in frustration. “You complain when you are miserable, and yet you never... Why in the world do you never...” she sighed. “You will not use blood magic for the rest of this journey,” she commanded, planting a finger to his chest.

“I won’t?” he raised a brow.

“This is a concession you must make for me. I will not bend on this matter,” she stated plainly, amber eyes fierce as he’d ever seen them. “You insisted that I remain inside at Jast for my safety. I insist on this, for your safety.”

Argrave kept the stare going for a little bit. Then, he raised his hand and fixed her messy hair. “As long as it’s not life-or-death.”

Anneliese pouted—a rare expression on her, and one Argrave found quite adorable. “If it is truly life or death, use your Blessing of—”

Argrave placed one finger to her lips, shushing her. “We talked about this. Stay quiet about that while we’re here,” he whispered, looking around. Thankfully, neither him nor his Waxknights were nearby.

She lowered her head with a nod of apology. “Alright. But to that point?”

“Last night’s venture... delayed things,” Argrave said in vague terms as he waved his hand dismissively. “[Bloodfeud Bow] is blood magic, but B-rank magic is still B-rank magic, and therefore costly. I suspect night will fall before I can fully repay things, provided I don’t expend much magic today. Fortunately, the battle for the second fortress won’t involve much magic at all.”

She sighed, then looked up at Argrave once again. “B-rank... I am happy for you,” she finally congratulated him. “Perhaps now, you will rest easier and cease working so hard.”

Argrave only smiled in response, giving no verbal commitments. But in his head, those words still rang—never again, never again.

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Argrave went to inform the prince that they were ready to travel but found Orion standing off to the side, one hand held to his forehead. He was just out of sight of the Waxknights, who assembled around a campfire as they ate their rations. Argrave could not recall seeing the prince in distress, so he walked up to him cautiously.

At his footsteps, the prince raised his head. Argrave tilted his head questioningly, and Orion confided immediately, "Another of my knights vanished."

"Vanished?" Argrave repeated.

"Gone, disappeared during his watch," Orion explained.

Argrave looked at the Waxknights. They ate their rations and wrapped their waxpox-rife flesh in clean bandages. Indeed, upon count, only seven of the initial ten they'd journeyed with were present.

"Deserted, or...?" Argrave mused.

Orion grabbed his collar, and Argrave's heart fell into his stomach. "Deserted? Why would you say such a thing?" the prince questioned in a loud, angry whisper.

Argrave calmly stated, "Look at them. It's but the first day, yet things are this challenging. I don't doubt their ability or their faithfulness, but men are men."

Orion's grip loosened on Argrave's collar slowly, and the prince straightened. "Their flames must be stoked by righteous winds."

"...boosting their morale is important, yes," Argrave agreed, feeling a strange discomfort he could so quickly interpret Orion's words.

Without another word, Orion stepped to where they gathered. Their prince's steady, determined approach towards them caused them all to rise to attention.

"Faithful knights!" Orion began. "Three of our number have left us. They swore an oath to the royal family, and to the gods, to live and die for the sake of the royal family. And now they have. More of you may—"

"Orion," Argrave called out, stepping up just beside him. "I have some things to say," he said quietly, recognizing well that a disaster might occur if this man spoke his earnest thoughts.

"Please speak, dear brother," Orion gestured.

Argrave looked out to the Waxknights—if ever before there'd been an intimidating crowd for public speaking, this was it. But public speaking was one of the few things Argrave was talented at, he believed.

"As Orion said, we stand here today with three fewer than we departed with yesterday. These men—these brave men—they marched forth with strength, with ideal, and they confronted the monstrous forces of the Corpse Puppeteer and the Plague Jester. And knowing that they are gone... what will you do for their memory?"

Argrave stepped around, eyes jumping around the small crowd of knights before him. "You must never forget why they are gone," Argrave proclaimed. "Forget not the sea of corpses you fought against yesterday. Forget not the foul beasts that hunted us through the wetlands. *These* are our foes. You must never forget that. And when we have won, and when we return... all of us, even the fallen, will return as heroes. Each and every face you see... they will owe you their lives. Each and every face you remember, every face that you long to see again... they will owe you their lives. If there is good, and if there is evil... then *we* are good, and *we* fight evil!"

Without giving so much as a single cheer, the Waxknights kept staring on at him. He had confidence enough in his words, though, that he was sure he'd had a positive effect.

"I shall prepare Silvic and my companions for travel. Silvic must scout, per usual," Argrave turned to Orion. "We'll travel less distance, and the battle to take the fortress will not be half as hard, but it's a better point to begin with the third day."

"Wonderful," said Orion with vigor, beaming down at Argrave. "Give my regards to Lady Anneliese. And ensure Durran is prepared to recite the gods and their domains," he requested.

Argrave nodded, making another mental note to do something really, really nice for Durran once all of this was behind them.

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Anneliese proved herself an able scout once more, picking out a path with her Starsparrow. Were it not for that tiny and resilient bird they'd claimed, this journey would have been three times as hard. Though she could not constantly watch for enemies, picking a path that did not have them endure wading through chest-high waters was a blessing enough to be considered miraculous.

If the journey of the first day had two climaxes—one for the assault on the road, and the other the taking of the first fortress—the second day was not comparable in the slightest. Instead, it was a steady trickle of enemies, like a constant pressure upon their party. They had to keep watch at every moment for gibbons, like assassins paid by the wetlands, or endure a siege of leopards whilst Orion dealt with encroaching rockhide hippos.

With the constant pressure came tension—all of them were drawn so thin they were all ready to snap at a moment's notice, save the indomitable people of the party, namely Orion and Galamon. With morale faltering, Argrave once again assumed the role he'd taken in the fortress. Some might call it a commander, but Argrave just felt like a motivational speaker. Soon enough, the Waxknights looked to Argrave for direction as much as they did Orion. Someone more paranoid might think Argrave was trying to subvert them, but Orion seemed pleased that Argrave was taking extra efforts.

Argrave struggled tremendously, though the extra role he so readily took had nothing to do with it. He was beset by constant headaches, and exertions that caused him no trouble yesterday made him quite exhausted today. It was a familiar feeling, and he was more than able to push past it. Even still, Anneliese provided constant and unconditional support, and ensured that he ate properly during the whole journey. Between his anemia and the constant assault from enemies, he might've snapped without her.

Yet she and all of Argrave's companions proved more than mere support, especially so on this day. Galamon was ready for battle at every second, and when it came, fought like a man possessed—Anneliese told Argrave in secret that the elven vampire felt as though he had something to prove when confronted with the unimaginable strength of Orion. Though Argrave was worried this might lead somewhere poor, he was grateful for his steadfast ally all the same. Meanwhile, Durran slowly integrated into the party all the better. He worked well with Anneliese, and he and Galamon developed a rapport.

There was some solace knowing rest would soon come as they grew ever nearer to the second fortress. Simultaneously, there was dread. The solace Argrave felt was like a gleaming fruit with unblemished skin that, once bitten, revealed blackened and rotted innards.

Argrave's role was not so pivotal as it had been at the first fortress. The goal was simply to get by while the big fish battled it out. Even still, there was danger. There always was, it seemed, and doubly so when they stepped willingly onto a trap.

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Chapter 197: Endless Isles

"Any further steps, and we will be within their grasp," Silvic cautioned their party as they idled.

Orion nodded. "This was made clear to me earlier. Being within their grasp is unimportant. A weak grip is easily broken."

His ever-zealous words did not abate Argrave's fear at all. Silvic continued, cautioning, "This will not be as other ambushes. We enter the distortion, the realm, of a being similar to myself—we will be in the heart of things, ostensibly surrounded by foes. It further suggests that the wetland spirit holding this fortress yet lives. If that is true, you will face more than a tide of corpses."

Durran ran his finger against his bald patch caused by yesterday's burns. He had taken the hardest knocks during this journey, yet he did not falter. That steeled Argrave somewhat. Anneliese stayed calm, likely dually from her own tranquil nature and the enchanted items he'd given to her at Jast.

"I will fight this Intrepid Troubadour Argrave claims to be beyond this distortion. The remainder of you are more than capable," Orion assured.

"All save you, perhaps, will be unable to leave until the master of this distortion is dead and gone, or until you are allowed to leave," Silvic once again warned.

"None intend to leave until the enemy is conquered," Orion rebutted at once.

Without so much as a breath to gather his courage, Orion gestured for them to follow and stepped forth. In but a second, he seemed a chameleon that blended into the environment before he vanished altogether. Silvic was the second to move, and just after the Waxknights. Only once the first Waxknight had entered did Argrave follow, his companions trailing just after him.

Just the same as it had been when they travelled through the Marred Hallowed Grounds to find Silvic and bring her before Orion, the scene distorted before Argrave, and he stepped into what might as well be another world.

Endless isles of green dotted the land before him, thick and tall plants like cattails and reeds growing up out of rich brown soil. These isles were large, covered completely by greenery, like a vast archipelago of verdant growth. They were divided by fast-running rivers that were entirely clear yet seemed to stretch downwards forever as an ocean of water. The sky above was so blue and beautiful it was worthy of admiration.

On one of the overgrown green isles before them, a four-legged creature armored in shining, strong steel stood. It had a thick, round body easily identifiable as that of a horse's. Its legs were thick and

strong. Where its neck might've held an equine head, a man's torso stood. A centaur, Argrave knew, and equipped in full steel plate that gleamed with enchantments. It dwarfed even the titanic rockhide hippopotamuses they'd grappled with during their journey, and held an unstrung bow taller than Argrave in hand.

Sitting on the centaur's back was a humanoid figure made of wood and teeming with liquid light within. It was quite similar in appearance to Silvic, though without the waxpox corrupting most of its body. While Silvic was decidedly made in imitation of a female, this rider was male. He bore a crown of roots atop his head, though they twisted and entwined together to resemble two horns. He had a beautifully ornate stringed instrument in his hand most resembling a guitar, though different enough it could not be called so.

"We seek to kill the Plague Jester," Orion called out, stepping forth to the edge of the isle all of them stood upon. "Will you stand down?"

"We stood down once, after you had slain thousands," the troubadour aback the armored centaur called out. "You made fools and singers of us, weaving tales and jests that mocked our own people."

The centaur strung the bow and held his hand up, where part of the troubadour's wooden body morphed and broke off into a wooden arrow teeming with liquid light. The arrow was nocked and fired at Orion. Argrave flinched involuntarily at the quickly approaching projectile, yet Orion batted it aside with his mace, demonstrating inhuman speed.

"Now, you will need to kill us all," the troubadour concluded. "Even then, we will not have stood down."

Deflecting the arrow left the mace badly bent, and Orion corrected it with one hand. "Let it not be said I did not try to sway you," he said coldly as he stepped forth onto the river. His heavy plate boots sunk not an inch before ice formed. He stepped across the thick river to the island where the centaur and the troubadour waited, and every time his feet lifted up, the ice melted behind him.

"That is a new spirit," Silvic noted. "Like me, but... young."

It was a vaguely familiar line to what it had been in 'Heroes of Berendar.' Argrave did not have time to marvel, though, and he looked about in paranoia for the first signs of their foes. And he saw it at once. The tall reeds of the islands brushed aside to make way for a new arrival, crawling free from the bottomless rivers dividing the islands. At first, it was one location—then, all the cattails and reeds on the edge of the island they stood atop shifted aside, making way for fell arrivals.

The Waxknights bunched together, uncomfortable by the fact that they could not see what was approaching. Slowly, their opponents rose above the tall reeds. The Sentinels of this wetland spirit were amphibious creatures, thick and long bodies closest in appearance to a crocodile. Their scales did not cover all of their flesh, as though they were immature—instead, one could see through their pink, translucent skin to spot organs that danced with liquid light, marking them as blessed by a wetland spirit.

"We hole up, endure all that's thrown at us," Argrave shouted out, attempting to rally everyone as was planned. The Waxknights answered him with a grunted *HOAH* of assent. Argrave gestured towards Silvic and urged, "See what you can do to block off any of the banks with roots or reeds, eliminate some avenues of approach."

“At once,” Silvic hastened, sinking her root-like hand uncorrupted by waxpox into the reeds.

The Sentinels of this young troubadour pressed in on them with swaying, almost staggering steps. The closest opened their mouth and spewed poison gas, but their party was well-prepared in advance for such assaults, per Argrave’s cautions. With each of the Waxknights being spellcasters, wind magic quickly swept away the dangerous poison, scattering it and rendering it impotent.

The reeds of this strange place slowly twisted and writhed, spurred by Silvic to raise walls at the banks of the verdant isle. Their party did nothing more than hold back the Sentinels, killing those who got too close. Though powerful and poisonous, they were slow creatures. The greatest concern was the others on this plane.

Dragonflies as big as a grown man’s torso came to assault them. Their movements were erratic, unpredictable—in one moment they would be one place, in the next they’d dart in a straight line towards one of them, before zigzagging and attacking from the back. Their fangs were like knives, and Argrave, with only the hood of his duster for protection, collected cuts to the face one after the other. Even with magic, they were difficult to defeat. Galamon was the only who could consistently deal with them, but even then, they did not always fall. Elsewise, Argrave’s Brumesingers used their conjured warriors well.

The battle between the Intrepid Troubadour and Prince Orion raged in the background, the furthest thing from ‘slow.’ Orion charged the duo of the centaur and troubadour with all the rage and persistence of a bull seeing red. And, fittingly, the Intrepid Troubadour dodged with as much grace as a matador.

Arrow after arrow soared through the air at Orion, the armored centaur receiving more ammunition from the troubadour sitting on his back. All the while, it nimbly maneuvered around the isles, jumping from isle to isle as the arrows sought their target, leaving trails of green light floating just behind. When the arrows struck the earth or the water, explosions of plant life rose up and targeted Orion, groans and creaks echoing like the sound of timber falling.

Yet the Prince weaved through the summoned plants and the near bullet speed arrows with far too much grace, doggedly seeking the troubadour as though he had a death grudge to settle. None of his blows managed to hit home, but they left devastation in their wake, and had the power of the elements behind them.

Blow after blow ruined great swathes of this land, this eternal land of green isles. Orion’s fists left poison writhing on the edges of reeds, slowly eating them from within. His kicks summoned winds, sparks, flames. Sometimes, he seemed to run on the air itself. And as ever, his strength and endurance went far beyond the realm of what was normal. His armor could barely keep up with his prowess.

And as the fight proceeded, it became clear the troubadour could not keep up, either. When the centaur took to air, jumping to another island to flee Orion’s pursuit, the prince took his mace in hand and threw it. It spun through the air wildly, yet it was moving so quickly and towards such a large target it did not need to be particularly precise. It hit the front leg of the beast-man, and it crashed to the earth, throwing its rider down.

Reeds and roots rose to conceal and protect the troubadour, but Orion was faster. He grabbed the wetland spirit by the neck and wrenched it free, tearing free copious amounts of writhing greenery with him. Argrave barely noticed this in the distance and felt some relief as he knew things would soon end.

Yet Orion held the troubadour in the air, the stringed instrument dangling from his hands. Argrave waited for the end to come, and yet it did not. The centaur struggled to rise, incapable of doing so. The troubadour struggled desperately, yet it lacked the strength to free itself. All the while...

Is he talking? Argrave questioned.

Just then, he saw the reeds rise and twist around the injured leg of the centaur, replacing the lost flesh with wood and root. The troubadour kicked Orion with a sharp, light-imbued spike on the edge of its foot, and the prince staggered back. He slammed the troubadour to the earth at once, and...

Feeling as though his ears had popped, the scenery jarringly shifted around them. They were surrounded by stark, moss-covered old stone walls, with little else in sight. Orion stood there, pummeling the still corpse of the troubadour. The Sentinels had been brought with them but began to scramble.

The centaur, though, rose up to its feet. Orion turned his head, prepared to chase, yet already the beast-man, much larger in close proximity, bounded over the stone walls and fled. Its steps shook the earth.

"Orion!" Argrave shouted, running over.

"I am fine," he assured, one hand held over the spot that he'd been kicked. A sharp fragment imbued with the liquid light of the wetland spirit persisted in the wound, though the lingering light faded quickly as the thing died. Argrave spared a glance at the fallen troubadour, which had become naught but a husk of wood leaking liquid light like oil.

"What was that? You stood there like a...!" Argrave began, trailing off.

Orion pulled free the wood fragment, then crushed it. "I tried to accept his surrender."

Argrave took a deep, incredulous breath. *He's changing*, he knew. *And quickly. He doesn't have normal sensibilities. That centaur escaped because of those changes—who knows what variables that will cause?*

"We should talk," Argrave said seriously. This might be the first time he'd said something like that to Orion. Hopefully, it would be the last.

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Chapter 198: Bizarre Adoption

Though Argrave knew that something needed to be said to Orion, those words did not come to his head immediately as the two of them walked away from the rest of the party. They entered into the keep of the fortress that had manifested after the battle had concluded. Argrave glanced around at decrepit wooden furniture covered in equal parts by wood rot and growths from the wetlands.

Argrave came to stand over a table. Orion stood opposite it, staring at Argrave with curiosity as he waited for him to speak. Though Argrave briefly contemplated sitting in a chair, he saw its thin, shaky legs rotted out and decided against it.

“That centaur getting away bodes ill,” Argrave began, starting at the problem Orion had caused. “Centaurs—they’re closer to man than beast, and they can communicate with our foes. He can report to the commanders of the other fortresses, or even the Plague Jester herself.”

“You fear our enemies will take note of us? They already have—they harass us during this whole journey, brother,” Orion stepped around the table.

Argrave mirrored his brother’s steps, circling around the table opposite him. “This is different. These beasts that assail as we travel... they sense intruders and hunt them, but little else—now, you’ve displayed your power, stated your intent plainly. If the commanders are warned, the final assault will be all the more difficult. They’ll group up.”

Orion lowered his head. “I apologize.”

Argrave sighed. “I don’t get why this is happening. Back at camp, you lunged at Silvic as though she were your nemesis without any provocation whatsoever. Now, someone attacks you first, and you let them stab you? You let their ally get away?”

“I apologize,” Orion repeated sincerely, lowering his head further.

“I don’t want an apology. I want to know why,” Argrave insisted.

Orion raised a hand to the table before him, placing his fingers against it almost gingerly. The battle he’d just endured had destroyed both of his gauntlets, leaving only scraps of loosely hanging metal with broken enchantments behind.

“Do you ever grow lonely, Argrave?” Orion raised his head, gray eyes emotionless.

Argrave thought for half a second before answering, “Not lately. But I did, once. A lot.”

Orion brushed his fingers against the decrepit table, pushing it lightly and watching the thin wood bend and bounce back into place. “I cannot grow lonely. I always have company. The gods accompany me through life. Since my birth, they have always been here.”

Argrave had grown rather less afraid of Orion lately, so he dared say, “But that doesn’t answer my question. Why do you act differently from how you did?”

Orion slammed his fist against the table and the wood buckled easily. Argrave didn’t move an inch as wood splinters fell at his feet. “Because I don’t understand,” Orion said, voice far too calm in the wake of his outburst.

Argrave waited for an elaboration, and it came as Orion continued, “I know the gods. My faith is unshakable. All is part of the natural order, and the world can only truly be perfect when their dominion extends from the tall mountains of Dirracha to the distant corners of the world. I have ninety-eight parents, brother—my mother, our father, and all the gods of Vasquer. Each and all taught me as much of the world as the other.

“And now, I go out into the world with their teachings in my mind, with the support of all my parents, both within and without...” Orion clenched his fist. “And I find that learning to do something is wholly different from putting it into action. The task is simple: spread the faith. Yet the ways are manifold,

subtle and direct in equal turns. Each path I might take has its own application that excels at different points. You enlightened me to that," he pointed.

"Me?" Argrave questioned. "What?"

"You abided heretics and enemies to help the faith in tremendous ways," Orion continued, stepping across the wrecked table to stand before Argrave. "The people whisper of you staying an invasion from the Veidimen by treating with them in their land. This action saved the lives of thousands of faithful in Mateth. What's more, Durran described your exploits against the foul heralds of Fellhorn. All of this... I could never have done it. I don't understand it."

Orion stepped away and put his hands on his hips. "I am not particularly smart. I confess... I confess I am quite stupid. I have always been slow to read books, last to comprehend lectures. Though my instincts and will are second to none, and I have my parents at my back... I am impulsive, easily angered. Yet personality is not a static thing, and wisdom is more than equal to intelligence. Personality changes and morphs based on what happens. I am trying to understand, trying to grow, trying to learn from these experiences. I am trying to be a better faithful."

Argrave stayed silent in the wake of Orion's openness. He had never seen Orion express anything of this sort to anyone—certainly never the player in 'Heroes of Berendar.' Maybe it was because things had changed. Or maybe it was because the two of them were family, and Orion trusted him easier.

"There will be better times in the future to try and learn," Argrave said gently. "Right now... right now, we have only allies and enemies. Even I am aware of that. Our foe seeks to genocide Vasquer with disease and rot. Will you let that happen?"

"Then what of that wetland spirit?" Orion turned back. "She is the enemy, yet you use her to help the faithful. You see? I cannot..."

Argrave felt conflicted. On the one hand, he felt some sympathy for Orion. From birth, he was molded and twisted into what he is now. He was a convergence of so many forces, stretched so thin by so many it was a wonder he was functional at all. If Argrave might teach him something to be a better person, shouldn't he take that opportunity?

Yet the fact remained this: Orion's attempts to be a better person might sabotage their journey to cure the plague. Millions could die if Orion continued to act indecisively as he had earlier. It would be tremendously stupid to prioritize Orion's personal growth over the fate of the continent.

But then... the two weren't mutually exclusive. And Argrave could get more time, if he got himself deeper involved with Orion.

Argrave knew the words he needed to say to get that. He took a deep breath, battling with his desire to be disentangled from the man before him. Orion was dangerous. They had already become too closely bound for Argrave's liking. Yet that problem, when weighed with the consequences of failing their current task...

"I'll teach you," Argrave said quietly. "When things are all done, I can help you with that. Experience. Understanding. Growth." He took a step forward, looking up at the prince. "For now, put all of that out

of your mind. The world needs you as you are, Orion. The world needs an unwavering crusader. We can work at more later. Together.”

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Though Orion seemed pleased by his vague offer and his empty assurances, Argrave was not entirely sure that things would resume their normal course.

Nevertheless, the second day ended. Without a book to consume, Argrave was forced to relax and rest. He did not realize how much he needed such a thing until he had it, but once his mind had rejuvenated he was consumed by feelings of impatience and frustration. He felt the need to do something, anything. As such, he and Anneliese spent the remainder of the day talking.

Argrave was coming to realize their relationship was strange. They seldom argued or fought, and their few disagreements were settled in less than minutes. Much of that was due to her, he suspected—she understood him without him needing to say much at all. Argrave had recalled some people claiming that arguments and fights were the sign of a growing relationship—if they did not argue, it was uninteresting and pointless. Argrave supposed their life was interesting enough to make up for it and was content to let that festering worry die.

On the morrow, Argrave rose with a headache not quite as severe as yesterday. The Waxknights had better morale, having lost none of their own, and things were prepared in short order. The only truly miserable was Durran.

“I spend all night fretting and worrying about what Orion taught me, and then I get it right,” he explained hollowly to Argrave as he adjusted his wyvern scale helmet. “But then... but then, he dumps just as much as I learned yesterday.”

“You want my advice?” Argrave began, then gave it before Durran could answer, “Just keep asking him questions if you’re uncertain. He’ll surely be happy anytime.”

Durran shook his head. “That man has no conception of personal boundaries, and you want me to spend more time with him?”

Argrave put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “When this is all over, I’ve got a plan for you. Something you’ll like, if I know you right. And I do.”

“I’m a different man, now,” Durran shook his head, exaggeratedly harrowed.

Barring that, they began the third day largely rejuvenated. And yet, it was not at all the same as the first and second days.

Their travels began as normal, with Anneliese scouting out a proper route to the fortress they intended to take their respite in before pressing onwards to deal with the Plague Jester. Once they began their travels, though, things remained eerily quiet. The only thing to assault them was leeches in the water, which the party did not often have genuine trouble with.

The lack of assaults was a disquieting thing, and Argrave made sure to remain cautious with every step they took. No matter how paranoid Argrave remained, it did not prove warranted. Even the Waxknights

came to relax somewhat. Argrave thought it was a portent that his fears regarding the centaur had been realized, but he kept those thoughts to himself.

The wetland trees, thick and alive with life earlier in their path, became twisted and stiff by the waxpox. They more resembled sculptures of rock made in the shape of trees after they had pressed deep enough. The water was thick with dead fish, dead bugs, dead everything—the abundant presence of the plague made Argrave ensure his companions drank potions to boost their immunity every few hours, and he kept checking to be sure their Humorless Masks were tight on their faces.

As the stone of a distant fortress came into view shining like an angler fish's light, Argrave once again spoke to his companions, ensuring they would know the plan for the battle well. Their role, just as it had been with the troubadour, was not to be so pivotal. It was precisely why he had been so insistent on correcting Orion's behavior.

Yet as they pressed into the heart of the fortress, steeled for battle... the only thing that greeted them was a desolate place. Argrave felt an ambush might be waiting, and had people scour the place thoroughly... yet no enemies came, not from within or without.

Argrave stood in front of their warband of Waxknights, Orion, a wetland spirit, and his own companions, each and all looking for direction. Argrave said grimly but loudly, "It seems that the worst may have come to pass, and victory has become all the more challenging."

The enemies had retreated and merged. They would not be fighting the Plague Jester alone.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 199: Askew

"We should press on as quickly as possible, even if we need to march through the night," Argrave spoke to Orion.

The prince's gray-eyed gaze was stern and serious, freezing lesser men in place. "Do you believe so?"

"Absolutely. The journey this time around was not so exhausting. Allowing the enemy an entire night to group up and prepare for our coming attack will be a disaster," Argrave nodded insistently.

"My feet can tread for thousands of miles without issue," Orion said, staring him down. "Yet it is not myself I fear for. It is you and yours. Not all are blessed as I am. This speech is not spurred by arrogance, I assure you. I merely worry."

Argrave put his hands to his hips and looked to the Waxknights, and then his own companions in turn. He could not deny travelling so much with anemia weighing upon him had been utterly exhausting. And exhaustion alone was not the issue. They would need to endure a night march when the wetlands were at their coldest. This final stretch spanned the most distance. What's more, they'd face an undoubtedly difficult battle at its conclusion.

"What do you think?" Argrave asked his companions.

Anneliese was the first to speak, saying in favor, "Strategically... it is a good assumption that arriving early might make the following battle less insurmountable. If Argrave is correct, we will face the Plague Jester and more, even foes we've avoided thus far."

Durran opened his mouth to speak, but Galamon cut in, "I have no issue."

Argrave thought Galamon was reliable enough it was pointless for him to confirm that, but he still nodded in quiet satisfaction. Orion stepped past him, though, walking to stand before Galamon.

"Take off your helmet," Orion said. "I would look at you."

Argrave felt some panic seize him—had the prince noticed something amiss about his companion? The elven vampire wore a helmet that covered his eyes and the top of his head, yet the mouth was left exposed. Though Galamon's teeth were not unexplainably large, it was still noticeable.

Galamon did nothing, and his white-eyed gaze turned to Argrave for command.

"...take it off," Argrave nodded, preparing excuses in his head for any discrepancies Orion might have noticed.

Galamon removed his helm, and his white hair fell across his pale white skin. He fixed his hair with one gauntleted hand, then stared at Orion dispassionately.

Orion put one hand on Galamon's shoulder, just beside his neck, then said seriously, "You are an able protector, and steadfastly loyal." He looked back to Argrave. "When this is done, I must ensure you are better armored to protect my brother." He patted his shoulder, then turned away.

Argrave raised his brow at the promise from the prince. He felt he was being yet deeper entangled with the Holy Fool, yet he could not balk at the promise from a royal of better armor. They still had artifacts comparable to the crown embedded in Galamon's armor, if not vastly outmatching it. Their defensive capabilities, too, were much higher.

"And you, Durran?" Orion spoke to him, causing a seemingly involuntarily flinch from the tribal. "Can you handle a night march?"

"If you carry me, I might be able to sleep," Durran suggested. Argrave thought it was a joke and chuckled, but as he stared at Durran, he realized the man might be serious.

"Hmm..." Orion scratched beneath his beard. "Yet, it would be unfair to the others."

"Clear it with them," Durran continued. "I'm sure they'll be fine with it."

"Durran's joking," Argrave cut in after some hesitation. "Considering there may be attacks, no one will be able to sleep."

The former tribal looked at Argrave bitterly, then laughed. "I'm fine. A bit sore, but I've fought battles on less sleep. Once the adrenaline kicks in..."

None as fatal as this one promises to be, Argrave thought.

"I know my men will be capable of this," Orion nodded. "And you, Argrave? We must not neglect you. Though you have grown broader, I still recall your many troubles with disease, broken bones... I would not have you kill yourself for the sake of this. If need be, I would face all of our enemies by my lonesome, drive them utterly into the earth, and—"

"I'm a big boy," Argrave held out his hand to stifle Orion. "Then... there is no time for breaks, for rest. We must march." He looked to Silvic. "Scout out the final path," he directed her, though the words were for Anneliese.

#####

A simple stick waved in front of Elias' face, back and forth.

"I cannot see it," Elias said. One hand covered his right eye, while the left eye was free and unblemished. He was shirtless presently, exposing a warrior's body. A large streak of waxpox had corrupted most of his forearm, some of his upper arm, while a single streak rose up his neck and consumed part of his face. One of his eyes had gone gray.

Helmuth, the spellcaster with abyssal purple eyes, stopped moving the stick in front of Elias' face. "Uncover your eye," he commanded, then set the stick down.

Elias lowered his hand. "It's well and truly blind, then."

Helmuth nodded and stepped away, saying nothing. There was another in the room—a mage belonging to the Order of the Gray Owl. He was quite an old, portly man.

"I've done all in my power to stop it from spreading to the brain," the spellcaster said. "But... it still persists. This disease feeds on magic. Your power hastens its spread. It is truly a cursed thing."

"Thank you. I appreciate Count Delbraun sending you to help." He took a deep breath and sighed, moving his one good eye about. "It'll never heal, will it?" Elias questioned. His tone was as though he was not discussing his own sight. "I suppose a spellcaster needs sight less than a warrior. It is a good thing I took the path I did, I suppose."

"Even the princess of this nation remains blind," the spellcaster from Jast informed Elias. "Broken bones, cuts, gouges... easy enough to heal, as all that was there is still present. But severed limbs, rotted or gouged eyes?" the spellcaster shook his head.

Elias nodded passively. "The riots are mostly suppressed by this point, and the people are cooperating. But... I still have to keep moving, root out the corruption in this city. I promised as much to the people." Elias rose. "Let's go."

Helmuth put his hand to his temple, greatly frustrated. The focus of his frustration appeared to be himself. Nevertheless, he straightened and followed.

#####

Princess Elenore of Vasquer faced the three maids kneeling before her, her raw pink empty eye sockets hauntingly empty. She combed her long, obsidian hair back, styling it with practiced movements. She wore a black mourning dress that hid much of her pale, smooth skin.

"If Induen won't return, something must be done," Elenore mused. "If he is in Veden, whatever I order done will happen much slower."

"Mina is his sole influence for staying, my princess," one of the maids counseled.

"Yet if she is removed, Induen will take centuries to return to the capital. He is stubbornly committed to seeking vengeance on whatever deprived him of an amusement or a gain. Elbraille is proof enough of that." Elenore shook her head. "Mina, who visited Orion's camp for the sole purpose of speaking to Argrave... Mina, who is close friends to Nikoletta..." she sighed ponderously, then set her hairbrush down on the table before her.

"...you might leave the capital, my princess," another suggested. "You might manipulate things all the better, while allowing Induen to remain where he is."

Elenore turned her head a different direction as though her empty eye sockets still saw. "I cannot leave the greenhouse. I cannot disentangle from Dirracha. King Felipe III has forbidden such a thing," she said, saying no words that hinted at genuine treason. "Well, even if it is a clumsy hand, I can think of no way to pull Induen away from his task without playing my hand overtly. Perhaps it is better this way. This plague is even more dangerous than the war, I suspect."

She lowered her head. "Encourage Induen in his efforts to fight the plague," she finally directed, lifting her head up quickly and sharply. "I believe... I believe that Argrave was not boasting when he organized his expedition into the wetlands. The strange spirit he pulled from the wetlands... the reports are too numerous and consistent to be fake. And Argrave..."

"He worries you, my princess?"

Elenore tilted her head. "I think he knows. Or at least suspects. Elaine's reports..."

"Suspects what?"

The princess shifted in her chair. "Suspects me. What I do. What we do, here in this greenhouse."

The maids looked between each other, disquieted.

"Orion's royal knights all ceased giving me reports once he... I don't even know what he's done to them, exactly. My informants say they are monsters. Regardless, things must be brought to a head. When Argrave returns—if he returns successfully," Elenore amended, "Induen must be fully committed to solving this plague. Get him invested. Get him involved. Make it feel important to him, special to him. All the while... subtly stroke his hatred towards Argrave. When Argrave is heralded as a savior, the one who fixed the problem Induen had been trying to desperately to solve... well, I'm sure you know how my dear brother might react. I need instability. There is no better way to make it than with this."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 200: Siege of the Palace

As far as Argrave was concerned, the primary difference between marching during the day and doing so at was merely that they had not slept. At least, that was his opinion before they began it.

Argrave was tired and felt a little clumsy, probably doubly so because of his anemia, and the cold water of the wetlands soaked into his bones. Spell light lit their path ably, and the boundary where Silvic's protection ended was still as dark and unknowable as ever. They were unharried on their march just as it had been during the day—a small blessing that spoke of ill fortune in their future. Though everyone present was hardy, tempered by battle and long journeys both, it was an unprecedentedly exhausting thing.

The wetland spirit Silvic had been consumed by the waxpox more and more as their journey progressed, just as it had been in the game. Their boundary of protection grew weaker as she did so, and the splendor of the liquid light humming within her wooden body died by the hour. Considering Orion's recent changes... he did not know if her death was certain, anymore.

Nor did he know if the Plague Jester's death was certain. Hopefully his words got through to Orion.

Nonetheless, they marched ever onward. The waters thinned as they did, and instead of wading through thick puddles, they stepped through no more than wet mud. The waxpox thrived here, stronger than ever. The rotted plants and trees all took on a taupe tone, accented by red. It was as though they walked through a forest of flesh and blood, and once the idea took root, it was nearly accurate enough to make Argrave nauseous.

Yet that did not last forever. In time, Argrave saw the ever-present mist around fade away, and the wetlands ahead were revealed in earnest. Stone roads were paved into the mud, each and all so uniform they were likely made by mages. None were complete, though, most either buried in mud or abruptly ending. They all led to the same point—a towering complex of buildings, dimly lit by the burgeoning light of dawn.

A beautiful palace rose up out of the wetlands, so impeccably preserved most might think it an illusion. Its walls of gaudy marble and gold still stood strong, nearly fifty feet tall. Spikes and statues of silver stood on the walls, each and all monuments to great warriors or mages. It had a central gate with a breathtaking archway, just over which the largest statue stood. It was a golden statue of King Felipe III, at a time when he was perhaps thirty at most.

A near-black polished granite pathway began at the central gate, stretching all the way back to the main palace. The courtyard beyond had an impeccably maintained garden, where the plants bloomed splendidly even now. Elaborate water fountains dotted small pavilions. All of it radiated luxury and decadence, persisting amidst the harsh wetlands which had become a wasteland of death, rot, and despair as if a mockery to it all.

"This was the palace of the Archduke," Orion stepped forward, gazing up at it. Everyone else nearly doubled over in exhaustion. "Built after my father's first war, and given to Archduke Regene, his brother." He looked back to Argrave. "My uncle, his children... Have they all died?"

You'll learn their fates soon enough, Argrave wished to say, but he nodded, still breathless.

Orion nodded, then looked back, examining each statue. "They conquered this land with a pledge to weed our heretics, to spread the faith... yet they build statues of men and women, warriors and spellcasters."

"...this was a palace for the Archduke Regene, not a temple for the gods," Argrave pointed out, finally catching his breath.

Orion did not answer. His gaze wandered the walls, the towers, and the distant main building. "The gate is open," Orion said slowly. "The walls are unmanned."

Argrave had noticed the same things, but the statues standing on the marble battlements made it seem as though they confronted a fortress manned by giants and gods. Maybe that was true, in part.

"We proceed carefully, lest more arrive," Argrave looked around slowly. "We'll know what we're facing before we face it. Silvic?" he turned, though his gaze landed on Anneliese. She nodded, and he held her steady as she took control of her druidic bond.

Minutes passed as Argrave waited, and Silvic acted as though she were scouting. Then, suddenly, Anneliese took a deep breath and grabbed out. Argrave caught her arm and said, "You alright?"

The bird fluttered back to her shoulder, but Anneliese took a moment, hand held near her heart as though to calm its throbbing.

"Just tired," she said, not rejecting his support. "And... the... the Jester. I saw her. I saw her face. I have never experienced such... absolute hatred."

Argrave had not experienced what she had, but he shuddered when he heard her say those words. After giving her a reassuring squeeze, he asked, "Did you manage to scout, even still?"

She nodded, then stepped away to speak to Silvic to relay the information.

As Argrave feared, the enemy had rallied here. Even now, they hid in the walls and in the outer buildings, waiting to ambush them once they entered the palace—prudent, considering a mere gate could not bar them from the palace walls for long and the animals they led could not manage sophisticated commands. Two of the Plague Jester's servants had made it here, it seemed—the bard and the jongleur. They were not staying by the side of the Plague Jester, but rather took the east and west wall respectively, likely to ambush them from behind if they proceeded too far in. The centaur was absent. Given his speed, Argrave supposed he was off gathering the more distant reinforcements. All the more reason to hurry.

The Jester waited in the Archduke's throne room. If Orion decided to stick around and help them deal with the two servants of the Jester that were formerly manning their fortresses, he couldn't say for sure the Jester would not come out of the throne room and attack them.

Orion needed to isolate them from the Plague Jester. She was so potent that merely being in the crossfire might mean death. Yet if Orion fought the whole force alone, even he might die. Hell, if the whole bulk of their enemies rushed out and attacked their party, they'd probably succumb then and there. But the Jester didn't seem to be confident in that. She was not aware of her inherent advantage, so she waited. The troops she led could not handle tasks like scouting and complex strategies were off the table. One small fortune in this miserable situation.

Argrave saw only one option in all of this. They would need to face the bard and jongleur, while Orion dealt with the Jester alone. That meant they'd need to fight two bosses that Orion typically dealt with, alongside a vast horde of the same harrowing opponents they'd encountered in the wetlands. Worse yet, they'd need to do things quickly, so as to avoid confronting more foes coming in from behind as reinforcements.

The Plague Jester was only a shaman empowered by a wetland spirit, not a strategist. The fact that she had divided her forces in this manner demonstrated that. Even if she knew she held the advantage, which was dubious, Argrave wasn't certain she'd be able to capitalize on that. This formation of hers was crudely effective and relied on their party proceeding in ignorance.

Yet Argrave was not stupid enough to brute-force things, relying on his Blessing of Supersession. Their opponent had employed their strategy and ostensibly held the advantage, but they had tremendous knowledge of their opponent. Argrave, Galamon, and Anneliese discussed the matter in great detail, all the others standing by as council. They worked to dismantle the coming battle piece-by-piece.

#####

Orion led them all into the palace of the Archduke, his Waxknights supporting him from behind in a compact and orderly formation. Argrave and his party followed, too, just behind the royal knights serving Orion. He was certain all of them were being watched. The enemy was prepared to jump out in ambush once they moved to deal with the plague jester.

Once they reached a certain point, Silvic broke away from the party, weaving into a pavilion overflowing with plants. Her presence disappeared into the well-maintained gardens in seconds, and none of their party betrayed that she had even left by giving a reaction. Just after, they reached the central square of the palace, where the path branched to the east and west, or continued north straight to the gargantuan main palace.

The Waxknights halted. Orion looked back and nodded to Argrave.

“Don’t forget, Orion. No compromises,” he called out, hoping to ensure things would go well.

“I will defeat the enemy,” he agreed, then turned towards the main palace, rushing upwards towards the stairs.

The Waxknights turned east and rushed just as Orion did. Argrave and Galamon moved towards some of the buildings arrayed against the wall, while Anneliese and Durran followed after the Waxknights.

“Be careful,” Anneliese whispered to Argrave before she left.

“Don’t worry. I like living,” Argrave returned. “I’d like you to live more. Be more careful than you want me to be,” he called as she left.

Like that, they parted, her white hair shrouded as she pulled up the hood of her duster to better protect from stray assaults.

Their strategy hinged on two principles—the first was that they would need to defeat the two powerful enemies as quickly as possible so as to avoid being attacked by two opponents far beyond them. The second principle would be to use the chaos caused by undermining the enemy’s strategy to dismantle them.

Argrave felt confident their plan was the best they had. He’d taken everything he could into consideration, especially the personalities of the bard and jongleur. He wasn’t confident in success, though, and being separated from two of his companions made him more nervous than he cared to admit. He channeled Galamon’s steadfastness, moving into one of the buildings of the palace with the elven vampire just beside him.

They walked into a simple, two-story building. At once, the place was filled with rancorous *HOOS*, and the gibbons that had plagued them during their journey came flooding out of a basement and the

second story, swinging atop the rafters towards Galamon and Argrave. The uproar set the whole palace alive just outside.

Argrave conjured a ward with his enchanted ring yet angled it precisely so it stemmed the tide rather than stopping it altogether. With the number of foes lessened for but a moment, Galamon danced past the gibbons' sticks pulsing with liquid light, dispatching one after another. Argrave conjured [Electric Eels] while his companion did his work, searching for an opening.

They were overwhelmed for but a moment, and Galamon shielded Argrave with his body. He took harsh, bone-breaking blows, but delivering a swing of his greatsword in response so powerful it clove through two foes. After, Argrave split his electric eels into a deadly surge, dispatching near a dozen of the gibbons.

This small assault chipped away much of his magic. He still had enough to do what needed to be done.

"Second floor," Argrave directed, breathing steady as Galamon finished off the last gibbon. "They should be fighting the bard by now."

Galamon nodded as he drained blood from one of his flasks, and then the two of them raced up the stairs. One gibbon had waited in ambush, but Galamon slammed his sword's pommel into its face before it could even swing. After it fell, he stomped on its neck, dispatching it.

There was a large bay window on the second floor, overlooking much of the palace grounds. Specifically, Argrave could see where Anneliese, Durran, and the Waxknights confronted a tide of chimera-esque Sentinels, and the animals of the wetlands that had so plagued them during their journey.

After looked around, he spotted a pink flower on one of the well-maintained hedges. "Silvic is in place," he concluded. Argrave took a deep breath to steady himself, then said, "Guess we wait for our grand entrance."

"I'll make sure you're safe," Galamon nodded.

Argrave held his hands out. The B-rank matrix of [Bloodfeud Bow] took form, and a recurve bow of dark blood took shape in his hands. He cast another spell, and his Brumesingers finally came out, stepping up to defend him alongside Galamon.

"Not sure I *can* be safe," Argrave concluded, blood dripping from his other hand as the arrow took shape.