

Jackal 41

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 41: Parting

"Hmm..." Rowe grunted as Argrave set down the quill, leaning over the parchment Argrave had been writing on. Anneliese was on the other side of him, just as interested.

"That's the simple illusion spell, [Muffle]." He pointed at another diagram. "And there is how you translate [Muffle] to an Inscription. Once you will magic into it, the enchantment will be complete. This one will muffle sounds, naturally. Higher-ranked mages with larger magic pools like you mostly resist illusion magic, and plenty of enchantments or spells exist that help prevent people's senses from being twisted."

"Very prudent to use a spell I don't know to teach me enchanting. Quite the amazing teacher you are, aye," the aged elf said sarcastically. Rowe reached out and touched the paper without asking Argrave for permission. "Aye, I feel it. I can put magic into this." He did so, and the inscription shone briefly before fading back into ordinary looking paper.

Argrave picked up a gold coin and dropped it onto the paper. It was near soundless. Rowe watched this with brows furrowed. Argrave ripped the paper, and it was completely soundless. Rowe stopped him. "I get it. Stop wasting paper. You know how much this stuff is worth?"

Anneliese picked up a piece of paper and moved away. Rowe turned to Argrave. "Then that is that. If I had known this matter was so simple, I might not have agreed to this trade."

"Yeah, sure. You would have definitely figured it out without me. Spare me the prideful nonsense," Argrave said dismissively. "Now, I'll get you those illusion spellbooks at Jast. Might be a pain, but I need druidic magic. Best way to scout and watch for enemies in the entire world."

"I'm glad you see that," Rowe said with some measure of pride. He stepped a bit closer, locking gazes with Argrave and speaking quietly. "So, that one is coming with you?" Rowe inquired. Argrave turned his head. Anneliese was writing something.

Argrave looked back to Rowe, nodding. "Yeah. Why?"

"That's what I should be asking you, boy. I have responsibilities here, but I could give you a higher-ranked mage. I'm sure I could talk one of the A-rank mages into coming with you. A devastating force on that continent of Berendar, as far as I'm aware. Invaluable in... whatever it is you're doing to stop He Who Would Judge the Gods," Rowe said, shaking his head quickly.

A loud *poof* came from behind Argrave, and he turned his head to spot a small mushroom cloud of smoke fading into nothingness. Anneliese stepped back from a burning piece of paper.

"That's why I'm bringing her. Latent genius, that one. She has great talent," Argrave said, pointing with his thumb. "Some enchantments are really quite useless, like that one you saw there; one-time uses that only destroy whatever it is they're written on. Others, like warding magic, are immeasurably useful. Trial-and-error, really."

Rowe walked forward slowly and jabbed his walking stick in Anneliese's foot. She let out a little yelp and jumped back. "Damned girl. Be more careful with paper," he reprimanded, picking up the smoldering piece of paper where the blackened remnants of an inscription could be vaguely seen. He cast a glance at Anneliese.

"Besides, I need people of good character at my side." Argrave walked forward, shrugging. "I trust Anneliese and Galamon more than any unknown element that is far stronger than me, magically speaking. Well, probably physically speaking, too."

Rowe cast some fire magic and finished burning the paper, scattering the ashes while wiping his hands off with his fur robes. "Trust. Bah. You've known her for three days, maybe. Keep being so trusting, you'll end up on a spit with the Tenebrous Reaper pissing on your still-warm body."

"What's with you and piss?" Argrave shook his head. "I haven't been wrong since you've met me. Never will be, if I can help it."

"You were wrong once," Rowe said condescendingly. "Told me to 'divine with animal guts,' but that's tripe. There's no validity to it. Might as well toss a coin in the air to decide."

"Tripe," Argrave repeated. "Very nice pun."

"Disgusting." Rowe waved his hand and started to move away.

"Hold a moment," Argrave stopped him. "I might need some help carrying the books and navigating this place. Can you call some people? I'll get a list ready of the spells I need."

"A list?" Rowe frowned. "You don't know the spells themselves, but you can make a list?"

"I know their names and what they do. Otherwise, I'm out of luck." Argrave picked up a quill. "Oh, also, if you could get one of your mages to cast [Cure Disease] on me, I think I caught another cold. Want to squash it before it gets worse."

"Right. One might think you're the patriarch the way you order me about. Savor it; it won't last." Rowe shook his head. "I'll get some of the young ones to do your bidding."

"The books will have to be carried to Katla," Argrave called out as Rowe walked away. "This is the last thing I need before returning to Berendar."

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Argrave walked through the gates of Katla with Anneliese by his side. Ahead, one snow elf lugged a great chest over his shoulder. It was full of books, so it could not be light. The Veidimen before them chose to carry it over his shoulder out of bravado, but now his expression was faded and tired after the walk from the city of Veiden to Katla.

"Are you going to say goodbye to your family?" Argrave questioned his new travelling companion. "Your grandmother excluded, of course."

"They live deeper inland, past Veiden," Anneliese said, amber eyes looking off to the side. "And I do not think they would care overmuch, either."

“Your call. Filial piety isn’t exactly my thing, either,” Argrave said sympathetically.

Anneliese crossed her arms. Argrave had gathered that she had problems with her family. Some were blatant, like her grandmother. Others were only Argrave’s assumptions, and so he would not press the matter.

Near the docks to Katla, Argrave could see a great gathering of snow elves. He craned his head to try and see what was happening, but unlike in Berendar he was not always the tallest in crowds and could not see over the people easily. He walked a bit faster, his cane tapping against the ground until he moved around the person carrying the books.

Once the docks were in sight, he saw battered and wounded Veidimen being escorted off a ship in the far distance. At the center of the crowd, Argrave recognized one of the prominent snow elves in Veiden speaking to Patriarch Dras.

“They were well-prepared, my Patriarch. There was nothing we could do,” the one speaking to Dras said with a shrug. He was a big man, but his demeanor was withdrawn and battered. “They had counters ready for our primary strategy. Even the druid Alcazar died.”

Patriarch Dras was much smaller, but his presence seemed large in comparison as he rebutted, “I thought you said Alcazar used an A-rank spell before he died. If they were ready, that would never have happened.”

Argrave pushed past the crowd, using his cane to push some of the snow elves aside. People looked at him angrily before they recognized him, and then the crowd promptly made way for him. Patriarch Dras turned his head at Argrave’s approach.

“You’re back from the capital.” His white eyes looked past Argrave to the snow elf lugging around the chest. “And it seems you came back with something.”

Did you trick me? Argrave wanted to ask immediately, mind dwelling on Mateth. He had always liked Dras when playing ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ Now, after what Anneliese had told him, much of the goodwill he’d had was gone. Even still, Argrave knew he only had himself to blame. He knew Dras was not entirely forthcoming; he should have prepared for that.

“Was looking for a piece of gold, but found a bag of silver,” Argrave said with a shrug. “Rowe and I worked out a little deal. You can ask him for the details.”

Patriarch Dras’ face remained stoic. “Seems I understand, now, why you were so quick to give up trying to save that city. You had something in mind the whole time.”

Argrave tried to keep his expression passive, but he was undeniably surprised and hopeful. “Meaning?”

Patriarch Dras crossed his arms and walked closer. “I’ll have to collect a more complete report for study, but the bulk of it was a high-ranking spellcaster. What few mages are still alive believe he used S-rank elemental magic. Your city remains in human hands, and I’ll keep my word.”

S-rank magic? That narrows down the scope a lot. Excluding the unaffiliated mages, there’s maybe ten people in the Order of the Gray Owl capable of magic of that tier, and only three that use elemental

magic. If Duke Enrico placed a lot of value on my words, he might've called in a favor... Argrave's head spun, but he could think of nothing.

His breathing threatened to spiral out of control as Dras' words set in. Mateth had not fallen. Argrave had been worried his actions might have prolonged the battle, ultimately worsening the result. Instead... Mateth never fell at all. He clenched his hand tightly against the cane in his hand. The unknowns of what had happened still wore at his conscience. Just because the city had not fallen did not mean there were no damages... or loss of life.

"We left it to fate," Argrave said after pausing for a long time. "Like we agreed, right?"

With this occurrence, Argrave's growing thoughts became confirmed; the world had already shifted far beyond its normal course. Perhaps it was immeasurably naïve to think the world would be constant as it was in a video game. He stuck with what he knew, and though his knowledge had been immeasurably helpful, it wouldn't be enough going forward. Though the variables would remain the same, the equation would be different. Argrave would need to be more flexible and predictive. One failure could cost him his life, or indeed everyone's life. That was what the bronze hand mirror in his pocket told him, symbolically.

"Aye," Dras said with a nod. "I've prepared a ship to send you back, along with an escort."

"Escort?" Argrave probed. "That necessary?"

"You can row the ship yourself," Dras posited. "Might make those wrists a little thicker, but I think you'll just never leave the docks."

"Hey," Argrave protested defensively, cradling his wrists beneath his clothes. "Wrist thickness is about bones, not muscles. Believe me, if I could run more than fifty feet without coughing blood, I'd do so." Seeing Dras' expression turn somewhat contemptuous, he added, "That's a metaphor. I think I can run fifty feet fine. Never tried it."

Dras snorted. "One questions why Erlebnis would choose one so... physically deficient, shall we say, to do his bidding."

"Some people have heart and brain, and those things are a lot more valuable than bulging muscles," Argrave said, waving to Dras. "I don't exactly see you on the frontlines."

The one who had been speaking to Dras before Argrave arrived interrupted, saying, "Show some respect for the Patriarch."

"Chief Relliden. If I found him disrespectful, I would make that known," Dras reprimanded immediately. "Go take care of the remainder of the vanguard that made it back."

Relliden grit his teeth but could only turn away and leave. Argrave turned his head as Anneliese and the luggage-carrier caught up. The man put down the chest, and a cloud of white burst up into the air as snow scattered from its weight.

"You should leave soon. Snow is coming," Dras said. He turned his head to some of the guards nearby. "Frant, get those daggers I had made."

"Yes, Patriarch," the elf responded, running off.

"And..." the Patriarch reached into his armor, and then pulled out a piece of paper. "The draft of the contract. Peruse it for yourself," he offered.

"A draft? I'm sure your best wizard will be furious. Rowe talked about how expensive paper was," Argrave commented, but took the paper. He read through it.

"Seems fine, barring the mention of my ties to *Erlebnis*," Argrave finished with special emphasis. "You crazy? In Berendar, they have an established pantheon. Ancient gods are a no-go. Don't want the world to know how my skin looks when it's being burnt at the stake."

"Hmph," Dras snorted. "Such a backwards people." He took the paper back. "I'll amend it, then. For now..."

Dras turned back to where the elf he'd sent away was just returning. He brought a wooden case and offered it to Dras deferentially. The Patriarch took it and opened it up. Argrave craned his head to see what was inside, but then Dras flipped it around, showing it to Argrave.

"Some of my mages have these. Ebonice daggers. A lot quicker to swing than an axe, but they offer little range. I thought I might give you some. They suit you best, I think. Sell them if you want. Not my business what you do with a gift."

Argrave reached out. "Hoh. These are nice." He took one. It had a dark wooden handle, like mahogany, and felt comfortable in his hand. He examined the blade, and found it looked plenty sharp. Then again, he knew nothing of knives or swords or any weapon.

"While you're gone, I'll ensure the warrior's blood stays roused in my men. When He Who Would Judge the Gods comes... we'll be ready for it. I won't lead my tribe to its death. There is more I need to do after this. As such, we'll make this a crushing victory," Dras said decisively.

"A crushing victory, hmm? Might a bit easier had you not wasted lives on an invasion you planned to cease anyway," Argrave chided.

Dras narrowed his eyes. "You didn't protest. We left it to fate."

"Things were already in motion by the time we spoke, no? You never planned to allow me to protest." Anneliese looked at Argrave warily as he used her conjecture to confront Dras.

Dras pushed his tongue against his cheek as he thought of his response. "I'll admit it," he nodded.

"Bad start for a partnership if one can't be straight with the other from the get-go." Argrave put the knife back in the crate and stepped forward. He was a fair bit taller than Dras. "All those lives lost... and all you achieved is making the people of Berendar hate the snow elves a little more. I'm told since you conquered the tribes, the population has doubled. You undid a lot of that today."

Some of the Veidimen warriors grew tense as Argrave grew closer. Dras stared up, smiling.

"The first attack... a failure." Argrave nodded. "Might want to rethink that dream of yours. Instead of leading your people to glory, you led them to death."

"There is glory in death," Dras said calmly.

"You say that standing on your own soil with unbloodied hands." Argrave looked around. "You've done enough 'good.' Just prepare for Gerechtigheit. Don't get cocky. This thing... is never easy," he cautioned, voice low.

Patriarch Dras thought of his response for a long time. Eventually, the tension faded from his face, and he nodded. "Be well. Give Galamon my love." He held out his hand.

Argrave shook his hand. "I will, to both." He looked back to Anneliese. "Let's be off, then."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 42: Parade of Steel

Nikoletta sat by her father's bedside, staring down at his chest as it rose and fell. His injuries were healed, leaving not even a scar, and his breathing was steady and unlabored. Still, he refused to awaken.

"It's been two days, Master Castro. Can you not awaken him yet?" Nikoletta said, trying to keep her tone polite, but finding it difficult to do so in light of her worry.

The old tower master stood beside her, watching the Duke Enrico. "As I told you, the spell to do so would be very costly. I would not leave myself fully drained of magic with the possibility of a recurring attack. I understand your concern, young lady Monticci, but your father is in no immediate danger."

"Hooh..." Nikoletta sighed, crossing her arms and leaning against her knees. "People in comas get brain damage sometimes, right? What if that happens?"

"What did I say?" Castro asked, then repeated, "Your father is in no immediate danger."

"You're right," she said, lifting her head up. "You're right. You would know best. I don't... even know how to begin to thank you, Tower Master. How did you even find out about the invasion?"

Castro shook his head. "It was happenstance I came here. I was looking for a promising Acolyte."

"Your wyvern... I never intended to..." she muttered. "You sacrificed much for Mateth."

"I helped of my own accord. If one places their hand in troubled waters, should they rage when their hand is bit? Such is the action of a child, not a man as old as me." The tower master smiled. "My Gray Owl... I cannot say I am unbothered by the loss, but when you lend something to someone unversed in how to use it properly, you cannot expect them to be a master. He had been by my side for seventy years. Everything dies, eventually."

"House Monticci's honor demands we repay this debt," Nikoletta answered firmly.

"I know, and I do not doubt your house's honor. Someday, that debt will be collected. I would prefer it to be at a time when neither will suffer further. Should I extort you while your seat of power lies in ruin, your father in a coma? One does not save a life expecting repayment—or at least, not a true savior," Castro dismissed with a shake of his head. "Take your time, rebuild yourself and your city. Despite my sagging skin, I plan to live for a while yet." The Tower Master smiled warmly.

"And besides, that squadron of archers you called for helped greatly when they arrived. I had heard of this 'Ebonice' through rumor alone, but it is indeed a great enemy to spellcasters." He retrieved an

arrow of the black substance and held it to the light. It resembled obsidian somewhat but was much more translucent.

"You are... a very good man, Master Castro," Nikoletta said, a great deal of tension draining from her shoulders.

Nikoletta's mind had grown numb from the constant anxiety the past few days. These events helped her realize how powerless she truly was. With her father incapacitated, she was the regent of the Duchy of Monticci. There was great unrest within the capital Mateth—refugees from the coastal villages swamped the city's gates, causing great disorder outside.

Inside was little different. There were a few snow elves living within the city, and mobs formed, lynching several of them without provocation. It was a terrible thing, but the military force they had was too small to punish the people that carried out those acts. The guilt weighed at Nikoletta's mind daily. She lowered her head into her hands, rubbing her tired eyes.

And atop all of that, Argrave was still absent. He could be dead. He could be a captive, tortured and starving. He could... Nikoletta frowned, recalling something the Tower Master had said.

"Master Castro," she said, straightening her back. "That Acolyte you were looking for... was his name Argrave?"

Castro was taken aback. "Yes, it was. You know of him?"

"Are you serious?" she stood. "But then he..." Her mind fell into disarray.

Did he plan this all along? To have Master Castro come to help at the last minute?

"No... no, that's ridiculous." She shook her head.

"You know this boy, young lady Monticci?" the Tower Master questioned.

"I do," Nikoletta nodded. "He's my cousin. He went to Veiden to stop the invasion."

"What did you say?" Castro asked with a strong hint of disbelief flavoring his tone. "No, that's—"

A great bell rung, and Nikoletta's head snapped to attention. "That's the watchman's bell," she said, the end of her sentence cut off with another ring. She stepped past the chair and quickly moved to the door, stepping outside into the estate's hallway. She rushed to a large bay window that overlooked the coast.

A lone longship cut across the sea. The sight of it brought back terrible memories, and Nikoletta's breathing quickened. She looked out to the ocean beyond, but she saw no other ships. The flag bore atop the ship was white in way of the red flag with the black wheel in the center. She saw a lone figure on the figurehead of the ship.

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"You should get off from there," Anneliese called out, arms crossed as she stood behind Argrave within the ship's railings. She had donned a set of thick black leather robes lined with white fur more suitable for travel. Her long hair was bound in a half-crown braid. It flowed down all the way to her knees, swaying lightly in the wind.

Argrave turned his head back from his spot standing atop the figurehead of the ship. He, too, wore a set of black leather robes, though with a cloak of white fur over his shoulders in way of lining. "Please. I saw you riding in this same spot when you sailed to Barden. This was on the eve of battle, no less." He placed one hand on his hips in defiance. Three daggers with black blades dangled on his leg. "Always wanted to do this, anyway. Make-believe I'm some kind of Jarl."

A wave clashed into the ship and Argrave jerked about, one foot slipping off the side. He barely managed to regain his balance, and then he made a speedy retreat back onto the safety of the boat's railings. Anneliese stared at him. She didn't smile much, but he had been around her long enough to recognize amusement in her eyes.

"Alright, so maybe it isn't as dreamy as I thought it might be." Argrave sat against one of the railings, peering out to the coastline ahead. "At least I don't get seasick. Always wondered if I would, but never really had the chance to test it."

"You're in good spirits. Is it because you're heading home?" She sat on a chest tied to the ship's deck by some ropes.

"Home? I'm but a vagrant. I sold my home, became a nomad." Argrave pointed at the chest Anneliese sat atop of. "I'm in good spirits because of those books in there. Good harvest, all things considered. Plus these Ebonice daggers..." Argrave tapped the three on his leg. "Dras is generous."

"No. I think that you're happy because Mateth did not fall. It went against your expectations."

Argrave almost cracked at that moment. Anneliese was half-right. He was hopeful. He hoped that he would not return to see the people he'd become intimately acquainted with over the past months dead. The other half was a deep anxiety that the opposite might be true.

Argrave stared at Anneliese, clicking his tongue. "Alright, so maybe I am. It's a double-edged sword, though. Mateth is still standing, but it'll be harder for Veiden to lend me any aid in my future plans."

"I'm still curious what you intend to do, exactly. You want to prepare the world for Gerechtigheit, but how?" She gazed at him, amber eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"I don't like repeating myself especially, so we'll wait for Galamon," Argrave shrugged.

"You still intend to bring him along?"

"Why wouldn't I? Good fighter, quiet, loyal to a fault, although a bit bloodthirsty, I will admit." Argrave grabbed at his neck. He spotted a great number of knights moving across the coast towards their boat on foot. "Look at that," Argrave said. "Another welcoming party for my landing. I might get used to this."

He held his hand out to form a spell matrix and he felt his vision spin. Soon enough, he was looking down at his body, immobile. Argrave was using druidic magic. He had bound a pigeon to himself and left it resting on the ship's sail. He commanded the pigeon he was seeing through to move and watched as it flew out across the ocean towards the host of knights. In the center of the knights, Nikoletta rode a horse. His brain shook at that moment, relieved from one great burden. He brought the bird back to the ship.

"Phew," Argrave said as his vision spun once more. "Druidic magic will take some getting used to."

The oars rushed back and forth, pushing them ever closer towards the beach. Eventually, when the ship grew close enough, the ship turned on its side, and a great deal of Veidimen pushed out a plank that landed on the beach. They stayed aboard, but Argrave and Anneliese stood. One of the Veidimen cut the rope tying the chest down, and then hauled it, following close behind them.

Argrave stepped onto the beach, holding his arms out. "Feel that? Wind, untainted by snow or dread cold. A stiff autumn breeze is paradise compared to that winter wonderland."

Ahead, the veritable parade of steel-armored knights approached them. One person broke free of the crowd and rushed forward, spurring a horse onward. Argrave suppressed a small little grin as he saw Nikoletta's obsidian-color hair waving about in the wind. Some knights tried to stop her, but none dared restrain the young lady Monticci by force.

Argrave walked forward in long strides. Nikoletta grew nearer, and her caution overwrote whatever it was that spurred her to move towards him. She slowed the horse and then dismounted, holding its reins as she stared.

"Nikoletta, cousin. Nice to see you in one piece," Argrave said, offering a handshake.

Nikoletta stared at him with her dark pink eyes, breathing heavily without saying a word. Then, she rushed forward and veritably tackled Argrave, hands wrapped around his back. Argrave staggered a little but managed to keep his footing. His hands hovered awkwardly above her head, which was buried below his chest.

"What are you—we're hugging? Well, I certainly didn't..." Argrave trailed off. He heard some sobbing noises, muffled beneath his clothes.

"You're crying? Why are you crying?" Argrave turned his head to Anneliese in panic. "Why is she crying?" Anneliese only watched, offering no answer.

Nikoletta headbutted him in the chest lightly. "Shut up, you bastard."

Argrave frowned and hesitantly returned the embrace. He had never been good at hugs, but it was doubly awkward considering the height difference. He didn't want to get his clothes soaked in tears and snot, but he didn't wish to push her away, either.

"It's been... so damned hard," Nikoletta said. "Why don't you tell anyone what you're doing? Why do you go off on your own like that? You just leave me here with a pit in my stomach."

Argrave didn't know what to say for a time. After a while, he opened his mouth and slowly said, "I mean... you've still got my clothes in that guest bedroom. Didn't I say you could take them out and stare at them when you miss me?"

She started shaking again, and Argrave was worried he had made things worse. It took him a few seconds, but he recognized that she was laughing. She pushed away, looking up at him.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me," she began, wiping her face off. "The past few days... they've been unimaginably stressful. It all just exploded on you." She took a deep breath, regaining her composure. "I thought I might never see you again. Spent the whole time steeling myself for that. Maybe they'd find your corpse on a beach. Maybe you'd just never be heard from again."

I thought the same about you, Argrave thought, but refrained from saying it.

“Pfft.” Argrave scoffed. “Me? Dead? Impossible. No rest for the wicked. That includes the long sleep.” He surveyed his clothes where she’d wept, cleaning them off with water magic briefly. “It appears Mateth didn’t fall, despite my fears. What happened?”

“The Tower Master Castro came atop a wyvern. With his help, we repelled the invaders, but the docks are... well, gone. My father... is in a coma, at least for another couple days.” She took a deep breath, as though it was difficult to say aloud. “Ultimately... we barely hung on. But that isn’t important. What in the gods name did you do? You’re returning escorted,” she eyed Anneliese warily.

“The Veidimen won’t trouble Berendar any longer, at least for another decade.” Argrave retrieved a rolled-up paper from his pocket. “Here. A contract. Peace treaty, I guess, but they called it a contract.”

Nikoletta stared in mute shock, but eventually took the paper from his hand. Argrave’s eyes stayed locked on the steadily approaching knights, marching on foot. He turned his head back to the longship. All those that had been rowing the longship stood at the edge, shields arrayed in a perfect line as they watched the approaching army. It was quite a terrifying sight.

“It’s over?” Nikoletta finally spoke. “Just like that. They’re free to just come, ruin thousands of lives, and then leave as though nothing ever happened.” Her eyes went to Anneliese, and the snow elf kept her amber eyes steady, returning the gaze.

Argrave’s expression grew somber. “I can’t change what’s already happened. I did... the best I could.”

The words felt hollow. He watched Nikoletta. He didn’t need to be an empath to tell there was grief etched on her face—hardships, sorrows. Argrave had been fully prepared to let Veiden seize Mateth. If not for chance, the person before him might be dead. All he had demonstrated was two percent indecision, ninety-eight percent ineptitude. *Well, perhaps indecision is ineptitude*, Argrave reasoned.

“You’re right. I can’t complain to you,” Nikoletta carried on, unaware of Argrave’s thoughts. “I see your name, I see some strange word, ‘Gerechtigkeit,’ and He Who Would Judge the Gods. I want you to explain to me what happened. Explain to me what’s *happening*,” she said, rephrasing the tense. “I don’t want to be left in the dark anymore.”

“Sure,” Argrave agreed. “Long story, though. Might be tiresome.” He looked back at the crowd.

“Where’s Mina? I don’t see her around. Nothing... happened, did it?” He asked in concern.

“Mina?” Nikoletta’s face went red and she looked to the ground. “She... well, she... we haven’t spoken in a while after she...”

“Hoh?” Argrave asked eagerly, his joy at learning she was fine seeping into his speech. “Did she do something? Get a weight off her chest to her best friend? Confess something?”

Nikoletta’s head shot up to lock gazes with Argrave. She stepped closer, speaking quieter despite their distance from the host of knights ahead. “You knew about... what she...?”

Argrave smiled. “Of course I knew. I gave her the push.”

Her eyes widened at his words. "Why would you do such a thing? It's against the teachings of the gods," she whispered insistently. "I've heard rumors of such things in aristocratic circles. Degenerates, deviants, they call these couples. People are dragged from their homes and stoned for this."

Nikoletta's knights came to stop a fair distance away, keeping a wary eye on the Veidimen aboard the boat. Argrave conjured a ward to block their conversation.

"I imagine only the peasants face serious repercussions for such relationships. Such is the nature of a landed elite," Argrave commented. "I've told no other soul. Even if people find out, you don't genuinely think your father would let you be hurt for this, I hope. You're his only child."

"You assume much about me to encourage my friend in this manner," she said angrily, voice unrestrained now that their conversation was blocked by magic.

"You were prepared to leave home because of your father's insistence to arrange a marriage for you," Argrave said poignantly. "Heard about plenty of attempts by handsome nobles to court you in the Order of the Gray Owl—all of them for naught. I see the way you look at Mina. Above all, you don't even blink at this handsome face of mine. Even skinny, I'm quite a looker. Right, Anneliese?"

Argrave turned his head. Anneliese opened her mouth, thinking, and then shut it. Argrave smiled and turned back to Nikoletta. "See? She agrees."

Nikoletta's face was tight, but she did not rush to deny his words. "Why would you want such a thing to happen?" she struck at the heart of the matter. "Doesn't benefit you. Is it because you have that inclination...?"

"If by 'that inclination,' you mean being attracted to women, then yes," Argrave said with a snort, then considered her question further. In truth, the pairing had been done at whim when he was in a good mood. Granted, it was what he always chose in-game, particularly because their ending was happiest. When they had been game characters, he had some attachment to them as just that. Now, though...

Argrave spoke much slower than usual, saying the answer only as he came to it. "Is it so strange to seek happiness for two friends? It'll be difficult, doubtless. I can't say people will accept it easily if at all, but I believe it's worth pursuing."

"Friends, is it?" Nikoletta considered that. "I have no idea what to think. I've been trying to avoid thinking about what she said. On the eve of a civil war, my father in a coma... now is not the best time to be lost in matters like these."

"Your father is in a coma?" Argrave pressed.

"He'll be fine, Master Castro assures me. My father will be awoken when the tower master's magic recovers sufficiently." Nikoletta let out a light sigh. "Such a ridiculous situation... my father had you dead-set as my marriage partner, and now you try and pair me with a woman."

"What? Really?" Argrave asked immediately. When Nikoletta nodded in confirmation, Argrave started laughing. "I'll have to refuse. I don't fancy children with oversized chins and the mental capacity of dogs." Argrave scratched his chin. "Though... maybe this isn't so bad. I can think of a way to solve both of these matters of the heart."

“There is no ‘matter of the heart,’ just what you’ve forced to happen,” Nikoletta insisted.

“Sure, sure.” Argrave nodded, agreeing sarcastically. “You said yourself you don’t know what to think—maybe I can give you some time to do so. First, let’s walk and talk of what you asked me earlier—about Gerechtigkeits.” Argrave snapped and pointed ahead. “Oh, and have the pride parade ahead carry my luggage. They’re heavy books, you see, and I’m far too weakened from the long journey.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 43: High Roller

“...and after the tomb guardians shambled in on Barden, one of their arrows hit the palisades. I was knocked unconscious by the wood splinters,” Argrave explained. “Anneliese here can tell you what happened afterwards. She carried me on her back and swam across the great blue ocean. She’s dedicated like that,” he finished, tapping the snow elf’s elbow as they walked through the gates of the Monticci estate.

Ahead, two knights carried a chest up through the estate’s front door. Anneliese did not seem to hear the exaggeration as she was observing everything around her with a great deal of interest. Though she feigned obliviousness to the hateful glances cast her way and the disparaging terms muttered in her direction, Argrave could tell they reached her and bothered her.

“You still haven’t mentioned what ‘Gerechtigkeits’ is,” Nikoletta said, coming to a stop. “I don’t understand. You go alone to the heart of an invasion, and you manage to just talk them into setting aside arms? It’s ridiculous. These things don’t just happen,” she shook her head, spreading her arms wide in disbelief at the situation.

“Hold on.” Argrave held out his hand and conjured a D-rank ward spell around them. “Soundproofing.”

“So, talk.” Nikoletta pointed, then crossed her arms. “How did you do what you did?”

“Well, much like how Anneliese put aside the battle we were having to defeat the metal men, Patriarch Dras put aside the invasion for another matter.” Argrave rested his hand atop the Ebonice daggers on his waist.

“Elaborate,” Nikoletta demanded.

Argrave scratched his chin. “Not sure you’d believe me.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she dismissed. “I’m tired of you leaving me in the dark, damn it.”

Argrave chuckled. “Never heard you curse. Guess I’m in the deep end now.” He scratched the back of his head. “Gerechtigkeits is a calamity. An ancient one, old as no one can remember. Shows up every millennium and again to try and put an end to the world.” Argrave shrugged and shook his head. “The Kingdom of Vasquer is too young to have any records of it. It’s... what, year 872 since its founding?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, more confused than anything.

“I just told you. A god is going to descend to this mortal plane hellbent on destruction. Wouldn’t call him malicious—it’s just his instincts. Malicious or not, I much prefer living, and no one else I can see is stepping up.”

Nikoletta shook her head, mouth agape in bewilderment.

"She might take you seriously if you acted serious," Anneliese recommended.

"That's true," Argrave nodded. "But—"

Nikoletta held her hand out to stop them from talking further. "What exactly is going to happen? When is this going to happen?"

"What is it? I think the world 'calamity' should make things clear enough. A disaster, a..." Argrave waved his hand, searching for synonyms, "An apocalypse, though it's a living thing rather than a force of nature. If you can call a god 'alive,' that is. As for when this is going down... considering that now is near the end of autumn... a few years. I could probably give an exact date, but frankly I haven't looked at a calendar in many months."

"You're serious about this?" Nikoletta sought to confirm. "This isn't some tactic you used to convince the snow elves?"

"No," Argrave shook his head. "Everything I've done has been towards this end. The big bad evil takes precedence over mortal squabbles in my eye. The whole world will just stop: no more life, big empty wasteland, everyone dead... as far as I understand it, at least. There aren't any tales of what happens *after* Gerechtigkei, unfortunately, so I can't confirm this."

Anneliese raised a hand to get attention. "A millennia ago, my people took part in a great war on another continent outside of Berendar. The devastation wreaked is spoken of in many stories. Perhaps the only reason the people of Berendar do not know is because they were not affected. But now, He Who Would Judge the Gods is to appear on this continent," Anneliese said, pointing to the ground.

Nikoletta's face warped between emotions rapidly, and Argrave waited patiently. Eventually, she asked the question he had been waiting for. "How do you know this?"

"It's like I told you back in the Tower of the Gray Owl. Believe me or not, it doesn't matter. In time, the truth will be made clear for everyone. Dim echoes of Gerechtigkei are already deeply rooted in this continent. This civil war wasn't fully man-made. The plague brewing in the northeast is unnatural, too. In time, genuine monsters will appear."

Nikoletta absorbed the information. "Why don't you want to say how you know this?"

"That's for me to know," Argrave dismissed.

"You don't trust me," she accused.

"If people know the truth, I could be in danger." Argrave shrugged. "I'll take no chances. I'd trust you with my life, but what I have to do is too important to muck up with my own personal biases."

Anneliese crossed her arms, watching passively. Nikoletta stared at him, her dark pink eyes shaking slightly. Eventually, she shook her head. "I don't get it. I don't get it at all. I don't get you. From the Order until now, I've never understood what you're aiming for. You speak nonsense half the time."

"I'm doing my duty," Argrave said simply, voice low. "Until it's done, I have no other aim." Anneliese studied his face with her amber eyes, and then turned away, looking out into the courtyard with arms crossed.

"What should I do, then?" Nikoletta asked him, some resignation on her tone.

"Stay neutral in the civil war. Rebuild your forces. Build your strength. And, when the time comes, help," Argrave shrugged as though it was simple.

"Alright." Nikoletta nodded. "That's more or less what was going to happen anyway, if I know my father. I'll probably keep that mercenary, Melanie, contracted for a longer period."

"Melanie?" Argrave frowned. "Red hair, chains, big sword?"

"Yes," Nikoletta confirmed. "You know her?"

Argrave pursed his lips. *One of the main characters is here. Huh.* He slowly nodded. "Yeah, I know her. She's done some work for the royal family. Don't give her too much responsibility. She works for the highest bidder—no morals. She'll kill you if anyone gives her a bigger pay."

"Okay," she nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Alright. Talk over."

Argrave moved to dispel the magic, but Nikoletta grabbed his wrist. "Wait. You spoke of how to deal with this matter of my father's intent to... marry us."

Argrave pulled his wrist free. "Well, you'd have to trust me a good deal. After the talk we had, that might not be possible."

She stared for a second, and then said, "Tell me first."

Argrave rubbed his hands together. "Way I see it, your father can send thirty proposals my way. As long as I never answer or even receive them, he'll be left waiting. I plan on leaving soon—more things to settle before the end times, you see. Once Castro helps Duke Enrico out of his coma, you tell him that I was amenable to a betrothal. Set his heart on this match, only for me to leave him in a lurch for a long while."

"If you leave him waiting too long, he might just change his mind," Nikoletta argued.

"You ever consider dear old dad might be fostering some ambitions for the throne? He'll persist for a while." Argrave posited.

Nikoletta was taken aback by that, and she stared at the ground. "Even still, it's not a permanent solution."

"You're smart... probably. You can find one in the time I give you. What, you want me to do everything for you?" Argrave spread his arms out and shrugged. "Of course, you have to trust I won't answer any of his proposals. Might be you could find someone else for the task, of course."

Nikoletta's gaze flitted between the ground and his face. Eventually, she held out her hand. "If there's one thing I trust, it's that you don't wish to marry me." She cast a brief glance at Anneliese.

"That sounds like depressing self-deprecation, but you're right," Argrave took her hand and shook it.

#####

Argrave, Anneliese, and Nikoletta walked down the hall of the Monticci estate. Ahead, the two knights opened the door to Argrave's old guest bedroom, entering sideways. Argrave followed close behind. He failed to duck, though, and slammed his head against the doorframe.

"For the love of..." Argrave trailed off. Nikoletta hid a laugh behind her hand. "Don't laugh," he demanded, pointing at her. "I got used to the big doorframes at Veiden. Not my fault this estate was made for midgets."

"You're seven feet tall. You're the abnormal one," she rebutted.

"I prefer the term 'special,'" Argrave said, ducking and entering the room he'd stayed at briefly in Mateth. Anneliese and Nikoletta followed.

"Should I prepare your friend Anneliese a room, or do you...?" Nikoletta asked.

"Won't be staying long enough to sleep," Argrave answered. "Have to get Galamon, and then do some other things..."

The two knights set down Argrave's chest of books beside the already-formidable stack he'd collected in his guest room at House Monticci's estate. They cast a glance at Anneliese as they left and shut the door behind them with a slam.

"Alright. Where's my money?" Argrave got to business.

Nikoletta was taken aback. "From the auction of Foamspire?"

"No, you think I stopped this invasion for free?" Argrave said sarcastically. "I'm kidding. Yes, of course from the auction."

"I have it," she nodded. "The bidder paid in rose gold magic coins: 214 of them. We probably could have got a lot more if we'd gone through different channels, but... no matter. I stored them in the vault here at the estate."

"Around 430,000 gold? Not bad. Damned fortune compared to what I usually have so early in the... well, never mind." Argrave nodded. "You can keep fifty of those. Mateth will need a lot of money to repair, and with your docks gone, commerce won't exactly be easy."

Argrave had planned this for some time. It felt a small drop in the bucket of guilt weighing him down, but it was a start. Mateth had survived by chance. He alone had been inadequate. His presence had changed events, but it had not been deliberate or measured. That would need to change.

Nikoletta was startled. She spoke slowly and delicately, surprise marking her face. "Argrave, that's... a fair bit of money."

Argrave shrugged casually, walking and sitting down on his bed. "Consider it a service fee... and an investment. Never could have sold a thing on the Baretta Troupe Auction without your help."

“Even still... I can’t take such a generous sum without offering anything in return. We have a well-enchanted lockbox in the vault. I’ll store the coins in there, give it to you.”

“I’m not the type to refuse free stuff,” Argrave nodded, falling back onto his bed. “Go ahead.”

Nikoletta walked towards the door. “I will, then. Thank you for your help with this situation regarding my father.”

“Sure, sure,” Argrave called out between a yawn as he relaxed on the bed. “Not like I’m doing much. You’re the one that has to do the lying. I’m just offering my name.”

Nikoletta stayed silent for a few seconds, shaking her head. “Whatever.” She stepped to the door, opening it. “Another thing. The Tower Master Castro is coming here. He came here looking for you, after all.”

“What?!” Argrave sat up quickly. “You’re playing with me.”

“He’ll be by shortly. I have to go. Ducal matters,” she explained, shutting the door before Argrave could say anything more.

“You could’ve said something earlier!” He shouted to little effect. Argrave sat, mouth agape as he stared at the door. His brows furrowed and he brought a hand to his mouth, expression pensive. “Damn. She boomed me.”

“It seems you are an oddity even among your own people.” Anneliese stepped closer. “Your friend seems nice... and she trusts you. Why didn’t you tell her about Erlebnis?”

“Don’t think that would go over well,” Argrave cautioned. “Barring my association with a heretical god... there’s no need to say more than necessary. Let Nikoletta stay safe and happy, devoting her time towards rebuilding Mateth. Once Gerechtigkeits starts making his move, I can start bringing people over to my side. Until then, this is my problem. Well, our problem,” Argrave conceded.

Anneliese mulled over his words. “You do much for your friends,” she finally said.

“Yeah, I’m a saint, I know.” Argrave nodded sarcastically, and then pointed. “Listen. A big fish is about to swim by. He’s got his eye on me—though why I still don’t know. That said, I’m not one to pass up an opportunity. If a grifter sees a high roller, he’s got to peddle his wares.”

“A grifter?” Anneliese raised her brow.

Argrave stood, moving to the pile of books and sorting through them. “If you’re good at improv, feel free to contribute. Some of these books are pretty useless to me... [Germinate], [Expand Roots], [Feel Needs]... of course, Castro needs to think they’re the best druidic spells.”

“What makes one spell better than another?”

“Uhh... I don’t know, mayb—”

A knock interrupted Argrave’s response, and he froze for a second. He glanced at the mirror in the room, fixing his appearance quickly. With a final readjustment of the white fur coat over his shoulders, he

moved to the door and pulled it open. There, a short old man waited. He looked perhaps sixty. It was difficult to imagine he was near two hundred.

"Ohoh," Castro said. "You must be Argrave of Vasquer. A pleasure to meet you. You are quite the tall one," he commented. "This old man may hurt his neck looking so high up."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 44: Used Spellbook Salesman

"Ohoh," Castro said. "You must be Argrave of Vasquer. A pleasure to meet you. You are quite the tall one," he commented. "This old man may hurt his neck looking so high up."

Tower Master Castro stood waiting in front of Argrave's door patiently. He was like a much more compact version of Rowe the Righteous in that both were old, bald men. Evidently that compaction had removed the terrible attitude, for Rowe would never smile so warmly.

"Just Argrave, no Vasquer," Argrave corrected. "And you're Castro, Master of the Order of the Gray Owl," Argrave continued quickly. "Nikoletta informed me you were looking for me. Beyond that, I don't know much. Although I have an inkling, I'm not quite sure. Why don't you come in? I have no refreshments on hand, but you can at least sit." Argrave stood aside and gestured to the table in the corner of the room.

Castro nodded. "Please and thank you." He entered the room, noticing Anneliese. "Hello, young lady. Who might you be?"

"This is Anneliese, a friend of mine, a spellcaster from Veiden, and my travelling companion," Argrave introduced her, walking to the table and pulling the chair back for the Tower Master. He offered the other chair to Anneliese, and then sat down himself in the third. Castro was watching his every move. Argrave could practically hear the gears turning in the man's head as they put an image of his personality together.

"You have quite the large magic pool. I see you're diligent with your training."

Argrave was uneasy at the man's comment. A-rank mages were more than mere humans—Castro could perceive magic by sight alone. "Indeed I am," confirmed Argrave as he adjusted in the chair. "So," Argrave began, putting his hands on the table and entwining them. "I'm very curious why a bigshot like yourself has come to visit little old me. I have an idea, but at the risk of appearing foolish should I be wrong, I'll wait to hear your answer."

"You are very business-like, I see," answered Castro, smiling. "I did not have time to ask her much, but Nikoletta seemed fond of you, and from what I have seen in her time as regent of the Dukedom, she is a person of good character."

Argrave glanced at Anneliese, but her expression was as passive as ever. "Your point being?"

"Nothing, forgive me. Old men tend to ramble. Perhaps it's because they like the sound of their own voice," Castro dismissed, letting out a wheezing chuckle.

Though Argrave considered mentioning Castro's true age, he kept quiet, not wishing to unnerve the man.

"To the point, then." Castro leaned in slightly. "Many of the more research-oriented High Wizards of the Order have taken a great deal of interest in the thesis you submitted. If it were to move from theory to practice, what you call 'Blood Infusion' has the potential to change the landscape of *all* magic."

"I know," Argrave nodded. "I left the thesis unfinished for that reason," he said. Argrave could veritably smell the bait he'd hooked to his fishing line. It would be more than enough for this big fish, he hoped.

Castro stared at Argrave's face for a moment, his expression slowly shifting. "You mean to say that you left out the completed theory?"

"Indeed." Argrave nodded, taking his hands off the table and leaning back into the chair with arms crossed.

"Why? The mages at the Order are already discussing bestowing a grand reward upon you, and that figure might be larger."

"I should work for nothing? Let others feast on the fruit of my labor?" Argrave held his arms wide. "It's complete, but as a C-rank mage, I can't yet prove it. If I give it all to them, another will find what I toiled to get. Perhaps it's selfish, but I want all of the credit."

The old man Castro nodded, considering Argrave's words. "It is not unusual for a spellcaster to take pride and be possessive of their own work. But the Order of the Gray Owl is supposed to be beyond that, young man." He tapped his finger on the table. "And further, by saying that it's impossible as a C-rank mage, you've greatly narrowed the direction of further research," Castro disclosed provocatively.

Argrave grinned. "I only mentioned it because I have a solid grasp of your character. One hundred and twenty years ago, it was you that instituted measures to reduce the political influence of the Order of the Gray Owl, trying to turn it into a politically neutral entity. You're an honorable, just man. Your defense of Mateth proves as much."

The Castro that Argrave knew was just a tired old man who wanted to study magic and be happy. Indeed, if a player rose high enough in the Order, Castro would simply step down as Tower Master, leaving it to the player. Such a man would not steal and develop research from a young wizard.

"I'm flattered that you think so highly of me," the Tower Master said, though it had a casualness that betrayed he was not truly affected by the praise. He'd probably seen many sycophants in his day.

"I am, however, quite mindful of the many privileges offered to me as a member of the Order of the Gray Owl," Argrave proceeded tactfully. "Once I am capable of proving what I preach, I'll naturally turn in a more completed version of my theory. If I die before then, you can do as you please with it."

"That is good," Castro said with a nod and a smile.

Argrave carried on quickly. "But that isn't all, naturally. Do you know about druidic magic, Tower Master?"

"The magic of the snow elves?" Castro half-asked, half-stated.

"You know of it," Argrave pointed. "Good." Argrave stood, moving to the chest of books and picking up some of the ones that he'd set aside that were useless. He took one and walked back to the table, placing it before Castro.

"The books with me are all druidic magic," Argrave said grandly. "Not half-torn manuscripts or spells wrested from tortured snow elves. Fully documented druidic magic."

Castro perked up at that, eyebrows raised in surprise. "How did you manage that?"

"Argrave is a valuable friend of the Veidimen," Anneliese interjected, finally breaking her silence. Argrave smiled as he caught on to what she was doing. "Our people were willing to offer these books in trade."

By naming him a friend to the Veidimen, Argrave's value would be further amplified in the eyes of the Tower Master. Having importance and prestige in the Order would enable mobility and leeway in future encounters.

"In return, I promised to deliver some illusion spellbooks by boat at Jast. A small price to pay for bringing a new field of magic to the order, by my estimation," Argrave tacked on to Anneliese's words without missing a beat. "Can that be arranged, Master Castro?"

Argrave had been planning to get the illusion books through other means, but this was perfect for his needs.

Castro straightened his back, thinking. "The snow elves were just invading. Now they wish to trade?"

"Their leader and I had some words," Argrave said. "Whole thing... big misunderstanding. This trade is a peace offering of sorts-- an exchange of knowledge," Argrave said while nodding remorsefully. "So? Can I expect those books at Jast?"

"Em..." Castro paused, being placed on the spot so abruptly. "I suppose, if those books are genuine, it is indeed a worthy trade."

Argrave put his finger on the book at the table and sat back down. "Peruse the book, determine its value for yourself."

Castro picked up the book. Argrave carried on as the Tower Master examined the tome. "Druidic magic is like necromancy in that it involves the soul but differs in the approach taken. Dead souls cannot be touched; instead, the druid tries to bond and form a connection with the natural beings in the world. Some spells form a link between the caster and the animal that persists for years. Other spells might temporarily connect with a less animate soul—plant life, for instance. A very fascinating and useful school of magic, in my opinion."

"I see," Castro half-answered, distracted reading the spellbook. "Intriguing."

"For now, I'll give you all the ones that I've mastered," Argrave lied. He intended to give away only the useless ones. Once he mastered the ones he needed, he would give them all up. "Eventually, I'll bring them all to the order."

"This is... a tremendous find, young man." Castro closed the book and looked at Argrave. "This meeting was far beyond my expectations. Each of these books are near priceless to the Order."

Argrave smiled. *He's talking me up like a nouveau riche hooked on some shabby art*, he dialogued internally. *Now's the time to reel in the line.*

"All I ask is that, when I become a B-rank wizard, the process for becoming a High Wizard is expedited, and further, I hope you can give me permission to take any spellbooks from the Tower's library."

Castro lowered his head, a faint expression of amusement on his face. "When you become a B-rank wizard? Few reach that milestone."

"Very few people are me. Only one, in fact," Argrave declared confidently.

The Tower Master looked at the book on the table, lost in thought. Eventually, he turned his eyes to Argrave. "Those things are something I can do." He held out a hand. "I'll send word to the libraries that you're to be given rights to take whichever books you so please. I'll prepare those spellbooks at Jast, though I suspect you'll need to coordinate the delivery to these... Veidimen," he finished respectfully.

Argrave bit his lip to stop himself from smiling. He'd earned a card that few could ever hold-- free access to all magical resources of the Order. Money was no obstacle after Foamspire, but some things could not be obtained with money. Order spellbooks were one such thing.

"Another thing. My friend here." he pointed to Anneliese, not yet shaking Castro's hand. "I'd like to make her a Wizard of the Order. She's already C-rank in multiple schools, and she's been there longer than I have."

Anneliese was surprised, but she reined in her shock quickly. The Tower Master smiled a little.

"Interesting. She would be the first snow elf in our Order, though not the first elf." Castro scratched the top of his head. "I would agree, but it isn't something I alone can decide. A special induction at the rank of Wizard—not common. I will bring it to my council. I can promise to be a proponent, but nothing more." Castro smiled. "Anything else I can do for you, or can we finally shake hands?" He held out his hand once more.

Argrave shook his hand quickly. "A wonderful meeting, Master Castro."

#####

Castro walked away from Argrave's room with a faint smile about his face. He had considered this trip to be a disaster before that meeting. That wyvern had been a gift from the southern tribes of the desert beyond the Margrave's territory, and it had died. Few others in Vasquer had such a thing, and the majority were nobility or royalty. Fortunately, the purpose of his trip greatly surprised him.

Impressive that he could stop the Veidimen from invading. Perhaps he was doing the bidding of the royal family... but being given a task and doing it right still requires considerable competence. He looked down at the book in his arms. *Still... absolutely worthless as a disciple. He'll wring me like a towel until he's dead or I am. Far too shameless, that one.*

Castro shook his head. In the many years of his life, he had learned that some people simply cannot tolerate guidance. Argrave was, from his insights, one such person. The royal bastard has his own plans for everything, and while he'd take what comes with an open hand, he'd never rely on anyone except himself.

His eyes are haunted. Far too much sorrow for a boy his age. Perhaps it's the family. Castro mused, slowing his walk. *Way I see it, he'll work himself to greatness or death. All depends on the people standing by his side, I suppose. It's best he distances himself from Vasquer.*

Castro rubbed his eyes. *Hah. Me, thinking about politics. This week has been far too exciting.*

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 45: Farewells

Argrave scattered bread across the streets, watching as the pigeons dropped down and chewed on it without care for the abundance of people walking about. He looked one in the eye, and then his hand shone with a spell matrix. Argrave felt a bizarre sensation in his chest that felt as though some carbonated liquid was bubbling about near his heart.

After the spell finished, the bird flew up and joined a flock of six unprompted. They acted just as ordinary birds, but Argrave felt there was a certain connection between the six of them distinctly separate from the rest of the animals. They moved together, acted together, and never strayed too far from Argrave's sight.

"You should stop here," Anneliese said. "Bonding with too many creatures can change your behavior, especially if they're all of the same species."

Argrave stood. "Six birds. It should be fine as a temporary druidic partner. Mostly for scouting, anyway."

"I'm curious why you use the C-rank spell [Pack Leader] instead of a more sophisticated, direct method of controlling the animals for detailed observation," Anneliese asked. "Knowing exact details about an enemy is important."

Argrave gestured, and then continued to walk down the street. "Gives me less control, sure, but with two mages, one of us can act as a net. [Pack Leader] allows one to control many of one species, but I get only a general sense of what each is feeling. If they feel something, or spot something dangerous, you can use one of the aforementioned more precise druidic spells to get a detailed examination..." Argrave trailed off, taking a look at Anneliese.

Anneliese had her arms crossed, and her gaze was locked on something else. Argrave followed her gaze, lifting his head up. There was a body hanging from a rope. It had been cast from a window and tied to something inside. It took a few seconds for Argrave to realize it was a Veidimen. Once he realized that, Argrave became very aware that they were being stared at.

"You alright?" Argrave asked.

"I'm fine. My people attacked theirs. Perhaps I should have expected this," she returned quickly. "Keep going."

Argrave clicked his tongue, but eventually said, "When we make it to Jast, I know a shop that sells some enchanted iron circlets. They muddle the features, make them less distinct for the average passersby. It's an illusion enchantment. For now, maybe we should get going... or buy a hood."

Anneliese lifted her head, amber eyes locking with his gaze as he waited for her answer. Eventually, she touched her hair. "The long hair would make a hood difficult. I will manage for now. But thank you."

"Alright," Argrave said, keeping his gaze steady. "We're done here, any—"

"Argrave," a guttural, spine-chilling voice called out.

Argrave turned to the source of the voice. Galamon stood there, his black, fur-coated armor covered in a large cloak. There was a bit of his armor missing at the torso from the attack he'd suffered outside Barden.

"Holy hell," Argrave exclaimed, walking forward without caution. "I'd never forget that growl. Was wondering when you'd turn up."

Galamon stayed silent, his white eyes staring at the ground. He refused to meet Argrave's gaze.

"We were just wrapping up. Let's go back to that abandoned house. We have some things to discuss," Argrave stepped forward, touching Galamon's shoulder. "Saved me a lot of trouble. Thought I'd have to go search Barden for you."

#####

"What is this? Why the kowtow?"

Galamon had his face and hands on the floor while kneeling. "What I've done cannot be forgiven. I broke a contract. I harmed the other party."

Argrave huffed, and then sat down at the chair in the abandoned house, rubbing his forehead. Anneliese walked into the house, brow furrowed after seeing this scene. She shut the door slowly, her eyes jumping from person to person.

"Alright, get up," Argrave commanded, gesturing with his hand. "Get up, you're embarrassing me," he repeated when Galamon did nothing.

Galamon took his head off the floor, but he refused to stop kneeling. His white eyes stayed locked on the chair that Argrave sat at, as though he dared not look at Argrave directly.

"I broke a contract," Galamon repeated. "My sin is without measure. I was contracted to protect you, and yet I was the very thing that brought you harm."

"I thought we settled this back at the village," Argrave said. "Wasn't a big deal, really. You dealt with the tomb guardians. Everything worked out. Just bad timing on my part—something to learn from."

"Even if you have forgiven me, I violated Veid's teachings. I must be punished," Galamon said determinedly, his low voice going even lower.

"Punished," Argrave repeated. "You took an arrow to the gut for me. A shoulder-shot, too, upon further examination," he noted, seeing a puncture on the elf's pauldron. Argrave leaned in. "I'm not going to punish you. I really don't care. Everything worked out fine, now... we just get back to business."

Galamon's head shook quickly. "Then I will punish myself. Veid would demand it."

Argrave sighed in exasperation. "What are you planning to do, go take a sunbath?" Argrave shook his head. "Anneliese, want to chime in?" He turned to her.

She nodded. "Ordinarily, a chief would decide the punishment for breaking contract if the contractor did not wish for punishment. Should that fail... they leave it to the oath breaker."

Argrave shook his head. He crossed his legs, falling into thought. Eventually, he nodded. "Alright. Let's think about this. I won't beat you. Would probably hurt me more than you, considering my physical deficiencies. All things considered... let's quantify the damage done." Argrave held up his fingers, counting. "There's the blood loss, you squeezed my neck real tight, and I had to walk with a cane for a while—very embarrassing. Let's call that last one 'mental trauma.'

"All said," Argrave continued. "You add all that up, carry the one... way I figure it, you're looking at about ten years of indentured servitude as my personal retainer."

Galamon met Argrave's eyes for the first time. The two waited quietly, staring at each other.

"What, you think I'm kidding around?" Argrave said finally. "We're going to be doing some dangerous stuff, my friend. Failure usually means death. I've also got a ridiculous number of books to haul about, and I'm definitely not carrying them. Those things are damned heavy."

Argrave put his hand to his chin, and then pointed to Galamon as he remembered something. "I've got years' worth of manual labor for you to do... making potions, fetching things, et cetera. You're going to be the muscle I severely lack."

The big snow elf lowered his head once more and took off his helmet. His hair fell over his face.

"We understand each other?" Argrave pressed. "Your punishment's really quite harsh. This is why you don't ask me to do these things."

Galamon laughed. It was quite a grating noise, and very haunting besides, but it was the first time Argrave had heard it. "You'll work me to the bone, I know." He lifted his head up, and his face took on his typical dour expression. "But Argrave. I am sorry. I'll be sure that it never happens again."

"Maybe get big canteens instead of flasks. What do I know, though," Argrave waved dismissively. "Anyway, now that we've put this nonsense behind us, we can start getting ready." Argrave put his hands to his knees, about to stand, but he paused.

"Galamon... where are your weapons?" Argrave asked, scanning the man's waist and back.

"I... did not want to alarm you. I placed them upstairs."

With a snap of his fingers, Argrave stood. "Go get them. We have some things to fetch from a certain ruin you're familiar with. It's near empty and full of real valuable stuff. You think I'm going to let someone else take that prize from me? We'll need that Ebonice axe for the big metal man still at the entrance. We can talk about what happened in Veiden, from why Anneliese is with us today to how your family is doing."

"You spoke to them," Galamon said quietly.

"I did. Muriem said she loves you. Rhomaden said, 'I don't know,' but he probably does too." Argrave took a step forward, grabbing Galamon's shoulder. "I promised her that, one day, you'd be sitting side-by-side with me as we talked. Family dinner, maybe. Keep your calendar open."

Galamon said nothing. Argrave patted Galamon's shoulder, then walked away. Galamon raised his hand to his eyes, hiding a glistening wetness briefly. Then, he stood, putting his helmet back on. He looked to

Argrave's back, and his fist clenched as a faint smile marked his face. With a slight nod, he moved to retrieve his weapons.

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"You're leaving tomorrow?" Nikoletta asked, looking up at Argrave from his position on horseback. She was escorted by two knights and an unusually reticent Mina.

"That's the plan, yeah. I have a few things to take care of. I do appreciate you giving us these horses." Argrave turned his head to Anneliese and Galamon, and they both acknowledged his words with a nod.

"Maybe Nicky shouldn't have, considering you lost the first two she gave you," Mina commented. "Though, you'd probably have stolen them if she hadn't."

"You steal one horse, people call you the horse-thief forever," Argrave said, feigning sadness.

Nikoletta laughed a little. She raised a hand to block out the sunlight from her eyes. "Well, this lines up nicely. Castro intends to wake my father tomorrow afternoon. If you're not gone by then, our whole plan might go bust."

"I know," Argrave nodded. "But time is a-wasting. I should be off." He pulled on the horse's reins.

"Hold on," Nikoletta stopped him. Argrave looked back to her. "I might not see you, as I have to stay with Castro during my father's treatment. Where are you going tomorrow?"

"Jast, by carriage. Got a lot of cargo and some obligations there, after all." Argrave disclosed. "After... I have some things in mind, but I have to discuss said things with my two elven companions. The price of doing business, I guess."

"I see." Nikoletta nodded, and then her expression turned pensive. "I'd ask you to be safe, but frankly, what you've told me leads me to believe you can't promise that without lying. You should... take better care of yourself," she said sincerely.

"That's one of the things I have planned, actually," Argrave said with a grin. "Well, if I stay longer you might start weeping, so I must depart. Goodbye, Nikoletta, Mina. Thank you for what you've done."

"House Monticci probably owes you its continued existence. You don't need to thank me for anything." Nikoletta smiled bitterly. "Goodbye, Argrave."

"Bye, Grave. You're... a good guy," Mina said slowly. "Be well."

Argrave nodded. "Right." Argrave pointed to the distant mountains. "Off to Aethel-something, crew. We'll multitask—plan for the future, grave rob for the present."

"What are you—" Nikoletta started to say, but her voice faded as Argrave set his horse into a gallop.