

Jackal 46

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Chapter 46: Come Wind or Rain

Argrave watched the village of Barden from horseback. The metal men had been stacked in a great pit off the side to the village. All along the coast, devastation was apparent. Few villages were left untouched, and even now, refugees moved to Mateth. The great fields outside of the city had been trampled, crushed, burnt, and more. This place might be wracked by famine in the years to come.

In the corner of his mind, he could feel the consciousness of the pigeons under the control of his druidic magic. Rather than seeing through their eyes, it was like he was vaguely cognizant of what they could feel. He could tell that they saw people, and the direction those people might be in, but little beyond that. It would be helpful for avoiding ambushes.

Anneliese was still very unused to riding horses, and Argrave kept the pace slow for this reason. "Ride closer," Argrave directed to Galamon and Anneliese. They did so, Anneliese awkwardly directing her horse forward. Though Argrave had suggested she use druidic magic to handle the horse, she refused. She wanted to learn.

"Now that this little party of mine is assembled, we can talk about what happens next." Argrave looked to Galamon and Anneliese. They watched him quietly.

"Long-term, our priority is to mitigate Gerechtigkeits's influence. Though it hasn't spread far yet, the plague brewing in the northeast can devastate the continent. Indeed, it takes priority over stopping the civil war in Vasquer. As such, that's our first long-term goal."

"But you grow sick easily," Anneliese interrupted.

"I was getting to that," Argrave agreed. He took the horse off road, heading to the distant mountains where the old tomb would still be. "With the invasion from the Veidimen halted, I have a lot more leeway in terms of what can be done. With my physique, going to deal with the plague now would likely just end with my death. As such, it needs to be dealt with." Argrave looked to Galamon.

"I won't turn you into a vampire," the elf said quickly and harshly. "Perish the thought."

"Did I say anything about growing my teeth out? Everyone is interrupting," Argrave complained. "Just listen. As we are now, we need to get our builds ready. In other words, we need to focus on personal growth."

Argrave gestured to Galamon. "You are already a very powerful warrior, but compared to others, you lack good equipment. Your axe is one thing, but at the very least, you need an enchanted bow and a good enchanted greatsword. Finding armor that fits your body is going to be difficult. Armor isn't exactly one-size-fits-all. It'll need to be custom made."

"As for you," Argrave pointed to Anneliese. "You need to learn the spells I specify. Some of them I have. Others I will need to get. Mateth is a bit lacking in the scholarly department, but Jast will have most everything we need. The majority of the spells you should learn are lightning-oriented elemental magic."

"Why?" she asked simply.

“You have a high affinity with magic just as I do. This helps with lightning magic’s one disadvantage: its tremendous cost. It’s fast, precise, and can affect many at once. Few things are attuned to lightning, and as such, few enemies can resist it. There’s a set of items that I’m going to get that will magnify electricity’s power, too, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Argrave and company passed over the dead body of one of the tomb guardians that had been using a bow. Galamon watched it as they passed, growing ever closer to the mountains.

“As for me, I’ll learn much of the same stuff Anneliese does. Beyond that, there’s the issue of my body. Eating my peas and carrots and getting some exercise is the least of it. I have to address my fragile constitution. As I am now, I’m plague-food.” Argrave clenched the reins together. “I’ve thought of a few ways. One of them Galamon mentioned: vampirism. But forget that. It’s a last resort.”

Galamon touched Argrave’s elbow, pointing to the direction of the entrance of the mineshaft. The three of them rode towards it, dismounting. Argrave tied the horse to a rock quietly. The birds under the influence of his spell [Pack Leader] flew down, landing on the horse’s saddle. Argrave had grown used to their presence, and already felt quite protective of them.

“With all of these conditions in mind, the best place to go would be south, past the territory of House Parbon. They’re not fond of me there, but they’re also busy with a war, and we have the advantage in scouting with druidic magic. We’re to head to a place called the Burnt Desert.”

Galamon shifted uneasily, but Anneliese only stared with a neutral expression. Argrave carried on, standing by the horses. “I know an alchemist there... we’ll have to collect some things on the way, but he’s one of the few people who can get rid of my sickness permanently. He’ll make me Black Blooded. Fitting, I guess. Doesn’t change the fact that it’s a pain in the ass.”

“What is the Burnt Desert?” Anneliese inquired.

“A desert of black sand. Really incredibly hot, I’m told, but it’s near winter. Best time to head there. It’ll probably be very cold at night.”

“It’s also a lawless wasteland of degenerate tribes,” Galamon added, voice low. “Lizardmen, cannibalistic humans, the southron elves...”

“Maybe it *was*,” Argrave held a hand out as if telling him to relax. “Right now, they’re in no mood for degeneracy. Ordinarily, these tribes are known to rear and trade wyverns. They’re in the middle of a drought, though. We’re not there to deal with that. We get what we need, and then we leave. Simple as.”

Galamon nodded contentedly. Anneliese asked, “What do you mean by ‘he’ll make me Black Blooded?’”

“Just that. He’ll change my blood from red to black. It’s his life project. The things that we’ll need to fetch are a detour, but without it, I’ll die from the plague.”

“That does not explain what it does,” Anneliese pressed.

“Eh... been months since I read about it...” Argrave paused, thinking. “It makes the blood denser, and rather than just carrying oxygen to the muscles, it imbues magic into it. Effectively, over the course of a

few weeks, the body will be entirely changed similarly to creatures naturally born with magic. Like dragons,” Argrave pointed, smiling.

“Oxygen?” Anneliese asked.

“Air,” Argrave elaborated, feeling like he was answering the questions of a child with insatiable curiosity. “We breathe to transfer air to the muscles. This thing has some consequences. The transitional period is said to be... painful. I have to eat much more than the average person. My magic pool will be smaller but will recover much, much quicker. There’s other stuff, but it’s situational. That said, I’ll probably be the healthiest person here when all is said and done.”

Anneliese nodded, absorbing the information. “This sounds very dangerous. You trust this person to perform this procedure?”

“Naturally,” Argrave said. He moved away from the horses. “But let’s move into the mines. We have some things to fetch. Galamon, as my indentured servant, you will be carrying all of them.”

Argrave and Anneliese walked off. Galamon stayed standing by the horses for a time, then eventually slung a bag over his shoulder and followed with a quiet sigh.

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“Galamon,” said Anneliese, grabbing the man’s shoulder.

The elven vampire stopped, looking back at Anneliese. Argrave walked away ahead, a flame whirling about his head to illuminate the stone paths of the ancient ruin. The tomb’s king was some distance behind them. It had died just as easy as the rest once its metal skin was pierced by Ebonice.

“I have some questions for you,” she spoke quietly.

“I have some of my own,” Galamon returned. “Why you wished to come with Argrave. Why he agreed to it.”

Argrave’s footsteps faded away, and the two Veidimen stared at each other in the dark, a flame swirling above Anneliese’s head just the same as Argrave.

“I can answer those, but I ask that you allow me my questions first.” Anneliese said, and seeing Galamon did not protest, continued. “Let me ask you this. Why are you so certain that Argrave is an agent of Erlebnis? Did he tell you personally?”

Galamon turned around fully. “I saw him head to a shrine in the forest that no one else seemed to know of. He spoke directly with an Emissary of Erlebnis and received a blessing. This blessing was pivotal in dispatching those ten druids. In addition, he possesses an uncanny knowledge about too much. I’m sure you’re familiar with this.”

“He never told you directly. It was an assumption,” Anneliese pressed.

Galamon paused. “It has basis. It is a presumption.”

Anneliese nodded. “I can agree with that. Let me ask you this, though. Have you ever felt that his knowledge extends beyond what even Erlebnis should know?” Galamon only stared blankly, the fire

reflecting off his white eyes. “He knew that city, Mateth, almost too well. Why would Erlebnis teach him that? How does Erlebnis even receive knowledge? There are too many unknowns, and he refuses to answer questions on the matter.”

Anneliese continued. “From the beginning, he probably knew your character. While it is well enough to say that Erlebnis may know these things, he did not interact with you as though you were strangers. He acted familiarly. Rather than knowing about you, he acted as though he knew you. At least, such was the case with me, and others I saw him speak to. Am I wrong in this?”

Galamon said nothing, and Anneliese continued. “You ask me why Argrave allowed me to come with him. This perplexed me just as much. From the beginning, he had decided I was a person of good character. This alchemist he mentioned—he trusts him well enough to perform this procedure to make him Black Blooded, despite having never met him. That extends far beyond mere knowledge.”

His face tightening, Galamon spoke firmly, “Argrave is a very kind person. It is simply his character to trust and act with familiarity. I consider it my duty to ensure he is not harmed from being gullible.”

“That may be the case. I know how to understand people well, though, and I don’t think Argrave is any more or less trusting than the average person. Ask yourself this; has he ever misplaced his trust? Has he ever been betrayed? Has he ever made a poor evaluation of another’s character?”

“Make your point,” Galamon said gruffly.

“I don’t know my point,” Anneliese said with a sigh. She could not help but remember some words they’d exchanged about her strong empathy.

“It might make me surprised, throw a wrench into the conversation that forces some semblance of honesty from me. Might make me mind my words a little bit. But uncomfortable? Not at all.”

Argrave had no trouble lying, that Anneliese knew. He was one of the better actors she’d seen. From the outside looking in, everything he did was for a greater good. Even despite his deceptive tendencies he seemed a genuine person, and she enjoyed speaking to him. But the fact remained that he refused to directly acknowledge his association to Erlebnis.

“I just think we aren’t getting the full picture,” Anneliese said finally. “The full truth.”

Galamon shook his head. “What Argrave discloses is his business. Meeting someone like him is a blessing. He’s arrogant, talkative, condescending, and somewhat infuriating, but he’s one of the best people I’ve met, elven or otherwise. Do not let your doubts interfere with what he does. I certainly won’t—my doubts or your doubts. Keep that in mind.”

Anneliese studied Galamon, discerning his emotions. She was worried she had angered him, but she only saw protectiveness, not hate.

“I’ll help as best I can,” Anneliese promised. “My reasons for being here aren’t entirely selfless, but you can be assured of that. This is to be a long journey that I may not even survive. I’ve resolved myself for that.”

Galamon slowly nodded. "Let's join Argrave. As you said, this is to be a very long journey. Steel your resolve further. Come wind or rain, as long as that man marches forward, we must march alongside him."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 47: Beneath the Lion's Sun

The two suns were just beginning to set behind the mountains, the red moon rising to take its place. At a point in the vast ridge, two mountains converged to form a narrow valley. Uneven rolling hills occupied one side of the mountains, covered with infrequent patches of dormant grass. If one went through the valley, moving beyond the mountains, one could see an unending expanse of black sand marred by a single half-buried stone road leading straight out from the valley.

In the middle of the valley, a manmade wall of smooth taupe stone stood tall, the two towers on each side partially merging with the mountains. A great many knights walked atop the walls, wearing white plate mail with a golden lion on the breastplate. In the center of the wall, a statue of a lion looked out across the black desert. Its jaws were open as though roaring. A glistening orange sphere shone from within its mouth, clenched by its fangs. Sparks of magic occasionally surged along the wall, each originating from the sphere in the lion's mouth.

The two mountains that formed the valley had been carved away near the summit to form two keeps. The rough, uneven terrain had been chipped down in way of square rooms with simple windows. These rooms, too, shone with enchantments, and the windows offered a view of both the desert and the hills before the mountains. Opposite this keep and across the valley, the entire peak had been sheared away, revealing a vast field of open stone contained within a small wall.

The man-made plateau on the peak was marked by claw marks and scratches. Elsewhere it was filled with bones, many of them so old the sun had bleached them white. Others were more freshly eaten. None of them were human bones; cow, pig, or sheep comprised the majority.

The creator of these bone piles rested in the center of the mountaintop with its tail coiled around its body. The wyvern was a great beast, a dark red that made it look like the dragons of old. It was noticeably muscular on both its wings and its legs. It feasted on a sheared sheep—one of many resting beside its maw. Someone sat beside it on a stone chair carved from the landscape.

Margrave Reinhardt ran his hands across his wyvern's head as it dug into its food. Even now, he wore his white plate mail armor. His long red hair fell past his shoulders and ended where the cloak of the same color began. His gaze was distant as he watched the beast eat, clearly lost in thought.

The wyvern lifted its head from its food, shifting its body to attention. The Margrave was drawn from his haze, and he followed his mount's gaze. In the distance, a man with dark green hair moved up the stairs in the corner of the room and started to move to the Margrave with long, hurried strides. The Margrave soothed the wyvern, and it resumed eating.

"Margrave Reinhardt," the man greeted from a distance. He was a young man with a handsome, earnest face. He slowed his steps, the wyvern clearly making him cautious. "I have more news."

"Speak, then, Baron Julio," the Margrave directed.

Julio reached into his shirt and pulled free a stack of letters. "More responses have arrived. Not a single southern noble has decided to support Vasquer. The majority of them have remained neutral, but the Duke of Birall declared he would be gathering his forces in support. I'm sure that, once word of that spreads, the southwestern nobles will fall in line," Julio said excitedly.

The Margrave nodded. "It's as you say. The majority will wait for the result of the first major battle to make a decision. Being neutral alone is a great boon." Reinhardt gazed at his aide. "And the Duke of Monticci?"

"Regarding that..." Baron Julio rubbed his hands together. "The young lord Elias has returned. He says that he brought news from Mateth."

The Margrave narrowed his eyes, turning back to the wyvern briefly. "I see."

"He went to visit his sister in the temple," Julio proceeded slowly. "He wishes to see you when he can."

"Send him up when you return," Reinhardt directed, voice low. "What else?"

Julio gathered himself. "The knights are already all assembled. Many of the mages of the Order of the Gray Owl residing in Parbon have decided to support, but the Order itself remains neutral—partly because Master Castro is away and has yet to respond. The Duke of Elbraille has not responded. By extension, his vassal Count Delbraun of Jast also remains neutral."

"I flew with Master Castro once," Reinhardt said, reminiscing. "For as old as he is, a terrific flier. He uses magic to bond with the beast, though. An enchanted whistle. Never was fond of that. Impersonal." The Margrave shook his head. "The Order won't take a side. The individual mages are what's important. You can use all the funds of House Parbon at your disposal to recruit them—they may decide who wins the war."

"Certainly," Julio nodded enthusiastically. "As you instructed, we have sent out advance notice of the levy. Public opinion is high—Vasquer is not well-liked, and after what occurred at Dirracha, people are doubly ready to take arms in defense of the Margravate."

The Margrave seemed disquieted by this. "Relying on levy... I don't like it. But Vasquer undoubtedly will, and we will likely lose if we do not." He scratched his chin where red stubble poked out. "With winter soon to come, any significant military activity will be impossible. We can only gather our forces and focus on preparing supplies to endure. True war will begin with spring. The harvests this year were good, but..."

"Margrave, if I may suggest something..." Julio began, and seeing the Margrave not respond, he continued. "Considering our enemy is Vasquer, we should prepare for sabotage—watch the comings and goings of refugees carefully, protect the granaries, be mindful of the rivers. That should be our knights' focus as we build our strength for spring."

The Margrave looked at his hands and nodded. "You are right. I have been warring with the southern tribes for years, meeting them at the Lionsun Wall. They lack fear, but they do not stoop to treachery. This will be a different kind of war."

Emboldened, Julio continued. "If we conscript the militiamen, too, our forces will be further bolstered. I can—"

"You're overreaching," Reinhardt cut Julio off, turning back to his wyvern. "Take the militiamen, leave the villages defenseless? Bandits mostly form from deserted soldiers. War is the time when they are most present. I should leave the people without a method to defend themselves?" Reinhardt fixed his ruby eyes on Julio. "You've been good as my aide, Julio, but do not forget that this war began to overthrow a tyrant. Go now. Send Elias to me," he waved his hand.

Baron Julio bowed, but his fists clenched tightly at his side. "Yes, Margrave. At once."

The Baron walked away, and the wyvern tossed aside the corpse of the sheep, retrieving another.

"Redden..." the Margrave said lightly. After hearing its name, the wyvern's eyes came to attention and it moved its head in front of the Margrave. He scratched beneath its chin, and some huffs of air came out from its nose. "I might be leading my whole family to its death. Hundreds of thousands of people could die because of this war."

The wyvern stared passively, ignorant of the words.

"Bruno might already be dead because of what I did." The Margrave lowered his hand from the wyvern. "Am I... ignoble?"

But Redden did not answer. Seeing no more scratches would come, it returned to its food. A few moments of quiet passed, and then the wyvern lifted its head once more. It let out quiet a growl, and then shot past Reinhardt. The Margrave lifted his head to see the beast striding towards his son. Elias met it with open arms, briefly holding back Redden's head like meeting a bull's charge.

Reinhardt stood, following close behind as the play between Redden and Elias continued. Eventually Elias fell to his back, exhausted, and Reinhardt came to stand over him. He offered a hand to his son, and Elias took it, rising to his feet.

Reinhardt watched as his son caught his breath. The wyvern moved back to its food, claws echoing across the plateau as they scratched the stone. The dusk light was fading.

Reinhardt spoke first. "I had been considering how I might punish you this whole time. I thought back to my own childhood, my father..."

Elias waited quietly.

"I was just as stubborn as you were when I was young. I thought I was always right. I still do, in some things." Reinhardt reached a hand up and put it on Elias' shoulder. "As time passed, I realized I was glad you had not come to Dirracha. You could not have guaranteed your own safety as I could. And further... I was not relying on you to do anything."

Elias blinked, some of the tension in his shoulders relaxing. "Father... I'm sorry."

"I know. You're a good boy," Reinhardt said sincerely. "Nonetheless, you are my son and heir. I am prone to whimsy, as most of our ancestors have. We of Parbon trust our instincts—our gut." The Margrave pounded his fist against his chest where his heart was. "But as my heir, I must teach you responsibility. You have a responsibility to ensure the protection of the people beneath you. Flights of fancy can lead to their death."

"I understand that, father." Elias nodded. "I... wanted to find Argrave. That was what my gut told me to do. Having done that, I'm glad I did."

Reinhardt took his hand off his son's shoulder. "Just let me speak," Reinhardt directed. "What you need isn't punishment. You need responsibility. You need to realize that, as the heir to House Parbon, you wield enormous influence with corresponding consequence."

"Mateth is—" Elias tried to speak.

"I've been deliberating how, exactly, I might show that to you," Reinhardt continued. "As a spellcaster, you walk a very different path from your forefathers. We have all been knights. With the war coming, and spellcasters being a very important variable on the field of battle, I've decided to send you to Jast as an envoy to recruit mages to House Parbon. Theirs is the city of magic, and—"

"Mateth can't join the civil war because they're going to be invaded," Elias finally said, cutting past his father's lecture. "The snow elves—Veidimen, they call themselves— have been planning to invade Mateth for some months. They may already be attacking it by this point."

The Margrave stood with his mouth open for a time, expression confused.

"That was Argrave's aim the whole time. I don't know if he was doing the bidding of the royal family, or merely acting independently, but I've come to think he's not an inherently malicious person. Regardless, he's helping Duke Enrico prepare defenses."

"The snow elves?" The Margrave asked incredulously. "The bulky, pale-skinned elves?"

"Yes," Elias confirmed.

The Margrave looked back, and then grabbed his son's shoulders, pulling him towards the stairs. "I would hear what you have to say before we continue this talk of Jast. Let's go somewhere else."

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Chapter 48: Ambition and Anger

Anneliese held a coin in her hand, twisting it through the light passing through the carriage. Though the coin was a metallic pink, its surface shone with a great many colors twisting with the light. It wasn't so simple as light reflecting off its surface, though. Its projection of light was indeterminable and unending, twisting to create beautiful images indefinitely. It was, after all, a magic coin.

"How does this thing function?" Anneliese asked.

Argrave lifted his head from a book to Anneliese. Galamon, who sat outside to drive the carriage, looked back. Seeing he wasn't the one addressed, he turned his eyes back to the road. Argrave took a few seconds to discern what Anneliese was speaking of, and then said, "No one knows. They're not made anymore because the method was lost. That's why they're valuable."

"Who made it?" Anneliese continued.

"The Order of the Rose, an extinct mage order from the north," Argrave answered easily. "At one time, they were the only gold coins in Vasquer. As the kingdom grew, the Order of the Rose died off, and their value started to skyrocket over the centuries."

Anneliese nodded, placing the coin back into the lockbox alongside mounds of ancient, enchanted jewelry and precious jewels they had taken from the ruins of the tomb guardians. Argrave intended to bring them to Jast to appraise their worth.

Both people in the carriage picked up their books once again, reading quietly. Galamon, their driver, wore a brown robe to conceal most of his features. The carriage they rode was humble but formidable, with a large compartment for luggage in the back. Two strong horses pulled them along.

Their journey was a very quiet one. At times, either Anneliese or Argrave would raise their head, each trying to form the magic spell they were learning. Argrave looked at the terrain and occasionally directed Galamon to turn down a different road. Anneliese would ask questions as she thought of them—Argrave, too, occasionally sought her out for help with particular druidic spells.

Eventually, Anneliese finally closed the book, staring at Argrave. “Are you ever going to tell us where we’re going?”

Argrave looked up. “I told you. Side-quests. There are two places we must visit before we head to Jast. One is a short stop for a spellbook—that’s the last. The other is the Cavern of the Death of Lilies.” Argrave paused. “Or was it the Cavern of the Lily’s Death? It’s been a while...” Argrave placed his handkerchief to mark his spot, and then shut the book.

“Anyway, the cavern’s our first stop. One of four ingredients for becoming Black Blooded is in that cavern, and likely the hardest to get. It’ll be immeasurably useful for me, less so for you... It’s a crystal, but it’s more than that at the same time. It’s called the Amaranthine Heart.”

Argrave spread his fingers out to emulate roots digging into the ground. “It takes root in whatever it touches, then slowly spreads out, constantly absorbing magic from anything near it and turning it into a black liquid. This liquid is pure magic—dangerous when taken in large doses, but it can be drunk when needed to recover magic. Closest thing to a ‘magic potion’ we’ll find. Best to get now, as I’m sure we’ll have need of it in our journeys in the future.”

Argrave’s gaze grew distant and his tone became monotonous. “There will be fighting. The cavern is filled with large bugs. It will be extremely unpleasant and nasty. I am not looking forward to adding yet more things to my nightmares.

“Above all!” Argrave continued with renewed vigor. “We can’t take the main roads. We have to be very cautious travelling through the south what with the war going on. That’s why druidic magic was a blessing to me, though I will admit it is a bit unsettling feeling these birds flying outside the carriage.”

“I am confused,” Anneliese confessed. “With a war going on, will they attack random passersby? It seems we are being unduly cautious.”

“You really don’t...?” Argrave paused. “Huh. Come to think of it, I never told you. I am one of five sons to King Felipe III of Vasquer, and the only baseborn of those five. In the territory of a rebellion against the king, my presence will not be especially wanted, unless it’s as a captive.”

Anneliese’s eyes widened.

"Did I really never tell you?" Argrave asked. "Well... I am the sole royal bastard of this kingdom. Used to be literal and figurative. Now it's just literal. Debatably." Argrave nodded, and then resumed reading his book.

Anneliese looked out the carriage window to Galamon, expression asking silently if this was normally how he was. Galamon nodded, and then turned his head back to the road.

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Duke Enrico spasmed in his bed as a light coursed around him. He gasped loudly and his eyes opened wide. His hands rushed towards his chest, clutching the simple nightclothes that covered his body. He slowly calmed, eyes darting around the room. Tower Master Castro stood above him, while his daughter, Nikoletta, watched with her hands covering her mouth.

"Dad?" Nikoletta said slowly.

"What's happened?" he said quickly. "The... the..." Enrico tried to get up off the bed, but the tower master held a hand to his shoulder.

"Duke Enrico. The battle is over." He gently pushed the Duke back to the bed. "You are in your bed at the estate."

Nikoletta lunged forward, tackling her father back into the bed. Castro was surprised, but he stepped back amusedly after a second. Duke Enrico blinked, his hand hovering around his daughter's back as he slowly discerned what was happening. When he realized the danger had passed, he slowly returned the embrace and settled back into his bed.

"We... won?" the Duke said, voice hoarse.

Nikoletta pushed away, coming to sit on the bed beside her father. "That's right, dad." She smiled brightly. "How do you feel?"

"I feel..." the Duke tested his body. "Weak. And... dreadfully hungry. How long has it been?"

"It's been four days," Nikoletta told him slowly. "I've been serving as regent to repair the city and restore order."

"We should be..." Enrico closed his eyes, thinking. "...preparing for the next assault."

"No," Nikoletta said happily. "It's over, dad. The Veidimen won't be returning. Argrave came through." She reached forward and grabbed his arms, shaking him lightly.

The Duke said nothing for a time, processing the information slowly in the wake of his recent awakening. Master Castro stepped forward.

"There should be no issue with his memory, and his physical condition will improve as long as he eats and moves about. He should eat slowly, so as not to overtax his stomach," he directed Nikoletta. "Treat him as a prisoner who has been imprisoned for some time without food or water. With that, I will let you two have privacy."

"Master Castro?" the Duke asked. "Why are you here?"

As Castro walked away, Nikoletta explained, "He turned the tide of the battle. He also roused you from your coma."

Castro nodded, and then exited the room quietly, closing the door behind him. The Duke looked around the room, taking in his surroundings. Nikoletta stood from the bed, retrieving some water. "Here," she said, handing it to him.

"So Argrave... stopped the invasion?" the duke asked incredulously. When Nikoletta nodded, he took a small sip of the water. "I need to reward him."

"He's already gone. He said he had more to do," Nikoletta answered. "He and I spoke regarding... the betrothal you wanted. He seemed amenable to the idea. And... thinking about it more, so am I," Nikoletta began, fumbling over her words due to the lie.

"You are?" Enrico asked, setting the cup down on the nightstand.

"Yes," she nodded, staring at the sheets.

"That's... that's good news," the Duke said. He let out a laugh. "That's wonderful, Nikoletta." Nikoletta lifted her head up to see her father beaming brightly, wiping some tears from his eyes. "You have no idea how happy that makes me. Even from a young age, you never took to any of the boys. A father's dream, most told me, but I was worried. I thought it might be because your mother... and later, Elwind... both died."

Nikoletta looked to the floor, rubbing her hands together guiltily.

"Argrave... his actions have changed much in so little time," the Duke said. He reached for his cup and took another drink of water. "He's the only good thing to come of House Vasquer in the past decades," the Duke said, anger making his voice hoarser. "I never talked... about how your mother died."

At those words Nikoletta looked up at her father, confused by the sudden change of subject. "You said she died in childbirth."

"In childbirth? Yes. But between healing magic and research into the subject, such a thing is impossible for the Duchess of House Monticci," Enrico said angrily. "I got her the best care. There was foul play involved. Whether poison or magic, someone had her killed."

Nikoletta listened intensely, seeing as her father was telling her something she had never heard before.

"As you recall, Induen's mother died the same way. Felipe's first wife died 'in childbirth.'" Enrico pointed with his cup. "King Felipe used to be a good man, and he loved both the people and his wife. When the first Queen died during Induen's birth, he knew just as I do that there was foul play. The people he trusted most—people like me—became his potential enemies overnight. Felipe brought the whole realm under investigation, searching for a poisoner."

Duke Enrico grit his teeth, his gaze distant as he recalled distant and uncomfortable memories. "Though I helped him as best I could, we came up with no answers. With only two children—his daughter Elenore and Induen—most of his council insisted he move on and remarry." The Duke drank more water.

"Reluctantly, the king turned his focus back to the realm and his children, and the realm was good." Enrico took a deep breath and exhaled. "Eventually, King Felipe met Valeria, the present queen and

Orion's mother. She was perfect in every way, it seemed. Beautiful, ingenious, powerful... They fell in love. At the time, it seemed the couple of the century—the magnanimous widower King Felipe and high society's star, Valeria of Norden."

"But Queen Valeria... they say she's mad," Nikoletta asked in confusion.

Duke Enrico nodded. "She started to lose her mind after Orion was born; visions, hallucinations, rapid mood-swings, temperamental behavior. King Felipe's paranoia resurfaced and his cruelty redoubled. He thought someone had done something again. He did everything, completely uncaring of right or wrong, to find out what had happened to Valeria."

The Duke swallowed the last of his water. "Eventually, in anger, I told him that he could not use his sadness as an excuse to trample on the people. He removed me from the council, and I returned to rule at Mateth." He looked to Nikoletta. "Later that same year, your mother Gabriele died. She died the exact same way the first queen did. Skin pulled tight against her bones, veins bursting out of..."

The Duke took a second, composure lost. He brought some of the sheets up to wipe away the tears from his face. Nikoletta watched. She did feel some emotion, but she had never known her mother as her father did.

"I went to the capital for an audience with the king. I told him what had happened. And he..." the Duke clenched the sheets tight. "He just *looked* at me, a devil's grin marking his face, those cold, gray eyes wide in delight like... like some abyssal portal into the underworld. I knew, then, my answer, even without proof. He poisoned his own sister, your mother, to teach me a lesson. To make me endure the same pain he did."

Nikoletta opened her mouth but felt a choking sadness at her throat. Duke Enrico stared at his hands.

"He said something after that, offered my position on the council back as though I would suddenly support him now that I knew his pain." Enrico shook his head. "That man isn't fit to sit on the throne. Once, King Felipe III cared. That version of him died with his first wife," Enrico said with a grim tone. "If Reinhardt had not acted foolishly, there still would have been war. The people hate what Vasquer has become."

"Why are you talking about this now, father? What are you driving at?"

Duke Enrico took a deep breath and exhaled. "I don't know enough about Argrave, but from what little I've seen, he's one with tremendous bravery and a good nature. He's somewhat unfathomable. I have no idea how he halted this invasion, nor even that he intended to do so."

"Your point being?"

"Reinhardt is an impulsive man and my friend. I don't think he has a plan for what comes after this civil war of his," Enrico disclosed. "I will support him with... what little remains after the disaster with the Veidimen. When the war is over, I will be sure that you sit on the throne, Nikoletta."

Nikoletta was greatly taken aback. "But father..!"

"I won't force it on you. You are my pride and joy, and I have full confidence in leaving either the Dukedom or the Kingdom of Vasquer to you." Enrico's dark pink eyes stared at her intensely, then

looked away. “Should you decline... Argrave’s claim is the best. All of Felipe’s trueborn sons are as debased as him, and I’ll not suffer them on the throne. The marriage with Argrave would solidify both of your claims and should help ensure stability.”

“This is... overwhelming, father,” Nikoletta said quietly.

“I know. My tongue is looser than normal,” the Duke said. “The biggest flaw in this idea is Argrave himself. I know little of his motivations, his character, or even his true allegiance. I must force him to make those things clear,” Enrico nodded. “To begin with, I should spread the news of his halting the Veidimen invasion. News of the sale of Foamspire, too, should reach Dirracha. It will incense Prince Induen if the two are not collaborators.”

“Wait,” Nikoletta stopped him. “Argrave insisted that we should remain neutral in the war.”

“Why?” Enrico asked.

Nikoletta took a deep breath. “This... I have some trouble wrapping my head around it, but this is what he said...”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 49: White Edge

Anneliese looked out the window of the carriage, her head resting on her hand. Her other hand played with her hair, which was splayed out on her thighs. The carriage rode across a field of lilies, leaving two trails behind in the pure white flowers. The fields seemed unending. As Argrave recalled, one could only see this field at certain times in the game—fall. They bloomed near the end of fall.

“A pretty sight,” Anneliese commented. “Like snow, but... alive.”

“Yes, very beautiful,” Argrave agreed, staring at Anneliese. “As we move ahead, they’ll begin to turn red, and beyond that, wilt. That means we’re growing closer to the cavern.”

Her amber eyes switched from the scenery to him. “Erlebnis told you this?”

“He doesn’t tell you so much as reach into your head and place things there,” Argrave responded.

“Unpleasant yet convenient at the same time.”

She crossed her legs, placing her hands atop her knee. “For an agent of Erlebnis, you don’t seem to rever—”

“Now that we’re getting this close, we should really discuss the plan for these insects.” Argrave shut the book he held in his hand, changing the subject. “These bugs, they’re called Lily Lurkers locally. They’re the reason this field is so largely... undisturbed.” Argrave set his book on the carriage seat, and Galamon slowed the horses to hear his words better.

“The nearby village’s young couples would have late-night rendezvous at this place when the lilies bloomed because the moonlight reflects beautifully off the white flowers. Now, at night, those bugs roam the field like supersized ants, ripping people apart.” Argrave pointed.

"You know, ants can carry..." Argrave paused, struggling to remember the number. "...100 times their own bodyweight... if I remember right. They're strong. These bugs, they're the same way, except they weigh about ten pounds and have a paralytic poison stinger. They're around the size of my head."

Anneliese nodded, a frown disturbing her face. "You mentioned they come out at night. We must've come here during the day to attack them while they're in their... burrow. Burn them out, perhaps." She waved her hand as she offered the example.

"A plausible solution," Argrave agreed. "But the underground caverns are large enough it would be difficult to do either. Burning them out or using water might collapse the cavern, too. We need to go inside. This task requires precision."

"Entering the cavern would be suicide," Galamon contributed. "Tight spaces... perfect for those bugs. Impossible to kill when they're in large numbers."

"Both of you..." Argrave spread his arms out, shaking his head as though ashamed. He clapped his hands together, though the sound was muffled by his gloves. "Such mindless killers. Violence isn't always the answer."

Both of them looked at him like he was mental.

Argrave carried on, unaffected. "Fact is, we can't butcher this whole colony of Lily Lurkers. Waste of time to even try. Would take weeks, maybe a month, if we tried to kill them off one-by-one without any casualties. Their numbers are too high. Originally, I had been thinking just the same as you two, and consequently dreading this task. But these bugs—they have to eat, no?"

"Poison," Anneliese caught on quickly, and Argrave confirmed with a nod.

"Plausible," Galamon commented. "Don't think poisoning counts as non-violent, though."

Argrave waved his hand. "Mere semantics."

If it had been the game, no such option would be available to Argrave. One follows the quest marker, goes into the cave, kills the bugs—end of quest. That option would probably be much more fun... were this a game, naturally. Argrave would much sooner jump off a tower and be done with it than walk into a cavern infested with Lily Lurkers.

"Even ants have instincts," Anneliese responded after some consideration. "These bugs, if they are like ants, won't eat poison even if it is laced into something they will eat."

"We use a slow-acting poison they don't recognize. It's all just trial and error." Argrave spotted some discontent with that statement, and he quickly added, "All of the other ideas are terrible—this one is at least worth exploring."

"True," Anneliese agreed. "But we brought no poison."

"Listen." Argrave leaned forward. "I might forget some elven ruin's name, or the precise name of a cavern, or the exact number of pounds an ant can carry. I can promise you, though, I definitely won't forget a single recipe for poison. I wrote thousands of articles about alchemy, be it the ingredients or the final product. It was unimaginably tedious." Argrave tapped his temple. "This mind of mine is all we

need to make every poison creatable in Berendar. We're deep in the countryside. Shouldn't be much trouble to get what's needed."

"Why did you write thousands of articles?" Anneliese asked after a long pause.

"That's a good question," Argrave acknowledged with a nod. "I'm not sure myself. Masochism, perhaps. We'll get back to that. For now..." Argrave turned his gaze towards Galamon. "Galamon, turn left. Hard to brew potions in the middle of a field. We should head for that village."

Argrave peered out the carriage window. In the distance, he could see a field of red that made it seem as though the lilies had turned to roses. The sight set a flame of anxiety alight in his chest. This would be the first time he tried something major that was beyond the constraints imposed by 'Heroes of Berendar.' It could be said Mateth had already been an example of this, but Argrave did not feel that was his victory alone.

"A village, hm..." Argrave muttered. "It might be time to bring up the Blackgard name once again."

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The village of White Edge was typically a very quiet place. Not many lived here, particularly because they were so far from any source of water or civilization. They paid homage only to the Count of Jast, who himself was sworn to the Duchy of Elbraille. They did not have much to offer to the Count in way of taxes, and consequently, protection was insignificant as well. Still, some minor families persisted here, growing what few crops could be grown without a nearby water source.

The houses in White Edge were of better make than most of the villages one might find in the countryside. In way of simple plank walls and straw roofs, these buildings were well-constructed and near uniform in design. They looked fanciful rather than sturdy. When coupled with the well-kept hedges in yards, the place had an altogether idyllic air.

An old man sat on one of the porches of the houses, chewing at his thumb's nail as he tapped his feet quickly and anxiously against the porch. He was missing a few of the teeth on the right side of his mouth, and significant balding left him with only a ring of gray around the top of his head. He occasionally cast glances at some of the people working at harvesting the last of the crops grown in autumn, but besides that, his gaze remained fixed on the sole dirt road leading to the village from the forests.

The old man's tapping feet came to a stop, and he leaned forward until he was sitting on the edge of his chair. After a few seconds of watching, his eyes narrowed, he stood and walked off the stairs leading to the porch. He strode across the village square with purpose. A few people in the village watched him rush by curiously. In the far distance, a wooden carriage moved closer. The old man and some few others gathered to watch the carriage come in. In a small town, someone arriving by carriage was undoubtedly a notable event.

Perhaps they'd be less welcoming if they knew that Argrave had circled around the village before rejoining the road. He assumed it would not be especially appreciated if the villagers knew he had left trails of carriage wheels and horseshoe marks along their favorite romantic gathering spot.

Argrave looked to Anneliese, who had her hands in her lap as she waited quietly. “No issues with the plan?”

“Doesn’t involve us much anyway,” Anneliese shook her head. “Your methods are strange, but you have come this far, so I will simply follow along.”

“That doesn’t exactly ooze faith,” Argrave commented. “Well, faith is earned, I suppose. You’ll be singing my praises by the end of this,” Argrave half-muttered as he looked out the window.

“I’m sure I will,” Anneliese nodded.

Argrave glanced at her to be sure her amber eyes weren’t rolling. “I’ll be charitable and assume you’re not being sarcastic.”

Anneliese smiled lightly and said nothing further as the carriage started to slow. When it came to a stop, Argrave pulled back the door’s bolt and pushed open the door, alighting onto the road. Above, Galamon leapt from the top of the carriage, and it shifted when deprived of his weight. Argrave stretched and moved his joints about, freeing himself of the stiffness from the ride. Anneliese gathered the books in the carriage and walked around to the back, placing them with the rest of the luggage.

“Excuse me,” an old man said, walking before Argrave.

Though the old man looked like he had something more to say, Argrave spoke quicker. “Are you Bertrand Guill, the one who sent the notice to Jast?” His voice was serious and low.

The old man paused, looking up at Argrave and his company. “Yes, I am,” the man said, his voice slightly strange on account of his missing teeth. “You’re from Jast? You got my notice, then? You’re the help?”

“Yes. I’m Wizard Argrave of Blackgard.” Argrave retrieved his Wizard’s badge from the Order of the Gray Owl, making it shine by willing some of his magic into it. “This is my pupil, and the other is my guard, Galamon. I’ve come by order of Count Delbraun to deal with those creatures you mentioned.”

Bertrand held out a finger badly bent from arthritis. “I told everyone that this was a serious matter that Jast couldn’t ignore, and everyone didn’t believe me!” he shouted back to the crowd some distance behind him. The people started to approach and gather in front of them. It was not an especially large crowd—seven or eight. They all had to look up at the three of them.

“Why’re you with elves?” one asked, some suspicion in his tone.

Argrave ignored the question. “It’s a good thing you did send notice. It’s a better thing that I’m the one who got it. These creatures... ‘Lily Lurkers,’ you called them?” Argrave waited for Bertrand to nod, and then proceeded. “They’re Dextromorphous Exocellcynes. Very troublesome creatures.”

Argrave surveyed the crowd. No one seemed to have the slightest idea the grandiose name was entirely fabricated. “Ordinarily, I’d have more colleagues with me. As it stands, most everyone in Jast is preparing for the civil war.”

“War?” someone echoed. “What’re you talking about?”

“Margrave Reinhardt of House Parbon has declared war against the royal family in an attempt to end their tyranny,” Argrave explained succinctly. “But that is a long way off, and Jast has maintained neutrality in mirror of their liege lord, the Duke of Elbraille. More importantly, it’s not why I’m here.”

The small crowd was unsettled. Beyond them, more people started to approach, and the crowd grew larger yet.

“These bugs in your lily fields need to be dealt with,” Argrave said brusquely. “As such, Count Delbraun has given me leave to enlist your aid.”

“You want us to fight those bugs?” one of them said as though the very idea was ridiculous. Even Bertrand, the most vigorous amongst them, shrunk away from Argrave’s words.

“No,” Argrave said. “All of you would be worthless in a fight. Even a High Wizard of the Order wouldn’t be able to fight a colony of Exocellcynes easily.”

“Wizard, sir, and no offense to you...” one of the men of the village said, stepping forward, “But we’re dealing with the harvest. We need to finish harvesting the last of the crops before winter entombs us. These bugs stay to the lilies, and I see no need to stop the harvest.”

Argrave nodded, gritting his teeth. He stepped forward. “Have you ever dealt with rabbits? Moles, perhaps? Even ants? All of them surely ate your crops at some point or another.”

The man nodded. Argrave leaned down to the man’s face. “And you learned that, when you see a rabbit, a molehill, or an ant’s mound, they need to be dealt with before they spread into your crops and pick them clean. These creatures in your lily fields are much like those three, though as I’m sure you’ve noticed, they don’t eat your crops or your lilies. If it were just that, the Count wouldn’t send someone like me.”

Argrave straightened his back and walked around the crowd. “Right now, they nab a stray deer, or the odd couple who goes to the field without having heard the warnings. Each life they take enables them to be more. They lay eggs and multiply like any other bug. It’s the lily fields now. But soon enough, cows will vanish from their pens, the fences eaten away. Your dogs and cats will vanish—not because they ran away, naturally.”

“We... don’t have cows, sir Wizard,” Bertrand interrupted.

“That simplifies things,” Argrave continued undisturbed. “They’ll skip my preceding descriptions and head to the final step. As their colony grow more and more, their appetite will find their way to this village. They’ll wear all of you away as a locust plague does a field of wheat,” Argrave said grimly, turning to the crowd with a finger held out.

“A death at the hands of your ‘Lily Lurkers’ is not an easy one. Those three tails on their back—two are for sensing things, but one is a stinger that causes paralysis. They drag you back to their burrows like an ant might a peanut. Your gut will begin to rot with pestilence as you lay there, awake and conscious but unmoving. You’ll turn into an easily digestible mush for the bugs and their young. It takes a week to die, and I assure you, it is not a painless thing.”

Argrave let his words settle into the crowd for dramatic effect.

Once the crowd was riled, Argrave continued. "I've heard tell of it happening overnight. The Exocelcynes storm the village quietly in one line, just like an ant might. Come morning, all of the beds are stained in blood and poison, and the fields are left with no one to harvest them," Argrave finished, looking back to the man who'd initially dismissed Argrave's proposal.

"So, people of White Edge. You have three options." Argrave held up three gloved fingers, counting down. "Abandon this place, die in this place, or help me. The work is not especially difficult, I assure you. As farmers, it may indeed come naturally to you."

With his words finished, a silence took over the crowd. It was probably a lot to process, and so Argrave did not grow dispirited. He waited, watching as the people spoke amongst themselves.

"Retired here with the kids thirty some-odd years ago, and certainly not about to abandon it." Bertrand said enthusiastically. Some people nodded in agreement. "This is White Edge. Built this place from the ground up, we did," he urged the crowd, riling them up.

"I'm glad to see I didn't waste my words," Argrave concluded. "You should gather everyone else, catch them up to speed. My pupil and I have to prepare some things." He looked to Anneliese, finding it difficult to conceal a smile in wake of his performance.

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"How much of that was true?" Anneliese inquired as Argrave stowed away the lockbox inside the carriage.

"The only fabrications were the name and the overnight abductions," Argrave answered, ensuring things were locked tight. "Those two little mistruths were designed to make them amenable to my guiding hand—makes it seem like I have experience with this matter. The poison also doesn't rot your insides, but it does paralyze."

Argrave locked the carriage's compartment and turned to Anneliese and Galamon behind him. "If we didn't get involved, I suspect they'd just be forced from their homes. Might take years, though. But... who cares, it worked. We have a temporary labor force to help gather the ingredients I need."

"Now, we start our experimentation." Argrave pulled his gloves tighter. "I feel like a travelling scam-artist. I guess I'm not doing anything wrong, exactly."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 50: Bandages

"Such a cruel world," said a deep voice in lamentation. "That the gods should take these hands from you... it is their test. You must stay strong."

Orion wrapped a bandage around the disease-ridden hand of a farmer. The man, likely a common laborer, laid on the floor in a simple mat of blankets. His skin was bloated and waxy. Orion knelt by his side, long black hair bound in a single braid behind him. Throughout the rest of the simple warehouse, the royal knights tended to the other sick. Some of them were already showing signs of disease. Orion's hands, though, were clean of pustules or other blemishes marring the sick.

Orion finished wrapping the hand. "I have blessed you, good man of the realm. The disease is most likened to the pale fingers of Death itself—its dread breath cannot be reversed, only halted, even with the blessings of the gods. Until a cure is found, you must wrap your hands carefully like this every day."

"Bless you, Prince Orion," the man said weakly. "Bless you..."

"I am merely one of the gods' favored, good man, but we are all their children. It is my duty to protect and heal merely because I can." He stroked the man's hair like he was a child, and then stood, plate mail clanging beneath his dirtied white robes.

Orion looked about the room for yet more people to tend to, but one of the royal knights stepped forward. Half of his right cheek was badly deformed by the disease, and his hands were already wrapped in bandages.

"Prince Orion. How much longer must we go untreated?"

Orion looked to the man, then reached out and caressed his cheek. The man very clearly wanted to flinch away. "This plague is a test issued by the gods. Just the same, my good knight, it carries their divine will. You are servants of House Vasquer assigned to me. You are an extension of my divine crook. If you accept their will, I can mold you into true scions of me—of the gods," he whispered.

"Oh, gods..." the man said, nearly breaking down. "We're going to die..." the man fell to his knees.

"If your faith is true and your actions righteous, death will never meet you," Orion said with conviction, kneeling down. "From hardship sprouts greatness. Already, you feel no pain where the gods' plague has touched." Orion stared at the man's bandaged hands.

"When it consumes all of your body, I will give you my blessing and name you the Knights of Moder, heralds for the virtues of the goddess of plague and rot. Your flesh will be as tough as stone, and you will know neither pain nor fear. Do not despair, good knight of Vasquer. Pray to Moder and her mercy. Though the people may suffer, this is your gift," Orion preached enthusiastically. "You will help bring peace and prosperity to Vasquer and the lands beyond it, as is your sworn duty. Did you not take an oath to give your life to the royal family?"

"We're going to die," the royal knight said, face twisting in despair where it could—some of it was rendered immobile from the disease. The knight looked up at Orion. "You're no saint. You're a beast. A demon!" he shouted. Many of the people in the ward turned to look at them.

Orion's face went stiff. He stood, staring down at the man. "To speak ill of a divine herald... a great sin. But mercy is divinity's tool. I forgive you for your words. If you repent, and your faith remains true... you will someday bask in the warmth of the gods' love." Orion placed his hands together, eyes closed as though praying. Then, he opened his eyes and strode past the royal knight, seeking more people to tend to.

"My Prince," another royal knight said, walking closer and whispering. He had yet to be affected by the disease. "I apologize for Will's conduct. But I must ask... how much longer will we remain here? More and more refugees arrive each and every day. Nearly every single house is becoming filled with the sick. Your father the king sent for you near two weeks ago. All of the other princes have surely arrived by now."

“My father will understand,” Orion shook his head. “We will stay here until this disease has been conquered. This is my own war, of much larger scale and importance. Though the air grows cold as autumn ends and the humors in the air do not spread so easily, we must fight to stay this plague before winter passes.”

Orion turned to the knight. “Just as winter will stay the armies, so too will winter stay this disease. Come spring, it will sweep across the kingdom, killing multitudes more than any army might. If the gods thought my logic flawed, they would speak to me. I hear their voices ringing in my head. There is no discouragement. I cannot call myself a man of the gods should I turn my head at the dead and dying. Suffering and happiness are two sides of the same coin.”

Orion patted the knight on the shoulder and then strode past. The knight looked at the prince as he walked away, gaze bouncing between the door and Orion's back. Finally, his sight lowered to the sword on his hip, and he pushed his tongue against his cheek, mired in thought.

A senior knight walked to the other and placed his hand on the pommel of the other's sword. “Don't even consider it. Orion does not need us as guards—I suspect he could face an army naked with only a little trouble. To mutiny would be to die. He may seem mad, but he is blessed. That so few have died here is proof of that.”

“He'd have us all succumb to this plague,” the knight said angrily. “For some delusions of a knightly order. To save the lives of a few peasants in the backwater.”

“Backwater? Some of these men and women are from the northern cities,” the senior knight replied. “Most are from Belleden. Allegedly, even Belleden's Baron has fallen ill with this disease. This plague is indeed a serious one.” The senior knight turned his gaze to Orion. “Most prophets were thought to be mad before they changed the world. It may be hard to accept... but perhaps faith in him may be our best course for the future.”

The senior knight walked away, kneeling before someone begging for water and offering it to them. The knight cast one more glance at the door and then turned away, walking back to offer help to those ill.

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“No,” Argrave directed, leaning forward and pulling a wooden bowl full of a plant's roots from a farmer's hands. The man held a makeshift pestle and gazed up at Argrave. “You boil these without crushing.” Argrave walked over and dumped it in an empty pot, and then conjured some water to fill it. He gave it back, and the directed the man over to the fires.

Everyone in the field was working at making the poisons that Argrave intended to test tonight. The previous day, Argrave had outlined the course of action he would have the villagers take. This morning had been occupied with a trek through the woods, scavenging mushrooms, roots, and flowers. Now, they were brewing enough for one test of each poison recipe Argrave could remember. He had used the excuse of ‘testing this particular colony's resistance to each poison.’

Argrave felt as though he was coordinating a culinary class. Though some stubborn few refused to help, instead tending to the harvest, the vast majority within the village did. It was surprising how effective slight deviations from the truth could be.

"I feel like the Pied Piper," Argrave said to Anneliese a fair distance away from the working villagers. He kept his eye on their processes.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"Clue's in the name. He played pipes, wore pied clothing. He came across a town with a rat infestation. The people hired him, and he played a little song on his magic pipe, and the rats followed him out of town." Argrave looked to Anneliese. "The village refused to pay him after. He played his pipe again, and instead of rats, he led their children out of town."

"Where did he lead them?" she asked, intrigued.

"Dunno." Argrave shook his head. "Into the sea, maybe. Accounts vary, and I wasn't there."

"This happened?" she asked concernedly.

Argrave laughed. "I don't think so. It's just a little tale designed to teach morality. Guess it's in line with Veidimen teachings—never renege on a contract, or an instrumentalist will steal your children."

"I must have missed that in Veid's scriptures," she said drolly.

"Careful with the snark. It's like a drug; too much and you become addicted. You'll never take any conversation seriously again."

She stepped in front of him and turned, crossing her arms and staring. "Like you?"

"I'd call myself a responsible user," Argrave said with a contemplative nod. "Enough to take the edge off, but not enough to cease functioning in society."

Anneliese tilted her head. "You have a strange definition of responsible."

Argrave heard the sound of something dragging against the dirt from behind and turned around. Galamon held his bow in one hand, the other holding onto a rope slung over his shoulder. Behind, he dragged two dead deer along, each of their four legs bunched together and tied by rope. He released them and walked to Argrave.

"Forest is quiet. Not a lot of game—not even small creatures. Worse near the lily fields. Had to go far to find these." Galamon looked back.

"Figures." Argrave nodded. "Any more you need to go back and retrieve?"

"No." Galamon turned to Argrave. "You need more?"

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek as he thought. "This part is only for the testing. I think it should be fine. We need only spread them a bit thin. I had hoped to try venison, but oh well." Argrave looked to his labor force. "I think some of the people here are hunters—you might ask them for help with the butchering."

"No need," Galamon dismissed. "I am enough."

"Right. Sure." Argrave put his hand to his chin. "We can use just about everything. Don't even need to remove the bones."

Argrave looked back to his conscripted workers. "As much as I'd like to get this done quickly, I'd much prefer it be done right. Things will be calm throughout Vasquer for a time... relatively speaking. But the calmer it is, the greater the tempest." Argrave said with a low voice. "It's best we use our time wisely."

Galamon and Anneliese both nodded. Argrave walked back into the crowd, overseeing their rudimentary brewing in pots and pans found throughout the village.