

## Jackal 81

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 81: Farewell Once Again

"What do you mean, 'the Duchess won't be coming?'" Induen pronounced each word very deliberately, teeth clenched tight in anger. The prince was in a small, shabby room that seemed to be abandoned. It was poorly lit by moonlight through covered windows. Just behind him, his escort of four disguised royal knights stood alert. Their focus was devoted to the man adjacent to their prince, each very wary as though the man was likely to lunge at any second.

"Just that, Prince Induen," the man replied. He was smaller than Induen, but his presence had an indomitability one might liken to a rock. He wore rounded steel armor that seemed especially thick and heavy, so one could not see his face. A warhammer hung from his waist. His helmet was wrought in the shape of a boar.

"The Duchess will not be coming," the man repeated.

"Why?" Induen insisted. "Has something come up? Something more important than her prince?"

"The situation has changed. The Duchess does not feel it is in her best interest to meet," the boar-masked knight laid out plainly.

"House Parbon does not think it is in their best interest to give faithful service to my father." Induen stepped forward, moonlight dancing across his face until he came to stand before the man, peering at his eyes inside the helmet. "Are these two things related, I wonder? I should hope not. If you need an example of what defiance brings, you need only look to Parbon's vassals. That should be clear enough message."

Despite Induen's formidable presence, the boar-helmet knight did not move at all. Though the prince's breath came close enough to fog the well-polished steel helm, his hands stayed at his side, disciplined and unafraid.

"The situation has changed," the knight repeated.

Induen seemed to have some difficulty restraining his irritation. When he seemed liable to lash out, he turned away quickly, leaving his back to the boar-masked knight. "How has it changed? What's changed?" the prince asked coldly.

"The Duchess said it is because Jast has allied with House Parbon."

Induen's breathing grew quicker, and he reached at his side, pulling free a white dagger gilded with gold. It was the same dagger that Margrave Reinhardt had used in their fight together, and it still shone with enchantments. He stared at it, fixated, slowing his breathing until it was calm. "This is... news to me."

Induen put away the knife, and then turned around. "You. The Duchess belongs to House Cael. The sigil of House Cael is a boar. Are you a scion of that house?"

"No," the knight said.

"A champion, then?" the prince pressed.

“Once,” the knight said. “Now, I am someone the duchess is willing to let die.”

“It seems she is quick to discard things,” the prince noted.

“Yes,” the knight agreed.

Induen placed a hand on his hip. “What is your name, knight?”

“Unimportant. If you need a name, most call me Boarmask.”

“Hah.” Induen scoffed. “Which came first—the name, or the helmet?”

“Helmet,” the knight replied seriously.

“Well, Boarmask.” The prince stepped closer. “I dislike the idea of going to fetch something and returning with nothing. You said you were once a champion of House Cael. Do you care to champion your prince?”

Boarmask stared at Induen. “No.”

Induen raised his head, evidently not expecting that answer so quickly. ““No,”” Induen repeated. “I often like brevity, but yours infuriates me. Why do you refuse me? Do you not realize your situation?”

“I am leaving Elbraille tonight,” Boarmask said. “In search of the ideal master.”

“Yet you decline me, a prince,” Induen said.

“Would you die for me?” Boarmask asked.

Induen laughed. “A master to die for their knight? Perhaps you’ve the order reversed. You will die an errant knight if that is what you seek.”

“So it shall be,” Boarmask said. He stepped forward past Prince Induen, past his royal guards, and opened the door, leaving.

A silence settled in the abandoned room, the moonlight moving ever so slowly and reflecting off the dust hanging in the air.

“Prince... if you wish, we can...” one of the knights alluded, knowing well their master’s vindictiveness.

“No. I know that one. He had another nickname, but it seems that it’s changed. He was the Romantic Warrior. Perhaps he disliked the implication and donned that helm. It seems he is ever in search of the ideal master.” Induen shook his head. “A fool. He’ll die one, too, but not by my hand. I doubt you are capable enough to dispatch him, anyway.”

Induen pulled out the Margrave’s dagger. “I will not return to the capital with empty hands.” He ran his gauntleted finger across the blade, scratching the steel armor. “Neither the Duke nor the Duchess will break cleanly. What I bite, I hold ‘til I die.”

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Argrave adjusted the things on their carriage, settling everything into place. Beside him, Galamon lifted one more chest and put it in the luggage compartment. Argrave looked behind him, but there was

nothing more to put on the carriage. Argrave did one last examination to be sure everything was secure, tugging on what was there and testing it. Content, Argrave turned his head back towards the distant black walls of Jast.

They had gotten everything they needed from Jast. Galamon's newly forged greatsword hung from his hip, just opposite his dagger. Both were enchanted. Argrave could not deduce the quality by sight alone, but he supposed they would soon have occasion to test them out. In addition, his armor had been remade, covering the gaping hole in the torso. The crown taken from the ruins near Barden rested in Galamon's helmet, hidden beneath steel. The elven mercenary had always been potent, but with the crown enhancing his physical abilities, he would be a force to be reckoned with. To top all of that off, Galamon had both Ebonice arrows and enchanted arrows, each numbering near twenty.

Argrave and Anneliese had donned their enchanted gear, clothed in fine leather and wearing rings with B-rank warding magic engraved into them. They could cast a B-rank warding spell twenty times before a recharge was necessary. Argrave hoped to learn how to recharge enchanted gear himself eventually, but that was a distant goal.

And lastly, the Amaranthine Heart had given Argrave gallons of liquid magic over the course of days. It had been an expensive endeavor. All of the liquid was stored within the main portion of the carriage where he and Anneliese would sit. With so much excess, he had decided to have Anneliese drink the stuff as well. Provided she was diligent in expending magic in practice, it would enable her magic capacity to grow faster just as his did.

"That's quite a lot of stuff you have," commented Elias from behind.

Argrave looked to him, and then shut the luggage compartment's lid. "So it is."

Perhaps if the bronze hand mirror in his pocket had any use beyond telling him things he knew, it might not be so troublesome to bring his books and the liquid magic produced by the Amaranthine Heart. It was a wonder the protagonist of a game could haul so many things around.

Then again, a protagonist did not need to sleep, eat, or drink, and was incapable of feeling fatigue. A playable character was quite a terrifying figure, bluntly—they blindly rush into any danger, they never fail, and each has a single-minded drive towards achieving just about anything.

That role had been delegated to Argrave.

"Now..." Elias' voice brought Argrave from his hazy thoughts. The red-haired young lord rubbed his hands together as though they were cold. "I have to get my father's permission for all of this."

"Incorrect," Argrave shook his head. "I don't think he can reasonably renege. It would do too much damage." Argrave poked his chest. "All you have to get is his forgiveness."

Elias blinked for a few seconds. "But you said... I could always get permission later."

"You've been cheated. Duped." Argrave clapped his hands together. His newly worn metal ring beneath his gloves struck his knuckle, and he winced. *Damn. Not used to that.*

Argrave parted his hands, rubbing his tender knuckle. "I only said that so you would agree. I'm sure Margrave Reinhardt will be furious at the liberties you've taken."

Elias did not know how to process this, standing there mouth agape.

“Let me teach you a valuable lesson imparted unto me by sages of old. It is better to seek forgiveness than ask for permission.” Argrave nodded, and then patted Elias’ shoulder. “On that note, please forgive me. It had to be done. If you wish, lay all the blame on me. I am perfectly willing to accept yet more of your father’s loathing.”

“No, I...” Elias looked at the ground. “It was still my decision. I cannot let you suffer for it.”

“I knew you would say that,” Argrave nodded. “It’s why I even brought up the idea: I knew you’d never do such a thing. It’s too reasonable.”

“You are...” Elias paused. “A real bastard,” he finally said, with brief laughter.

“So I am often told,” Argrave nodded. “One more thing. Be careful on your journey home,” he said sternly, stepping closer to Elias and staring down at him. “I’m not telling you to drive safely, but rather make sure you don’t end up in a ditch with a knife in your gut. Just because it feels like things have settled down doesn’t mean you can relax. Delbraun might have other plans for that contingent of mages following you home, if you catch my drift.”

“Gods, you sound just like Helmuth.” Elias shook his head. “All near me have made that clear. And besides, my... betrothed...” he stumbled over the word, evidently unused to saying it. “...will be coming with us. I doubt Delbraun would try anything.”

Argrave spread his arms out. “Good. In that case, I’m leaving. If you don’t hear about me for months, assume I died horribly. Hold a funeral, maybe.”

“What are you...?” Elias trailed off confusedly, but Argrave had already turned to walk to the carriage. Galamon followed just beside him. “Hold on. I have more.”

Argrave turned. “Is this about Stain? He’s a tough kid. He’ll be fine.”

“No,” Elias stepped closer so he did not need to shout. “I decided to take Vel—err, Stain, with me to Parbon. He has some insights about subterfuge that I think would be helpful to my father.”

“Good idea,” Argrave nodded. “What, then, is your question?”

Elias bit his lip, brooding on where to begin. “My mage, Helmuth... he told me not to associate with you. He told me he saw something within you... an abyss,” Elias outlined. “It may sound strange, but Helmuth’s ascendance to an A-rank mage gave him unusual abilities. His eyes—”

“He has a touch of Truesight. I know.” Argrave nodded. “And I knew what he would see. That was why I brought Rowe—so things wouldn’t get out of hand.”

Elias swallowed. “So... you knew, this whole time. Maybe you know my question.”

“Not hard to guess, exactly,” Argrave chuckled. “Anyway, I’ll see you later.”

Elias’ face morphed in confusion, and Argrave turned once more. Argrave opened the carriage door, and Anneliese lifted up her head from within, looking at Argrave. He took one step into the carriage when Elias called out, “Wait!”

Argrave waited, leaning off the carriage while holding the door's handle.

"What is it? What did Helmuth see?" Elias asked.

"Like I said, I know what you wanted to ask me." Argrave sat inside and started to shut the carriage door. "This is called stonewalling. I taught you about it a while ago."

Elias stopped the door. Galamon stepped closer, standing over Elias and looking down at him, as if in warning.

"Why don't you wish to tell me?" Elias insisted, unintimidated.

Argrave sighed. "You're the 'honest to a fault,' type. You'd make a good friend, but a poor confidant for that reason. I have secrets. I'd like them kept."

Elias mulled that over for a time, staring Argrave down. Eventually, he released the carriage door. Argrave took the opportunity to shut it.

"Here we are once more," said Argrave to Anneliese, quickly dismissing the former conversation from his mind to dispel the guilt he felt. "Long drives, nothing to do but read and talk. Plain, tasteless, but preservable food. And at the end, a promise of misery and hardship."

Anneliese nodded, a book already open on her lap. "The first part is not so bad."

Argrave raised a brow. "I'm glad you agree."

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 82: The Wider World**

"She is too old," Helmuth said, sitting just beside Elias.

"You've said this," replied Elias, cradling his head with one hand. "You've said this many, many times. My father married late. This is no different. Stop talking about it."

Elias, Baron Abraham, Stain, and Helmuth sat around a table, each eating quietly. Stain was more than a little uncomfortable in their company. He felt like he had traded one well-dressed noble family for another, but Elias insisted on having him return to Parbon. At the very least, his presence assuaged his sister Ridia's fears about her new would-be-husband.

Helmuth set his spoon down, and it sunk into the bowl of soup. "It's different now. House Parbon will need many heirs. She is too old."

"I should marry half a child instead?" Elias lowered his hand. "I want someone to share life with, not someone whom I can make more children with."

"Delbraun's daughter would have grown older." Helmuth crossed his arms. "After this war, Parbon will be at the peak of prominence. If you have fewer heirs, Parbon cannot capitalize on this advantage."

Elias slammed his fist on the table. "Did you forget why my father started this war? This isn't about benefits, isn't about advantages or disadvantages. My uncle sits in the dungeons, bound in chains and starved. The people suffer under Vasquer, who grasps for power like no other." Elias shook his head. "Get out, Helmuth. I don't want to hear any more of what you have to say."

Helmuth stared for a moment, and Elias held his gaze. He picked up his bowl of soup and went for the door, leaving quietly. Elias picked up his spoon, ready to resume eating, but Baron Abraham also stood.

"I'm going to go join him," the Baron said quietly, then left just the same way.

Once the door had shut behind them, Elias lowered his head and sighed.

"You're wound awfully tight," Stain noted. "I guess I get it. Scary thing, marriage. My sister's a nice lady, though. She's shy, and that's probably perfect for someone like you—all chivalry, all honesty, all sweetness. You'll have her wrapped about your finger soon enough, don't worry." Stain held his fist up as though cheering him on.

"It's not..." Elias was about to refute, but then sighed once more. "I suppose there is some of that in there. But the reality of what's happening is setting in. War. One of my father's vassals was slain by unknown assailants, half his village burned down. And..." Elias tapped his fingers against the table. "...I'm starting to question if being honest and good is even worth it at all if someone you trusted your future with can't return the favor in the slightest."

"Heh." Stain rubbed beneath his nose. "You're starting to see. It's simple—trust yourself and no one else. That's how I was raised. I turned out okay."

Elias snorted, then crossed his arms. His brows furrowed as though he had a realization. "I guess... I can't really know how Argrave was raised. He might not be a trusting person, and we haven't exactly been close in the past... maybe..." He trailed off, and then shook his head. "Forget it. I need to put this behind me. These next months will be busy for me, I suspect."

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Duke Enrico hunched over a book, his study dimly lit by candlelight. His blue hair was uncharacteristically disheveled, falling over his face in greasy strands. The book was a very old thing, veritably crumbling, and the Duke flipped to the final page. A few moments passed as he read through it. Once he finished, he closed it, sighing.

He leaned back into his chair, eyes closed as he lost himself in thought. The candlelight flickered, wax dripping down the tall white stick in the silent study. A knock came at the door, drawing Enrico from his thoughts.

"Enter," he called out, voice hoarse from fatigue. The door opened, and his daughter, Nikoletta, stood there, magic lamp held in hand.

"Are you busy, father?" she questioned.

"No, no, never too busy for you," he said, some vigor returned to his tone at the sight of his daughter. He stood, gesturing to the chair opposite his desk. "Have a seat. What's the matter? It's awfully late."

After shutting the door, Nikoletta walked in and took a seat as her father had instructed. "I just... couldn't sleep." She looked across his desk. "What are you reading? Looks... old."

"I've been looking into that thing Argrave told you of. Gerechtigheit. Most of these books are from distant lands, translated into our tongue." Enrico picked one book up. "It's... very difficult to read, poorly

translated... yet despite these facts, I have found mention of this entity," the Duke said seriously. "That, alone, is concerning."

"So, do you believe it exists?" she questioned. "This ancient calamity?"

"The tales are consistent, the dates are consistent, and the tumult before its appearance... is consistent with what we experience now." The Duke set his elbows on the table and leaned in, bloodshot pink eyes glowing in the candlelight. "The only thing that isn't exactly consistent is *what* Gerechtigkei is."

"You didn't answer my question, father," she insisted. "Do you think it's real?"

Duke Enrico said nothing, gaze growing distant as he thought on her question. After a long time of silence, he finally answered, "I think it would be best if we preserve and build our military strength. Because everything that I've read... concerns me."

"I... see," she said quietly.

Enrico's eyes stayed locked on her, and eventually his gaze softened. "Speaking of concerning... why are you having trouble sleeping?"

"Oh..." she rubbed her eyes, reminded of her tiredness. "Just... my mind won't stop working. You've recovered, father. Why must I remain regent, especially during the rebuilding of Mateth? I keep stressing, and worrying that I might do something wrong, or..."

"It's precisely because you're rebuilding that you should remain regent," the Duke said firmly. "I am old, and grow older yet. One day, you will be Duchess in your own right... or perhaps even Queen. It is important that you know rulership well, and there are few better ways to know it than to rule."

"But if I make a mistake...!"

"I never said you could not ask me anything, Nikoletta," the Duke smiled. "If you are uncertain, or if you have doubts, I will impart to you all that I know." Enrico rubbed his hands together, and then, as if reminded of something, added, "I believe it is important to give your children responsibility. This is a lesson you should learn, I think, before Argrave returns and this war is settled."

"Haha..." she laughed awkwardly, lowering her head.

"That business in Jast established him as firmly opposed to Vasquer, in my eyes." The Duke leaned back in his chair. "It is a good thing, too. I... after the battle, after nearly dying... it would mean a great deal to me to be able to hold my grandchildren in my arms. I hope you know I'm proud of you, Nikoletta."

Nikoletta stared at her knees, and Enrico noticed something was amiss. "What's wrong?" he asked, leaning forward.

"I-I... I have something to tell, you, father." She lifted her head and met the Duke's gaze. Her lower lip trembled as she proceeded. "I don't think... I'm not like..." she trailed off, unable to finish the words.

"What's the matter?" the Duke insisted concernedly.

"I don't think..." she lifted her eyes to the Duke's, examining his features. "I don't know if I'm... ready for this," she finished.

"Is that what's bothering you?" the Duke stood, walking out from behind the desk. "Listen. When I was betrothed to your mother, I had these exact same thoughts. It was stifling, it was overwhelming, and I felt unprepared." Enrico knelt down and hugged his daughter. "The truth is, though, you can't ever be 'ready' for something like this."

"Yeah," she muttered weakly.

"But you can't let it consume you," he said with conviction. "Put it behind you. Move forward. Once you accept it, embrace it, you'll realize that all your fears were for nothing." He pulled away, gazing into his daughter's eyes. "Okay?"

"Okay," she nodded.

The Duke nodded in turn, and then stood up. "Maybe you should leave tomorrow to me, take a break. Some time to relax may do you some good. I am still here, despite my plans for the opposite," the Duke assured. "Maybe you can enjoy some time with Mina? You two are still good friends, from what I know."

"Mina is going to be leaving soon," Nikoletta said hollowly, staring at the ground. "She should probably go back to her father's estate. It would be for the best."

"Really? I had no idea she would be leaving." The Duke walked back to his desk. "Such a thing would be sensible, given all that's going on. She's welcome to stay as long as she likes, you know."

"I know," Nikoletta nodded. "Even still, it would be for the best."

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Argrave and Anneliese sat across from each other. Their postures were uncannily identical—both had a bottle partially full of black liquid at their side, their legs crossed over the other, with a book supported by their knee. That, coupled with their all-too-similar gray leather outfits made quite the picturesque scene in the small carriage, but both of the passengers within seemed to be ignorant of that.

Anneliese looked up from her book. "Did you know about the founder of House Vasquer?"

"What about him?" Argrave answered absently.

"Apparently, he led his armies alongside of a host of snakes, who bit his enemies at his command."

"Yeah. His 'Legion of Ten Thousand Snakes.' Interesting stuff," Argrave nodded, but then frowned. "But where did you hear about that?"

She shrugged. "I read it."

"From what? Where did you get the book?" Argrave insisted.

"I sold some things I brought with me from Veiden, and I bought it." She shook her head. "I know I should have been learning more spells, but I needed something to break the monotony. Forgive me."

Argrave was more amazed than irritated, so he shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't mind, as long as it doesn't take up too much of our time. You might've asked. I would have bought it for you."



"I know. But it was my interest, not yours, and you do enough already." She looked down at her book again. "After reading it, I thought to ask you... I wonder if he used druidic magic. I am not so arrogant as to think my people were the first to—"

"Argrave," Galamon interrupted loudly, tapping the side of the door. "That belltower you mentioned. I see it."

"Really?" Argrave pulled aside the curtain blocking the window, and looked outside. After adjusting to the sunlight briefly, he saw beyond.

"Ah. There it is. Ritmont." Argrave proclaimed, leaning out the window. "Take a good, long look. These are to be the last vestiges of civilization we take with into our memory before traversing the treacherous Low Road of the Rose."

"Have you any escapades planned here?" Anneliese inquired somewhat sarcastically.

Argrave returned back into the carriage. "If you consider spending money an escapade, sure. This time, we'll be buying supplies for the Low Road. Shouldn't take long, and we're still loaded with lucre."

Argrave looked to his lockbox. "We've twenty-seven rose gold magic coins remaining, and much more gold coins in hand. A little higher than I expected, honestly, after the money-sink that was Jast."

"I know what to buy," contributed Galamon, driving the carriage outside. "Caving... we'll need plenty of things."

"I'll trust you for a lot, but the Low Way isn't your average cave. It's hardly a cave. I'd call it an underground world," Argrave cautioned. "We'll need to prepare differently than you might think."

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 83: Backpacking**

Galamon hefted a giant pack over his shoulder. With both his armor and the pack, he could not weigh less than five hundred pounds presently. The well-built snow elf rolled his shoulders, testing the weight. Argrave wondered if the straps would snap, given time.

"You look somewhat pitiful," commented Argrave, wearing his own pack. It was mostly full of water and other such essentials, and quite light compared to Galamon's or even Anneliese's.

"It would be more pitiful watching you try and lift this pack," refuted Galamon. He tapped his fingers against his helm. "With that crown from the ruins, this will prove no burden. Even still... low food, low water... for a long trek as you claim this to be, we are woefully unprepared. You should return more books, pack more essentials."

"It's like I told you—stop thinking of it as a cave." Argrave fit his thumb beneath the strap of his backpack, adjusting it. "If you can confidently hunt for food in a forest, we'll have no trouble staying alive and well-fed in the Low Way. Even you, strange eating habits that you have. This place has a river, and many springs. I even know what foliage is edible. Anneliese and I can munch on mushrooms if need be."

Galamon turned his head away, unconvinced, and Argrave looked about the quaint settlement of Ritmont. It was a relatively humble walled town, mostly relying on agriculture for prosperity. Its

proximity to a river and its position crammed between the territories of Jast, Elbraille, and Parbon made it a minor hub of trade, and the place was moderately well-developed. The roads were paved, the guards were well-equipped, and the buildings sturdy. That said, it had no lord—the people walking about were under the Duke of Elbraille directly.

Argrave had stopped here because it was the last vestige of civilization that had a connection to the Order of the Gray Owl, and he had some books to leave behind. It was costing him a good deal to have the tomes delivered back to Jast, but he was not lacking in money. There were many books to return on account of the fact that Argrave and Anneliese both had made tremendous strides in magic.

In their time at Jast and in the road to Ritmont, Argrave felt he'd covered all of his bases. He had examined the statistics on his bronze hand mirror for the first time in a while.

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

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

He'd learned C-rank healing spells in case of emergencies, C-rank warding spells to deal with lesser attacks, and C-rank elemental spells of some variety to cover all his bases as according to each element's strengths. Anneliese had done much the same, though her array of spells was already quite diverse as she had been at C-rank longer than Argrave.

Beyond that, Argrave had learned one blood magic spell at C-rank: [Pain's Thorn], a long-range bolt not dissimilar to the D-rank spell of the same school, [Pierce]. Blood magic was most effective at quick bursts of extreme power, in Argrave's estimation, and until he was Black Blooded, he did not intend to learn any more blood magic.

"Will you keep with tradition and inform us of our objective only once we have arrived at this Low Way?" Anneliese asked pointedly.

Argrave clicked his tongue, drawn from his thoughts. "Awfully cheeky, but you're not wrong. I'm tempted to do just that when you paint me as such a monster." He adjusted the backpack on his shoulder. "Well, I've never been a traditionalist, and for this journey, there's a lot to explain. We've got everything packed in our bags. Let's return to the carriage and discuss things."

They walked out the gates of Ritmont, and Argrave set his bag inside the carriage, just beside the many satchels full of the black liquid magic created by the Amaranthine Heart. He sat on the side of the carriage, while Anneliese and Galamon both stowed their backpacks in the luggage compartment of the carriage.

"Okay. Before we begin, I'm going to consult you two about this. Frankly, I've been torn this entire journey." Argrave rubbed his hands together, and then eventually conjured a ward to block out their conversation for caution's sake.

"So... there's a coven of vampires within the Low Way. They're mostly reclusive barring the occasional gruesome murder, but they also have something that I need. We have two options." Argrave raised one finger. "Entreat them for the thing." Argrave raised the second finger. "Annihilate them."

Galamon and Anneliese had been with Argrave long enough to follow his train of thought. Galamon was the first to respond, saying, "For vampires, there is only one option. Pull them out by the root. Take no chances."

Argrave crossed his arms. "You might see why those words are somewhat dubious coming from you, Galamon, if you introspect."

"I am aware of the irony. My own existence is an antithesis to my ideals. I should kill myself... but I value my life over my values." Galamon stared Argrave down. "It is a source of shame and guilt to me. But I know the beast that chains vampires just as they do, and I know also that scant few of them can be trusted to control it. Even I have faltered before the hunger... as you well know, Argrave."

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, surprised by his companion's uncompromising answer.

Before he could offer a response, Anneliese questioned, "Do you truly believe you can reason with this coven?"

"There's forty of them," Argrave brought his hand to his chin. "Maybe less. Some of them may have died, hunted by the Stonepetal Sentinels. You might think such a size would be difficult to sustain, but a literal river of blood runs through the Low Way. It tastes foul, supposedly, but it sates their hunger."

"And the answer to my question?" Anneliese pressed.

Argrave laughed. "As I'm sure that you've discovered, I can reason with a lot of people that seem difficult to reason with. The infamously unruly Rowe 'the Righteous' even confessed his admiration towards my abilities... in between calling me a 'wormy bastard,' or something like that." Argrave spread his hands out. "I can do it, I think."

"But you won't," said Galamon. "You won't even try."

Argrave frowned, and Anneliese contributed, "I am inclined to agree with Galamon on this matter. Most vampires... are not worth risking our lives for."

"Careful. You'll make Galamon shed tears of blood," Argrave said, voice distant. "Alright, alright," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "You outnumber me. I submit. In that case, we'll be working closely with the Stonepetal Sentinels. These guys... aren't pleasant. It's why I even considered the option of diplomacy with vampires."

"Who are these Sentinels?" Anneliese questioned.

"They call themselves 'the last remnants of the Order of the Rose.' There's truth to that, I guess. They're knights and mages who have pledged themselves to ridding the Low Way of the abominations created by the Order of the Rose. The last sentinels against the tide of abominations. Of late, they've been trying to combat this vampire coven."

Anneliese nodded. "They do not sound so terrible."

Argrave looked off to the distance. "The Stonepetal Sentinels retained all the unpleasant traits of the Order from which they descend. They don't like outsiders, who they view as people seeking to steal their wealth and knowledge. They're arrogant, because even after all the abominations the Order of the

Rose has brought to the world, their magic is still pretty potent. Of course, they lost most of the important magic. Faded glory, all that,” Argrave shook his head.

“They’re brash and rough on account of years of patrolling the Low Way, and they view everyone who isn’t descended from the Order of the Rose as lesser.” Argrave gaze jumped between the two of them. “Especially those who aren’t human. Unlike in Jast, where the biggest enemy was the common man, the Stonepetal Sentinels have many mages in their number, so a simple Circlet of Disguise will not be sufficient to disguise your elven heritage.”

“I see.” Anneliese nodded. “After what occurred at Mateth, they may not be especially welcoming to us.”

“True enough, if news of it has even reached them. Let’s hope not.” Argrave directed his attention to Galamon. “I hope you’ll rein yourself in, Galamon. No matter what they say, just ignore it. Just because we’re going on the Low Way doesn’t mean you can’t take the high road.”

Galamon frowned in confusion, Argrave’s idiom lost on him. He said nothing to Argrave’s warning.

Anneliese followed up, asking, “Once we retrieve this item, we will proceed into the Burnt Desert?”

“Nope,” Argrave shook his head. “Well, yes, technically, when you consider that the item we need is on the path. Along the way, we’ll fetch the Crimson Wellspring. This object is what creates the rivers of blood flowing throughout the Low Way, and is yet another ingredient to make me Black Blooded. Coupled with the item the vampires have, it’ll be three out of four. The last is in the Burnt Desert.”

Anneliese processed what Argrave had said. “One item to draw magic from life... another to create ceaseless blood—ceaseless vitality,” she connected the dots. “And this item from the vampire coven—what exactly does it do?”

“It’s a scalpel to be used for the surgery to make me Black Blooded. I’m not sure of the specifics... but it doesn’t actually cut. It modifies and morphs flesh, and even bends the spirit...” Argrave thought about it and had a spontaneous shudder. “The vampires call it the Unsullied Knife. They tried to use it to cure their vampirism—excise the beast out of them. After failing, they hoard it. I suppose there’s nothing else they could have done with it, but it is still unfortunate.”

“What foes will we face beyond the vampires?” Galamon questioned.

“Now that’s the important question,” Argrave pointed his finger at Galamon. “It’s important to know how to deal with the Guardians in the Low Way. This’ll be a long one, folks, so let me wet my throat and get comfortable...”

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 84: Stone Vigil**

A vast mountain towered overhead, like a sheer wall of gray stone warding off all who would dare approach. At its base, a great opening gave way into sheer darkness. The hole was so large that it could be seen far in the distance—indeed, if one could see the mountain, one could likely see the gaping entrance.

The opening was a perfect half-circle. Perhaps one hundred men could walk side-by-side and enter without issue, and its highest point was about three hundred feet tall. Briars carved from stone seemed to emerge from the tunnels, clawing up the side of the mountain before blossoming into brilliant stone roses. The years had defaced both the briars and the roses, many chipped or discolored by the elements.

A great wall of stone formed a half-ring fortress around the tunnel, and though formidable, it still paled in comparison to the entrance it protected. Much of the stone fortification had crumbled, yet people still persisted within, pitching tents and hosting fires in the vacant courtyard of the ruined castle. Much of the fortifications had been repurposed—instead of protecting against invaders that would come *to* the tunnel, they protected against that which might emerge *from* it.

Heavily armored knights roamed the entrance, keeping watch on the inky darkness beyond. Their armor bore a surcoat with a rose on the front, though all of the colors had faded to gray, and many bore miscolored patches as a consequence of repair. Despite the poor look of the surcoat, the steel was polished and glimmering. Magic persisted on the armor's surface, each set thoroughly enchanted. Many of the knights bore sashes across their chest. These sashes had roses carved of stone pinned to them, each of identical quality. Some knights had many stone roses, while others had only one or two.

Light flickered in the darkness inside the tunnels. Most of the knights quickly came to attention. One, a knight bearing at least twenty stone roses on his sash, grabbed a horn from his side and raised his visor. He stepped past the simple stone fortifications, scarred face deathly still and serious as though awaiting a threat. The light came ever closer, dancing out of the darkness.

The sound of steel clanking echoed out. It soon became clear the light was torchlight, and the ones bearing it were knights just the same as those watching outside. The old knight relaxed somewhat, and then raised the horn to his lips, taking a deep breath. The sound echoed out across the ruined castle, and at once, people came from their tents, most armed and ready.

The old knight took off his helmet entirely, letting his unruly and matted gray hair fall to his shoulders. He stepped towards the entrance of the tunnel with slow, measured steps, moving to meet the emerging party. Once he had moved close enough to them, the emerging party slowed, and then pounded their fist against their heart.

"Greetings to Master Sentinel Alasdair!" they all shouted, somewhat synchronously.

"Relax, men," Alasdair said, raising a hand. "Where is Knight Dirk?"

One of the sentinels stepped forward. "Reporting, sir. Knight Dirk died."

"A Knight of a Dozen Roses died on a simple culling trip?" Alasdair said incredulously. "Have the beasts grown bolder yet?"

"No, sir." The knight removed his helmet. "A portion of the road collapsed beneath him as he led. He fell and broke his neck."

Alasdair sighed, raising a gauntleted hand to his mouth. "The fool. Too skilled, but overeager." Alasdair looked up. "His body?"

"Lost, sir." The knight could not look up. "He... his body fell too far. It tipped into the canals."

Alasdair looked to the rest of the knights. None of them looked accomplished, merely weary and defeated. Deciding there was no point in harping on the matter, Alasdair nodded.

"It was unavoidable." He grabbed the knight's shoulders. "We must fight on with Dirk in our memories."

"My memories of the dead are starting to replace each other," a Sentinel said, stepping forward and removing his helmet. He had dark hair, barely green, and a mischievous look about him coupled with shrewd eyes. "I'm starting to confuse them. Was Dirk the one with one-eye, or that scar across his forehead?"

"Ossian," Alasdair said coldly. "Show respect."

"I don't need to obey you, not anymore. I lived another journey: I receive another rose. We're both Master Sentinels, you and I, Alasdair." Ossian walked forth, his hand held out. "Do the honors."

Alasdair glared at the younger knight. "Do it yourself, if you're my equal."

Ossian clenched his outstretched hand and smiled. "With pleasure." He looked around, then moved to a rock. He picked it up, weighing it in his hand, before tossing it aside and picking up another. Satisfied, he cast a spell. He shook it, and stone fell away from the rock, revealing a perfect rose. He raised it and pinned it to the top of his sash.

"There we have it. Twenty journeys, twenty survivals. I do believe I am the youngest Master in the Sentinels." Ossian smiled.

"You'll never be given command, you know," Alasdair said coldly.

Ossian waved his hands. "I don't need such a thing." He spared one last glance at the group he'd emerged from the tunnels with, and then shook his head. "Well, I'm going to eat and sleep. The rest can do the report."

Alasdair glared at Ossian, veritably trying to bore holes in the knight's helmet with his gaze alone. The younger knight walked away, helmet dangling from his hands.

"Alasdair, sir..." the knight who'd reported Dirk's death began. "Ossian led us out of there. After the collapse, he took us all out and made sure we met our quota of kills. Not one of us died."

Alasdair looked to the knight, brows furrowed. He opened his mouth, ready to say something, but a horn sounded across their encampment. They came to attention, looking at the wall the sound came from. The horn blew twice more.

"Visitors?" Alasdair muttered, stepping away.

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"Jesus. Did they really need to blow the horn?" Argrave complained, nervously adjusting the pack on his back. "Three people, they blow a damn horn. Can't I just have a quiet entry? I'm tired of a host of well-armed men greeting me whenever I go someplace."

Argrave trudged ahead, while Anneliese and Galamon marveled at the vast tunnel behind the half-ring fort. Argrave found that the entrance was so large it was vaguely unsettling.

"I go to Veiden, there's a bunch of warriors and a damned dragon sitting there. I return from Veiden, Nikoletta commits battery against me with a parade of steel trailing behind, and now here..."

Argrave watched as more and more people showed up to the walls. They peered down. The gates of the fort were already open, as the walls of the fortress had deteriorated to the point where keeping it closed would be pointless.

"Not many humans come to Veiden. Fewer return from it. Both noteworthy events," Anneliese rebutted. "And now, not many people are brazen enough to approach a 'paramilitary organization,' as you called it, in their fortress."

"Just let me complain. It makes me less nervous," said Argrave distantly, focused on what lay ahead of them.

A man stepped beneath the open portcullis at the front of the fortress, his helmet off. His hair was gray and unruly, matted and stifled from being suppressed beneath a helmet for so long. He marched deliberately towards them, alone barring the three waiting at the gate. As Argrave advanced, he started to recognize the man: Master Sentinel Alasdair.

"Great. Of all the people to greet me, I get Alasdair..." Argrave muttered, then stepped forward, greeting warmly, "Hello!"

"Halt. Keep your distance," Alasdair held out his hand. "Outsiders are not welcome. If you seek shelter, leave now. This is a knightly order, not a place for refugees."

"Are you..." Argrave trailed off, as though grasping for a name. "Master Sentinel Alasdair?"

Alasdair, not anticipating being recognized, place his hand on the pommel of the sword at his waist. The motion earned Galamon's caution, who came to attention. Argrave tried to warn the vampire with his eyes, but little could be communicated with glances alone.

"I am. How do you recognize me?" He frowned, pondering. "One of the servants for the merchants we use for supply, perhaps?" His gray eyes scrutinized Argrave. "No... your clothes are too well-made for that. Enchanted leather. And elven companions. Who are you?"

"It's an honor to meet you, sir. I've heard tales of you, sir," Argrave said excitedly. He was doing his best to put on an act reminiscent of an overexcited, naïve nobleman fed stories about the Sentinels. "I am Argrave of Blackgard. I hail from the distant north. My family once presided over the Blackridge Citadel, in the times when the Order of the Rose still held prominence in Vasquer."

"How...?" Alasdair trailed off, then looked away, shifting on his feet. "I don't know Blackgard, but the name Blackridge Citadel is familiar. I think I get it. You're a fallen noble from a house with connections to the Order of the Rose." Alasdair shook his head. "My answer is unchanged. We don't accept refugees. We don't get involved with politics, either. If you've any delusions—"

"I'm not here for refuge. I'm here for the Low Way, sir," Argrave said seriously. "I've been marching for months. I thought my last stop would be Thorngorge Citadel—perhaps you know of it, sir?"

Alasdair bit his lips, looking vaguely as though he didn't care. Once the name clicked, he looked to Argrave suspiciously. "It's that place near Jast... I don't think it's publicly known."

“Indeed, it isn’t,” confirmed Argrave. “I went there in search of a relic of antiquity—an heirloom of my family. I didn’t find it in Thorngorge Citadel. I did, however, find documents that spoke of its transfer. It was given to a group known as the ‘Wayward Thorns.’”

“Really?” Alasdair said coldly. “This heirloom—what was it?”

“My family called it the Unbloodied Blade. It’s a scalpel.” Argrave used a false name for the artifact. It would be too suspicious if he gave it the moniker the vampires had assigned to it. “It’s elven in origin. It’s useless for combat, and indeed may be useless in general... but it is my family’s, and the last place it was seen was here.”

“And you wish to march into the Low Way and die young?” Alasdair shook his head. “Live longer, boy. Leave us here to our vigil.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. You have your pride, and I have mine—I’ll match you piece for piece, and still be left with some,” Argrave challenged, matching arrogance with arrogance. “That name, ‘Wayward Thorns...’ I thought about it. I know there’s a coven of vampires within the Low Way. And I know their origins—apprentices of the Wayward Thorns.”

“Then you should know well to leave this place alone. I don’t know what your family taught you of this place, but—”

“My family is dead. I am the last Blackgard. All I have left is what I wear, and my father’s servants who walk with me even still,” Argrave interrupted. “I know the dangers of the Low Way. Necromantic abominations, vampires, and even the very ground itself are all enemies abounding within. Even if I should die, I wish to try and reclaim my family’s legacy, meagre though it has become. Will you deny me?”

Alasdair was taken aback. He ground his teeth together, staring at Argrave. The silence festered for a time, enflaming the anxiety in Argrave’s chest. He waited, biding his time, and then struck with the killing blow.

“I can even take you to where the Wayward Thorn’s apprentices are likely hiding.”

Alasdair craned his head back, looking at Argrave in the eyes. Their gazes stayed locked for a time, and then Alasdair looked back to the half-ring fortress behind them.

“Come,” he waved his hand, gesturing Argrave to follow as he turned and walked.

Once he passed through the threshold of the fortress, though, he commanded a nearby knight, “Fetch Jean. I have something to check, eliminate any uncertainty.”

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 85: Thorny Hospitality**

Argrave and Galamon sat around a campfire, engaging with the Stonepetal Sentinels. One Sentinel seemed to be recounting a story, and Argrave was asking him questions. Though there was a cautious distance between the two parties, there was also an undeniable curiosity from both—by all accounts, an engaging conversation.

Meanwhile, though, far out of either’s sight, something else was happening.



Alasdair leaned on a table with his arms crossed, standing just across from a woman who examined a long piece of parchment with spell light. The woman was old, with wrinkled skin and thinning gray hair, all concealed by robes bearing a rose on the shoulder. They were in a tent that had been enveloped by a ward to block out any would-be listeners.

“The lords of Blackridge Citadel were the Tullens. Even the minor nobles in the regions—the castellan, the treasurer, et cetera... none of them were named Blackgard, Alasdair,” the old woman looked up at the Master Sentinel.

Alasdair sighed, then kneaded his forehead. “Is there even a noble house with the name ‘Blackgard’ affiliated with the Order?”

“These records aren’t perfect, but they’re just about so. ‘Blackgard’ was never a house associated with the Order of the Rose.”

“Slippery bastard. Had everyone under his thumb the whole time. Played us like an instrument, now I’ll string him like one...” Alasdair muttered. “Thank you, Jean.”

“What will you do with him?”

“Confine him. Find out why he’s here, why he knows so much about the Stonepetal Sentinels, and... after that, I’m unsure. Depends on what he says. We’ll probably confiscate his things. Both he and that female servant of his have items worth at least a year’s supply.”

“Those two are both mages,” Jean contributed. “The she-elf is probably B-rank, judging by how much magic she has. Argrave, or whatever his real name might be, is likely C-rank.”

“What about the big snow elf?” Alasdair pressed.

“A warrior alone. You’d know better than me about his skills,” she shook her head.

“Alright. Thank you.” Alasdair leaned off the table, walking about the tent. “We’ll gather some people before they fall asleep. Veterans, mages... all our men are here, and I’ll take no chances. Can’t be sure what these people want. I’ll be sure they rue this deception, though.”

“Acting without the approval of the other Master Sentinels?” Jean clicked her tongue. “You’re taking liberties with the leader gone, Alasdair. I thought you were the honest one.”

“You know as well as I do that Claude would do the same were he here,” Alasdair refuted passively.

“We’ll keep them engaged, make sure they feel welcome. It’s important we find out why they’re here, and who sent them, if anyone. Claude would agree with me.”

Jean rolled up the parchment. “Not my place to argue. I’ll return to the ladies’ tents, gather some spellcasters to help.”

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It was night. With the moon behind the mountain, the fort in front of the Low Way of the Rose was deathly dark. In one of the tents closest to the walls, a set of white eyes peered out into the darkness, watching ever carefully. Galamon drank from a flask quietly, guarding and waiting.

His gaze flitted from the work in his hands—maintaining his armor—and watching the outside. He continued like this in relative silence, the silence of the night broken only by Argrave and Anneliese's quiet breathing.

After a time, though, Galamon brought his busy hands to a stop, his eyes focused solely on the night beyond. He watched for a time, body completely still, and then put the gauntlet he had been cleaning back on his hand. He stood and moved to Argrave, kneeling down beside the sleeping bag. He grabbed Argrave's shoulder and shook him gently.

Argrave, ever the light sleeper, woke immediately. He mumbled something incomprehensible, blinking quickly.

"Be quiet," Galamon insisted.

Argrave mumbled something to the effect of, 'Is it morning already?'

Galamon flicked his forehead, and Argrave winced in surprise. "A lot of people moving outside. Something's happening."

"Probably just preparing to enter the tunnel," Argrave dismissed, too tired for a proper response.

"Did they mention these plans in your long talk with them last night?" Galamon said sternly. "They're giving our area a wide berth and muffling their noises with spellcasters."

Argrave blinked, thinking. "You don't mean..."

"This is what I would do if I wanted to capture potentially dangerous people without casualties," Galamon nodded.

"You're sure? Not jumping the gun?" Argrave asked, some awareness returning.

Galamon frowned. "Do you know me to be paranoid?"

"This damn..." Argrave blinked quicker, still evidently very tired. He slapped his face twice, then shook his head as though to jolt himself awake. "Alright. Alright." He pulled out of the sleeping bag, rising to his feet. The commotion awoke Anneliese, who turned over to look at the both of them.

Galamon walked back over to the tent flap, watching outside. Argrave looked around frantically. "Already dressed, everything's packed..." He took a deep breath. "Okay, what the hell am I doing?" he asked himself, trying to gather his thought process.

"What is wrong?" Anneliese asked, sitting up.

Galamon said nothing, but Argrave replied distantly, "Our hosts seem to have taken issue with us."

"We're right by the wall. I remember where there's a caved-in portion. Can't sense any people blocking it. We move quickly, we exit without issue," Galamon said, planning everything out thoroughly. "We'll lose this tent, but nothing else."

"Right. Right," Argrave nodded at first, but it quickly turned into a headshake. "No, no... this won't do. I don't know what the hell happened, but I need to get into the Low Way. All the other entrances are miserable to get to."

Galamon turned his head away from the outside. "You're thinking about this now? We have a quick and easy out. We take it," he refuted.

"And then we have to sneak in when they're ready for us? Forget that. These guys are some of the best-equipped knights in the kingdom of Vasquer. It'd be ridiculous to even try. We have them unaware. They won't be focused on the entrance. We have to go now," Argrave whispered intently.

"And instead we should rush past when they're prepared to apprehend us?" Galamon's voice held disdain. "Ridiculous. Cut your losses, Argrave. Acknowledge when you have no other options but retreat."

"Hold," Anneliese said, pulling both of their attention. "We can..." she rubbed her eyes. "...weave out the nearby hole, and then follow the wall until the base of the mountain. There is another collapsed portion there. We can enter right next to the entrance to the Low Way and walk the rest of the way relatively unmolested."

Argrave pointed insistently to Anneliese, feeling his point supported. Galamon questioned, "You're sure there's another collapsed portion near the base of the mountain?"

"I am," Anneliese nodded, getting up from her sleeping bag. "While Argrave was speaking to the Stonepetal Sentinels, I was examining the walls and the tunnel. It was difficult to be around them. I could tell they were not fond of me," she justified herself.

"Okay. That's enough for me," Argrave said eagerly. "Galamon, you have everything?"

Galamon put his helmet back on. "It's dark. Light will attract attention. I will lead you two through the darkness."

"As ever," Argrave retorted, his mind starting to come alive.

Argrave and Anneliese moved urgently to put what few things of theirs remained unpacked back in their bags. Soon enough, the tent was left with only their sleeping bags on the grass, and Argrave put the backpack over his shoulder. He checked to be sure everyone else was ready, and then Galamon opened the tent, leading out into the darkness.

Chest ablaze with anxiety, Argrave took a deep breath and followed. He could hear nothing beyond the sounds of his companions and his own feet hitting the ground, and the night was so dark he could only follow after Galamon. True to Galamon's word, it did not take long before their feet left the courtyard's grass and stumbled over fallen stone bricks.

They emerged from the half-ring fortress, standing before the plains. Argrave felt the wind at his cheek, and his hair moved. Realizing this might be the last time he felt open air for a long, long while, he felt another wave of nervousness.

Galamon grabbed Argrave's shoulder, pulling him from his daze. They followed along the wall as it winded, taking quiet yet quick steps. With the wall to guide them, Argrave felt some confidence return.

"Damn it all. It had to be something I said. What did I say, Galamon? Where did I ruin things? I thought I did pretty well..." he whispered, knowing well his companion's sharp hearing would catch his mutters.

"I don't know. You spoke a lot, and the acting you were doing was insufferable," Galamon returned. "I tuned much of it out."

"Gee, thanks. Real helpful."

"Be quiet," Galamon veritably growled. "Focus on what to do, not how it happened. Dwell on this later, when we stand with stone over our heads and the Low Way beneath our feet."

"This isn't exactly how I wanted to enter it," Argrave muttered, but then heeded Galamon's advice and remained quiet.

They followed along the wall with the sheer gray mountain base looming closer after every step. Though they passed by multiple collapsed portions, Anneliese urged them onwards, insisting she knew of one closer to the entrance. Argrave trusted her, but at the same time felt uneasy, numerous 'what if' scenarios echoing in his head.

Eventually, they did indeed find a collapsed portion of the wall all but touching the base of the mountain. Argrave breathed a sigh of relief, trying to peer out into the darkness beyond. He saw a few torches lit near the entrance to the Low Way, but all else was covered in shadow. He saw a few people and felt terribly exposed with them in sight.

"It's dark. Can't see a damn thing. I'll just follow your lead, Galamon," Argrave shook his head.

Galamon nodded. "Grab onto me if you must."

Shouts sounded out across the night, making Argrave freeze. He listened, trying to discern their voices. It was a fruitless effort, though, but it helped confirm one thing—they were indeed targets. The voices came from where they had been sleeping.

"Let's go now," Argrave said insistently, trying to suppress his fear with action.

Galamon stepped back into the fortress, and Argrave followed just behind. After a few steps, a horn sounded out, the sound bouncing off the mountain walls and echoing dreadfully.

*Damn it all*, Argrave despaired silently, following after Galamon.

They proceeded across the empty courtyard towards the entrance to the Low Way. All those that had been guarding turned their heads to the sound of the horn. None of them seemed to move. Just as they neared the perimeter near the tunnel, though, someone broke away, taking the torch off its sconce and rushing towards the blown horn.

Galamon drew his dagger and rushed away. Argrave called out weakly, "Wait!" but to little avail. The elven vampire caught the man's wrist which held the torch, pulled him forward, and then plunged his dagger beneath the man's helmet. The fiery enchantments on the dagger burst from the visor, and then Galamon pulled it away. The man's body dropped.

"Galamon...!" Argrave called out quietly. "If they didn't have a reason to pursue before, they do now!"

"The man would have seen us—shouted, called for help. That alone would ruin things. We can make a clean break. They won't find out where we went for some time. By then, we'll be deep within." Galamon grabbed the man's torch and smothered the flame. "Let's go."

Argrave spared one last glance at the man's body. He shook his head, swallowed, and went after Galamon, entering the Low Way of the Rose.