

The time that Argrave spent with his companions in the village without a name was probably the happiest Argrave had ever been in Berendar. Though the food was exceedingly simple, their neighbors were unhappy at their presence, and the days were cold and stiff, he'd never known finer company than those Argrave travelled with. Being in life-or-death situations made their trust unbreakable, their honesty comforting, and their presence easing.

Durran practiced with Galamon, trying to adapt to only having a forefinger and thumb on his left hand. When that wasn't happening, the tattooed tribal delved into books. Of late, he seemed to be inspired about something—he spent a particularly long amount of time focusing on previously untouched necromantic spell books written by Garm. Argrave was somewhat concerned, but he trusted Durran was a good enough person to use necromancy wisely.

Anneliese and Argrave focused on their magic studies. She was half-tutor, half-peer, and Argrave learned much and more studying with her. Never once did it feel like a chore. Indeed, it felt like a blessing, probably because they'd been enduring deadly struggles for weeks on end. Or maybe the blessing was simply the fact he got to spend time with Anneliese.

His study into a particular spell bore fruit after a while.

An invisible tempest swirling in Argrave's hands splayed the grass flat against the ground. He held his hands out, and the power freed itself. The wind took visible form, though it was like a pane of glass against grass. It was the shape of an armored knight holding a gargantuan tower shield perhaps eight feet tall. The knight braced, then swung the shield from left to right with tremendous force.

Wind split through the vast plain ahead of him with tremendous force. Grass and the dirt in the tempest's path were both torn asunder, upturned by the seemingly indomitable force pushing past. In only a few seconds, a vast area of wintry grass had simply been removed, much of the dirt beneath it similarly uprooted. The knight vanished, yet the wind kept travelling across the plains before them, splaying the grass flat and slowly losing power.

"Heheh..." Argrave raised his hand to his mouth, hiding a smile as he giggled. Dirt and grass peppered the area ahead of them. "Good gods."

"Quite a potent wind spell," Anneliese remarked, standing with arms crossed behind Argrave.

"Compared to most of the other B-rank spells of different elements... it might be a little less potent," Argrave nodded. "My [Pavise Gale] wouldn't do near as much damage as the [Icebound Twinblades] you used at the Marred Hallowed Grounds. The strongest point is the initial swing of the pavise, and after, it weakens by the second." Argrave turned his head back to her and walked up. "But it's a lot cheaper than most B-rank spells, it can protect me while it's active, it forces foes away from me, and it's fitting when you consider I still have that ring that augments wind spells I got at Jast. Moreover, I intend on keeping my tried-and-true strategy."

Anneliese tilted her head. "And what is that?"

“Sword and shield,” Argrave said. “Keep my opponents away with one hand, while I conjure [Electric Eels] with the other to do concentrated bursts of attack. Lightning magic is precise and deadly. Most other spells are more... wide range. I might cause more devastation if I use innumerable powerful fire, ice, or earth spells, but I can learn those later. For now—this is highly efficient.”

“And what of B-rank lightning magic? [Electric Eel] is still C-rank,” Anneliese noted.

Argrave put his hand to his chin. “They exist, certainly. You’ve learned some,” he pointed to her. “They’re the deadliest I could learn barring blood magic, but...”

“None are as precise as [Electric Eel],” she finished.

Argrave nodded. “Yeah. I can direct eight eels to attack different targets, and they do so with pinpoint accuracy. No collateral damage, too. Spells like the B-rank [Cloudborn Chain] are incredibly long-range and uncomfortably fast, yet it can only strike one target, whereupon the electricity spreads out for a short distance,” Argrave summarized. “Very deadly, but lacking versatility.”

Anneliese took a deep breath and sighed.

“What’s the matter?” Argrave stepped forth.

Anneliese looked at him with sad eyes. “We’re to be facing foes capable of spells like that in the future.”

Argrave raised his hand to her face and brushed aside a strand of her long white hair. “Our armor is better than you might think. And the whole reason I had you get the Starsparrow was so that we can scout ahead, avoid fights entirely. The only way I see us losing against most normal opponents is if we’re ambushed.”

“Our own capability does not diminish danger entirely. One misstep... one ambush unforeseen... that is all it takes to meet the end. And the likelihood of that is greater now that you are a target of public interest. You are known as a contributor in stopping the plague. A hero to some, yet a target to others... others, who...” She shook her head. “I apologize. It is not like me to be rattled so.”

Argrave took her into his arms at once. “I hear you,” he said, chin resting gently atop her head. “And I worry too, believe me—I don’t have to tell you. I can’t deny I want to stay in this little village with you, living happily until we expire.” Argrave shook his head. “But there’s a big obstacle to that in the shape of a world-ender... and a bunch of little obstacles along the way. We’ve got stupid people grasping for power at the wrong time, ancient evils waking up, and a whole lot of chores to do before we can rest.”

Anneliese laughed quietly into his shoulder. “I cannot picture how you managed that all this time.”

He finally pulled away and held her face before his. “I think you do. Because you’re doing it too, now. You have been for a while. We’re racing headlong to oblivion—whether we stop it or embrace it, I guess we’ll figure out.”

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Durran was so engrossed in reading on the house’s porch that he did not hear Argrave approach. Naturally, the opportunity was not wasted—Argrave crept up behind him and grasped his shoulders suddenly and fiercely. Durran cried out and thrust his elbow at Argrave’s face in reflex. With a step back, the elbow whizzed by his face, and Argrave stood there laughing.

"You mother..." Durran held his hand to his face, then eventually joined Argrave in laughter. "Good gods. Next time, I won't miss, you know."

"We'll see," Argrave stepped forth and sat beside Durran. "You've been working hard lately," he noted.

"Well, it's hard to stand about twiddling my thumbs when everyone else is working night and day. I blame you freaks," Durran shook his head. He picked up the book he'd thrown aside after the scare. He was still a bit rattled, and he took some time to calm himself, cursing at Argrave.

"But, uh... necromancy?" Argrave noted the book's cover. Though still a low-rank necromantic spell, it was necromancy nonetheless. The spell Durran read only allowed him to take notice of spirits—harmless, ostensibly, but it was a gateway spell.

"Yeah. Had some plans for a couple people that I dislike," Durran nodded.

Argrave laughed, knowing he was joking. "Orion might not go down so easily."

"We'll see," Durran repeated Argrave's earlier claim. "Anybody dies if you drop something heavy enough from a high place. Get a wyvern..." he finally broke into laughter, unable to keep a straight face.

"But seriously," Argrave cut into the amusement. "Why now? You avoided the stuff earlier."

Durran scratched beneath his chin. He hadn't shaved recently, and stubble had formed. "Well... seeing the Corpse Puppeeter, that whole scenario, really got me thinking. That was power. Incontrovertible power. Beyond that, I thought..." Durran raised up his left hand. "Maybe there's some freaky magic I could pull."

"Freaky magic?" Argrave raised a brow.

"You know. Reanimate fingers, sew them back on," Durran waved his left hand about. "I even asked Galamon if he'd be willing to donate."

Argrave stared at him in awe.

"What? He'd be fine overnight," Durran said defensively. "Maybe I could give back some blood, I don't know. Whatever," he shook his head. "His fingers were too big, anyway, and things don't work that way. They'd either wriggle at their own will if I gave them souls or stay stiff if I didn't, and neither suit my needs."

Argrave wrung his hands together uncomfortably, acutely aware of the fact he had fingers. "Like I told you... we can make an early trip to Vysenn. Forget fingers, you can regrow entire legs if you head out there," Argrave advised.

"Forget it. I don't need it, and it's a significant detour," Durran shook his head. "Whenever you planned to go is when we'll go."

"It's just..." Argrave clenched his hands a bit tighter against each other. "Anneliese told me you got that saving me after I passed out."

Durran stared ahead. "Doesn't really matter 'when.' It just happened, bottom line. I'm fine with it."

"Thank you," Argrave said. "I'm grateful."

“Better be,” Durran said. Argrave knew his arrogance was spurred by embarrassment, so he only laughed at the former tribal’s response.

They stared out across the countryside of wintry grass in silence, nothing but the sound of the wind on their ears.

“We’ll be heading to a big city after the Tower of the Gray Owl. Dirracha,” Argrave turned his head.

“Yeah?” Durran met his gaze.

“You deserve a break. I’ll give you some money—do whatever the hell you want, so long as you don’t draw any attention. Significant attention, at least.”

Durran’s eyes brightened. “How much money?”

“More than you’ll need,” Argrave said simply.

Durran smiled. “I deserve it,” he said, poking his chest. “Maybe I can wash out some of those prayers Orion taught me with good memories.”

“I hope so,” Argrave rose to his feet with a grunt. “I still have to talk with Galamon soon.”

Durran watched Argrave as he walked away. “Trying to have a heart-to-heart with everyone?”

“Yeah,” Argrave stopped. “We leave soon. Maybe I’ll talk with him on the road.”

Durran put his elbows on his knees. “I feel less special.”

Argrave chuckled, then walked away.

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They spent a total of two weeks at the isolated, sparsely populated village on the edge of the northwest. It might’ve been shorter, but the stay was extended by Argrave’s studies into magic, as casting a few B-rank spells consequently delayed the rate at which he was able to repay the debt to Erlebnis. He dared not leave before he was certain he was capable of defending himself and his companions to the best of his ability.

Argrave felt he was snowballing. Becoming Black Blooded was no minor thing, and the edge it gave him over others made itself known day by day. Already he had more actual magic than Anneliese, despite the fact she was both several years older and had been at B-rank longer than he had. At A-rank, their next objective in terms of personal power, magic capacity did not matter—it was more about knowledge, talent, and comprehension, all three of which Anneliese had in spades. She knew infinitely more spells at each rank than he did. He planned their route around that.

And so, after the ample amounts of rest and preparation they’d undergone, the four of them departed in the early morning, saying their goodbyes only to the widow who had generously allowed them to stay for a minor payment. Emboldened and well-rested, they headed towards the Tower of the Gray Owl cautiously. The titanic building became visible very quickly, serving as an easy landmark to guide their travels.

For some reason, Argrave felt a sense of paranoia during the whole trip. He had been happy these past two weeks—it was well past time for the other shoe to drop.

He'd be sure to catch it.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 212: Advantage Play

Though Argrave had claimed he would have a heart-to-heart with Galamon... the task proved considerably more difficult once he actually found himself riding his horse next to the elven vampire as they travelled in a relatively safe area.

"Don't bother," Galamon said, riding his horse diligently. "No need to make sure I'm fine."

Argrave pulled his horse up to Galamon. He was starting to learn to ride horses better, yet he still found himself lacking when compared to the experienced rider that was Galamon. Argrave would assume that his companion would ride infrequently, being as large as he was, but apparently such was not the case.

"You heard what I said to Durran, then? Not fond of a heart-to-heart?" Argrave questioned, riding closer.

Galamon looked to him for a moment, his glance alone confirming what Argrave asked.

After deliberating for a long while, he finally constructed something he was relatively sure would work. "Have you thought about what you're going to do once I cure your vampirism?"

Galamon finally kept his gaze on Argrave. His white eyes betrayed little, doubly so beneath his helmet, but eventually he let out the lightest of chuckles.

"It depends on whether my ten-year period of servitude is up," he said.

Argrave laughed. "I'd very nearly forgotten about that," he admitted. "I don't really know what you like to do, though. I don't know what you want out of life."

"I am simple," Galamon shook his head.

"Simple how?" Argrave pressed, lowering his head as they passed beneath bare branches. Winter was past its prime, and the hibernating trees seemed to be a little livelier. Perhaps, in time, leaves would adorn them once more.

Galamon slowed his horse to pass by a treacherous part of the terrain. "All I've ever wanted... is to do something decent that secures my family's future, and then retire with them." Galamon took a deep breath and sighed. "The people around me always made me do more. Demanded more of me. First Dras, now you."

Argrave looked vaguely uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to..."

"I'm fine with it," Galamon assured at once. "I am proud of what I've done. I just never planned to do it." Galamon stroked the side of his horse's neck to comfort it. "Veid charts my fate. If this is what she decided for me, I will rise to meet the task."

Argrave nodded, thinking more on what Galamon said. "Why do you have so much faith in Veid?"

Galamon considered that. "My parents taught me to."

Argrave had not been expecting such a simple answer.

"You're dissatisfied?" Galamon noted. "I fought in war after war alongside Dras. That tested my faith time and time again. After I... contracted vampirism, I wandered Berendar. My faith was challenged constantly. No challenge ever bested that faith my parents instilled in me." Galamon examined his gauntleted hands as they clenched the reins. "I know other gods are real. I have seen the ways of other people. And what I concluded... is that I love the Veidimen. I love our ways. I am partial to my kind—I wish to see them prosper before others, I will admit it. And Veid... she protects those I love. Such is her sole purpose. She molded our society, our people, our ways. And so I love Veid."

Argrave always had some difficulty understanding Galamon as a person. Now, though... now, he felt like he got a glimpse into the man he truly was. He hadn't intended to, but it happened nonetheless. This might be the most Galamon had talked about himself before.

"I respect you," Argrave said plainly. "And I admire you. I wouldn't be here if not for you—not just because you saved my life. You were a model for persistence."

Galamon nodded. "I'm glad. I try."

Argrave bit his lip, deliberating on whether or not he should say something. Eventually, he asked, "How would you feel if I supported Orion?"

Galamon's mouth noticeably tightened. "Supported?" he questioned.

"I think he can be a genuinely good person... if he has the right influence. As it is now, his family life... it's part of the reason he is who he is." Argrave rubbed his hands together. "Instead of a crusader, maybe I can make him a proselytizer. A peaceful proselytizer," he posited.

"Can you?" Galamon asked sharply.

Argrave sighed. "I don't know."

Galamon looked guilty at his sharpness. "I don't like him. I think he's a danger to the Veidimen. I would sleep easier if he died."

"You don't sleep anyway," Argrave pointed out.

The elven vampire furrowed his brows for half a moment before he caught on and laughed. A laugh from Galamon was a rare and scary thing, so Argrave smiled.

Feeling he should leave on a positive note, Argrave tried to conclude the conversation. "I'm glad you told me honestly," he told Galamon. "And I'll take your counsel into mind. Believe me."

"Hmm," Galamon only grunted.

"Another day or two of covert travel, we'll make it to Kin's End," Argrave changed the subject. "There, we can get you and Durran better outfitted, get better weapons. From what I remember, you didn't ask for much, did you?"

“My greatsword is more than enough,” Galamon shook his head. “I asked for replenished enchanted arrows, plus specific armor requests. Durran had the ostentatious orders.”

“Excellent,” Argrave nodded. “Things are looking up. But we’ll proceed carefully, as always. Now more than ever, caution must be the sole thing we trust in. This civil war can be resolved splendidly... and it might just be time for me to step outside of my comfort zone.”

“Meaning?”

“Doing things I’ve never done before. Not in ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ Creating options that weren’t there for me,” Argrave said plainly. “I’ve caused things to go out of control. That, alone, tells me I have an effect. But if I play things wisely... maybe it won’t be all bad.” Argrave smiled, his gaze distant. “In fact, it might be fantastic.”

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Argrave and his companions took shelter just behind a hill. Beyond, there was a large town nestled between hills. It was not large in the sense that it was populous—indeed, with rocky terrain and sparse natural resources, it was in an inopportune location, and consequently could not support a large population. Yet the houses and buildings in it were each and all grand and impeccably constructed, and the tall wall around made it seem even formidable.

Anneliese opened her eyes and took a deep breath, while the Starsparrow perched itself on her shoulders. “Alright. I have examined things thoroughly.” She adjusted herself, gathering her bearings after using druidic magic for so long.

“Take your time,” Argrave eased her.

“I spotted Orion’s royal knights. They were standing outside a building, guarding. I presume Orion is within,” she began. “Beyond that, I believe things are as you said. I searched for those wearing the uniform of a High Wizard but found none. I noticed no sizable military force beyond militiamen and guards for important Order buildings.”

Argrave nodded, parsing through what she said. He let his paranoia run rampant as he considered everything he knew about Kin’s End. “Orion’s royal knights?” he said. “Are you sure of this?”

Anneliese paused. Without a word, she cast the druidic spell again and the bird vanished from her shoulder. Argrave waited patiently, and she spoke again after a time.

“They are not those we travelled with, the Waxknights. I...” Guilt flavored her tone, as though ashamed of her lack of awareness.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. “It’s fine. We caught it, and that’s what’s important.” He nodded carefully. “I’d like you to see what you can glean about those within the building. They might still be Orion’s knights—he may have simply changed them out.”

As Anneliese carried out Argrave’s directive, he shared a glance with Durran.

Though Anneliese said nothing for a long while, she eventually contributed, “There is a man within. He looks... he looks somewhat like you. Tall—taller than me, but shorter than you.”

“Blue eyes, and a lithe build,” Argrave finished, recalling Induen’s appearance all too well. “Am I right? Or is he quite skinny? It could be Levin.”

“No... no, your first descriptor was more accurate. He seems a warrior,” Anneliese noted. “Though he is dressed in fine clothes, clearly not meant for battle.”

Argrave took a deep, long breath, obvious questions rushing to his mind at once as he struggled to grasp why Induen might be here. He felt his heart beat a little faster and brushed his cheek that had been wounded by Induen months ago almost by instinct.

“Survey the whole town once more,” Argrave directed her. “The inside of each building, every nook and cranny. Any places ambushers might be.”

“Of course,” Anneliese agreed readily, and then the party settled back into quietude.

Argrave felt anxious, so he rose to his feet and gazed over the hill.

After a much longer time, Anneliese’s bird returned once more. She held her forehead as though pained. “The homes all seemed... ordinary. None were waiting in ambush. There are only four royal knights down there—two without the home, and two within. I cannot speak to the presence of magic users within the town.” She shook her head in regret.

Argrave nodded. “You’ve done enough.” He took a deep breath. “If Induen has no agents in the town beyond the four royal knights with him, he won’t notice if I search the town for magic users so long as I avoid where he is. If he does have more there... A-rank mages, for instance... we cut our losses, move past Kin’s End.”

“Argrave... this is the man that attacked you, right? The man who gave you Foamspire?” Anneliese questioned, and when Argrave nodded, she continued, “Yet he is not dressed to fight... I do not believe he bears a sword, even. Nor does he seem particularly incensed.”

Argrave took her observation into consideration. “Four royal knights... and Induen. That’s...” He rubbed his thumb against his palm.

He could not deny Induen still intimidated him somewhat. Yet the more he thought of it... the more he felt he would be capable of fighting against that. Induen was unarmored—he might have some enchanted items, but spells beyond B-rank did not work well as enchantments. That was the reason Argrave and Anneliese only had rings that conjured B-rank wards. Induen himself was B-rank.

“I’ll survey for spellcasters in hiding,” Argrave said. “Galamon, you’ll come with. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious. I won’t step foot near Induen unless I’m one thousand percent sure this isn’t some ambush. Orion might have his reasons for sending Induen, or...”

“And if you don’t find anything wrong?” Galamon questioned.

“I’ll...” Argrave rubbed his hands together.

Induen. He was a man far too comfortable with death. He enjoyed it—reveled in it. Acts of cruelty and eccentricity were commonplace from him. That, coupled with being the crown prince of Vasquer, boded ill for the future. On top of that, he had a great deal of Princess Elenore’s support, even if she did only view him as a tool. So long as he remained around...

"Induen is a problem for the future," Argrave concluded aloud. "A problem for the realm. A problem for us."

Argrave had been merely avoiding the problem this whole time, but in the back of his head, he knew what it might eventually come to. Could someone like Induen be redeemed? Moreover, *should* he be? Argrave thought the answer was no on both counts. The man enjoyed orphaning children, senseless violence, and was completely intolerant of anyone with agendas divergent from his own. Worse yet, he was talented enough to do real damage in a position of leadership.

Durran adjusted the way he sat. "You mean..."

"Provided I find nothing amiss in the town... he's far from Dirracha. Alone. Isolated. Not prepared for combat, on top of that." Argrave tried to make sure his nervousness didn't bleed into his voice. "There might not be a better time. You have to seize an opportunity, some would say."

A grim silence set over them as Argrave all but confirmed what he had been implying.

"That would end your association with Orion permanently," Anneliese counseled.

"I know," Argrave nodded, looking to Galamon. "But no matter how much I juggle it in my head, I cannot see supporting Vasquer as an option. They're too far gone."

Anneliese looked to the town below. "I do not believe he means to kill you. He comes unarmored, he brings few guards," she said simply. "And... he has knowledge of your mother."

"What does that matter?" Argrave furrowed his brows. "I'm sure plenty do. And I don't care all that much anyway."

"I... I do not know," Anneliese shook her head. "Ignore my thoughts if you wish."

Argrave looked at her, then glanced to Kin's End. Though it was a savage sentiment... he would be more comfortable fighting Induen than talking with him.

"I won't risk walking into a trapped building. I don't see why it's worth the risk just to hear him out. But..." Argrave took a deep breath. "I don't know. I'm not confident in killing him from afar. Royal knights are royal knights for a reason... and Induen wouldn't hesitate to involve the populace to save his skin. If I get close, maybe I can restrict his movements..." Argrave shook his head. "Galamon and I will scout things out. From there, I'll make a judgement call."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 213: A Prince's Gamble

There was a thin line between caution and paranoia. It was thin enough that Argrave lost sight of it completely. Maybe it was never tangible to begin with.

He felt half a fool as he wandered around Kin's End, looking for any single person who might be a threat to him or his companions. He and Galamon scanned the building Induen stayed in from afar, checking for other people within or secret compartments where enemies might hide. They checked everywhere inside, and miles outside the town. And the conclusion?

This was likely the best circumstance he could encounter Induen.

He had only four guards—royal knights, and perhaps the finest quality in all Vasquer. All four were mages of B-rank, though low within the rank at best. Induen had not advanced to A-rank, and he was unarmored and unsupported. The only armed men in the town consisted of a militia, perhaps twenty, and all attended the wall. There were two attending Wizards of the Gray Owl, both of which manned an administrative center opposite where Induen stayed. The Tower was not accepting Acolytes at this date—they had no reason to man this place thoroughly. Even if they were Induen's people... they were C-rank.

As that conclusion settled upon them, Argrave confronted the reality of what he was going to do. Though he spoke about putting an end to Induen permanently... the fact remained that it persisted in his mind like a dark cloud. Everything, from the irony of the town's name to the fact he might become known as a kinslayer... it clung to him, pushing aside important thoughts.

After an hour of walking, thinking, searching... the bottom line came to him. Argrave had to face his fears for the good of the future.

He'd done it time and time again the past few months. This one, though... it felt markedly different. Maybe it was because he was premeditating a murder if he didn't hear what he wanted to hear. Maybe it was because he had already faced Induen before and walked away with his teeth cut.

No answer came to his question as he took slow, steady steps towards the two golden-armored knights standing out front the quaint house that Prince Induen was waiting for him in. The knights caught sight of the three of them at once—Argrave, Durran, Anneliese. Galamon was elsewhere, his bow readied. Durran had the Ebonice axe. Everyone was ready for any outcome.

The knight's eyes followed them from behind their gleaming golden plate helmets. Argrave took the lead, his finger rubbing against the enchanted ring that conjured B-rank wards just beneath his glove.

When Argrave stepped up, the two knights looked at him for a time before saying anything. He saw them focus on his eyes like they jewels then pass to his companions, evaluating.

"The prince is inside," the royal knight on the left told Argrave.

"The bastard is outside," Argrave returned.

The royal knight stared up at him, eyes steady.

"He'll receive you now," the right-side knight directed.

Argrave smiled. "You see, that's the first mistake. Orion wouldn't 'receive' me. No—I suppose that's the second mistake. You left the windows unblocked." His gaze jumped between the two of them. "I'm trying to recognize either of you. Were you there the last time Induen and I spoke? I can't remember."

Induen's knights were so good at playing it straight that Argrave might've believed them if he had been bluffing.

The knight on the left side stepped forward. "You should go inside."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Argrave said plainly.

"Why would we care what you think?" the knight on the right side stepped forward in turn.

Argrave held his arms out. "Care to find out?"

He could practically feel the tension of his companions behind him, ready to fight. Argrave himself had all of his will focused on the ring around his finger, ready to conjure something at a moment's notice.

The door opened quickly, nearly spurring Argrave to action. He found someone looking up at him—Prince Induen, with his icy blue eyes and manufactured smile. Memories came back... and Argrave might have reacted to them, had there been any fewer people at his back.

Induen wore all white, which contrasted starkly with his obsidian hair. It was an elaborate, somewhat ceremonial suit, with tassels of gold on the shoulders and gemstones for buttons. He had long sleeves. It was far from anything used for combat. Argrave studied his hands—three rings, no fewer. He looked for necklaces and found one.

Assume all three rings are enchanted, plus the necklace. Assume he's got plenty of spells on hand—defensive and offensive both.

"Argrave," Induen clasped his hands together. "You ruined my surprise. You..." he stared at Argrave's eyes. "Orion didn't lie about you."

Argrave shrugged. He felt like he could not blink. "I don't like surprises."

"And you're good at ruining things," Induen smiled. "You had father's eyes, and now you've ruined that with some... freakish things." When a silence set in, he laughed. "I kid, I kid. So, will you come inside?"

Argrave was somewhat surprised by the question—Induen didn't ask many questions that left room for refusal.

"Why don't we take a walk?" Argrave suggested.

"A walk," Induen reiterated, clenching his hands together a bit tighter.

"It's like standing, but you move your legs and travel elsewhere," Argrave nodded, deliberately incendiary to draw a reaction from Induen. "There's an old fountain just outside town. Dried up, but it's a pretty view. Nice place. No one around to hear."

This was one justification Argrave had for talking to Induen instead of simply killing him outright from a distance. Though he planned things to be clean, perhaps a single shot from himself or Galamon... there might be other casualties. The prince was still in a residential district. If things weren't clean, and Argrave and Anneliese start using B-rank spells, coupled with the royal knights... people might die. Induen or his royal knights might use people. Closer up, he could minimize damage.

Despite Argrave's provocations, Induen only stood there, staring. His gaze jumped around. "This is that tribal... and your fiancée," Induen noted, eyes landing on Anneliese.

"Order reversed," Durran joked, holding his glaive like a walking stick at his side. His hand hovered near the Ebonice axe at his waist.

Induen's gaze lingered on Anneliese far too long for his comfort, and then jumped back to Argrave.

"Alright. A walk."

Induen brushed past Argrave, walking down the street. His four royal knights hurried after him, and Argrave watched them for a bit. Induen turned, walking backwards as if taunting Argrave. With a deep breath, they followed.

Despite Argrave's paranoia, they simply passed the gate of Kin's End and walked up the hill where the old, decrepit fountain waited. It was a grand, giant bowl that had once been filled with water spawned by magic. Now, it was in disrepair. Induen sat on the edge of it, his four royal knights off to the side in loose formation.

"So... we're here," Argrave called out, standing a decent distance away from Induen as he sat on the edge of the fountain.

Induen crossed one leg over the other. "I brought your armor. The one Orion had custom-made for your companions." Induen shrugged. "Unfortunately, my little brother is a bit paranoid, so I can't show it to you."

"That's nice," said Argrave, caring little in light of the situation.

"I also sent Orion with a document bearing my magic signature," Induen continued. "It petitioned father for legitimization. Yours, namely. You'd be named Prince Argrave of Vasquer."

Argrave frowned. Seeing that, Induen tilted his head back and smiled. "I've caught your attention, have I? Ahh..."

A wind passed through their party, and Argrave said nothing as he thought of what this meant. "Usually you hit me before giving me nice things," Argrave noted.

Induen crossed his arms. "I made... a mistake," he said hesitantly. "I should not have hit you."

Now Argrave was well and truly befuddled. He adjusted his feet, taken aback. He'd never seen Induen so... compromising. He hadn't expected to win any ground with this man—all he'd hoped for was a quick end to the battle.

"From the beginning... I was led about by the nose," Induen disclosed. "Both of us were."

Argrave frowned. "By whom?"

Induen smiled. "Perhaps you've already guessed," he ventured. "It all started with her, didn't it? She probably gave me Foamspire precisely intending I give it to you. She constantly stoked my anger against you. Yet now... she got heavy handed. She's been driving me against you since day one, but she got rushed."

"Elenore?" Argrave frowned. "What are you...?"

"You know things. You have friends, agents. Mina of Veden—I thought she might be Elenore's, but I'm certain she's yours, now," Induen said quickly. "You travel from place to place, achieving things that are... obscure." Induen tapped his temple. "And then it came to me. It might be my sister's not as irreplaceable as she makes herself out to be. It might be... the Bat has a predator every bit as skilled as she does."

Argrave didn't feel the point Induen was making was as cogent as he sold it to be, but he was stunned enough by the development words did not come to him right away.

"If Elenore wanted me dead... there's a lot easier ways to do it than by using you," Argrave posited.

"She wanted to damage me," Induen said. "She's always wanted to undermine me. A kinslayer—there are few worse crimes in Vasquer. This rebellion... people wouldn't attack me in Dirracha so brazenly. She must've spurred people in the city to attack, provoke a reaction from my guards."

As Induen said it, Argrave thought there might have been some truth to his claims. It was only a nugget of truth amidst misinformation, though.

Induen stood up off the fountain and stepped forward. "I've been looking for a way to sever from her... the truth is, she offers a valuable service, and she's incredibly wealthy. The information is more important than the wealth. But you..."

As Induen stepped closer, Argrave maintained a cautious distance. Induen looked briefly incensed, but it faded in a flash.

"I know you have more than you let on. All I've heard—it's the only way. You have information. Real, valuable information, perhaps beyond even her purview." Induen pointed at him. "Mina of Veden. She stalled me by your directive, didn't she?"

After a deep breath, Argrave gave a slow, steady nod.

Affirmed, Induen nodded. "But even if you're not as great as I suspect... it doesn't matter," Induen shook his head. "Elenore is a problem. She needs to go. And I need... competency, when I come to reign. And before it," Induen said with a smile.

"I travelled covertly, with few guards, to avoid her eyes," Induen explained. "One of my knights, an informant, I—" he paused. "Well, he's not a problem anymore. Don't worry about the details. The fact is, Argrave... brother..." Induen put both of his hands on his waist. "I want you to help me deal with Elenore. Deal with... other obstacles. And then, I want you to help me utterly annihilate this rebellion. In return... Mateth, Jast, and Elbraille. Anything you name in the south that's not already promised to my brother... I'll make it yours. Wealth unimaginable."

"What?" Argrave said despite himself.

"You heard me," Induen nodded. "Any land, no matter how large. Just not Parbon. Felipe has decided that is Orion's, and publicly. Even if father dies... well, let's not get into that."

"Why?" Argrave furrowed his brows.

"I need competency!" Induen explained heartily. "You get things done yourself. It's all I've seen. You went from some skinny, malnourished youth to a B-rank mage and newly praised hero! When I succeed father, I need a new generation of power to build. A new elite as my pillars."

Argrave crossed his arms. "What would happen?"

“Well...” Induen turned around, deliberating. “We would return to Diraccha. Deal with... pressing matters I mentioned earlier. There’d be a ceremony to welcome you as a prince. I’d establish you in a position of power—father’s close council, for instance—and once spring comes... we’d end the rebels.”

“I see,” Argrave noted.

“Your companions would be well-treated,” Induen assured. “Orion suggested the tribal be named your first royal knight—I have no objections to that. And your fiancée... she should stay in the capital, become intimately acquainted with the family. Perhaps a period of six months.”

“Intimately acquainted?” Argrave smiled broadly, taking a step forth. “Six months?”

As Argrave drew near... he was acutely aware that he was larger than Induen.

“You wed an elf, brother. This is something that will take time. She must be introduced to father, the court... everyone,” Induen explained.

Argrave laughed out his nose, a big smile on his face. “No. This is just another form of control, another form of threat. You can’t trust me, can’t surrender one iota of power over me. I’m... yeah, you had me for a minute. I thought, ‘what the hell? Does he deserve a quick death instead of a slow one?’”

Induen gazed up at Argrave. “You’ve gotten bold, brother.”

“A little,” Argrave concurred.

“Do you understand your situation?” With those words, the royal knights moved to support Induen.

“These men are royal knights.”

Argrave stepped forward. “I know them. Many of Orion’s knights died fighting things I killed.”

For the first time, Induen stepped back. Argrave held both his hands out and conjured [Pavise Gale] on either side. The two mage royal knights pushed Induen back and conjured wards in the same motion, and the gargantuan rectangle shields of wind bashed against a golden ward, sending air bouncing in all directions wildly.

A noise split the air, and a bolt of fire travelled towards Induen. It was an enchanted arrow, fired by Galamon. Induen looked liable to be struck... but he conjured his own ward almost lazily, and it bounced off.

“I brought two sets of armor here, one too big for any of those present... you think I’d gloss over the fact you had a man lurking?” Induen shouted over the ward.

“Doesn’t matter,” Argrave returned, his conjured knights still pushing and cracking the wards. “I get things done myself, as you said.”

Argrave triggered the Blessing of Supersession.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 214: A Prince's Arbiter

Five B-rank mages versus two. It was an overwhelming disadvantage, if viewed without knowledge of who they were.

In reality... there was a reason Argrave had confidence enough to talk to Induen.

With the power of the Blessing of Supersession welling within his being, he lapsed into his strategy as though it were a habit. Four royal knights and Induen stood before him—he loosed [Pavise Gale] time and time again from his hands and Garm's eyes both, preparing [Electric Eels] intermittently. The titanic conjured knights slammed their shields of wind into B-rank wards, chipping them away as quickly as they were placed. Argrave's Brumesingers remained at his legs to defend him in case of stray spells. The rampant display of power left the royal knights only one option—a frantic defense. Even Induen, reckless as he was, remained safely behind their wards.

They thought to outlast him. It was standard for fighting mages—most B-rank mages could only cast just a few B-rank spells before being drained. That wasn't an option for them, though. More and more eels joined up in the sky, sparking, waiting for an opening. Durran joined in, dropping his glaive and hacking with the Ebonice axe to aid in tearing down the wards before them. Eventually, they broke past the rightward knight's ward, and a pavise struck the golden-armored man squarely in the shoulder. He took to the air towards Kin's End, flying away dozens of feet while half-spinning from the power of the blow. Galamon, who'd jumped down from the walls of Kin's End, fired an arrow at this knight when he landed, yet Argrave could not tell if it hit.

Induen shouted a command, and in a few seconds the strategy shifted. The royal knights pressed forwards with their wards, pushing Argrave back slightly so they could not draw near. When one ward broke, a knight pushed past with it, conjuring two blades of blood magic—the C-rank [Putrid Paramerion]. He thrust both towards Argrave as fast as Galamon might've. Mist warriors conjured by his Brumesingers rose to defend him.

Durran swung the Ebonice axe down before the mist warriors could do anything, catching one blade with the beard of axe. It dissipated in seconds before the magic-breaking axe. The knight was surprised the weapon could contest his own, but all too quickly grabbed Durran's arm with his now-free hand. The other blade stabbed towards his back.

Yet Anneliese had not been twiddling her thumbs behind them. She cast the C-rank [Skysunder], and a bolt of white lightning struck the knight squarely on the chest. Durran winced as the lightning travelled into him, but he was not as severely affected as the knight. After disentangling, Durran pushed the spasming knight away, and Argrave finally rained dozens of [Electric Eels] on the man. To finish him, Argrave cast one more [Pavise Gale]. The tower shield swung by the knight struck his foe squarely in the breastplate, caving it in and sending the knight far away from the fight.

In a moment of laxness, Induen stepped forth. A guillotine blade of ice formed before the prince far too quickly, likely conjured by an enchanted ring, and hurtled towards Argrave. Anneliese stepped beside Argrave and conjured a ward to block it, yet the spell was powerful enough to shatter the ward in one blow. Though exposed, Argrave only tried to punish Induen for his overextension. His eels in the sky came down, but Induen retreated, replaced by B-rank wards conjured by his knights. Argrave abandoned the attack, and the eels danced gracefully backwards like a splash upon the surface of water without striking the ward.

Argrave suspected the only reason his foes had not fallen was because they used enchanted items to conjure their wards—they were faster and more numerous. Even still, he trusted in the Blessing of Supersession more than their enchanted items.

Argrave resumed his unrelenting assault once more. He felt like a commander of giants and a leader of titans as the countless knights of wind assailed his foes with earth-shattering blows. He was a Roman commander amidst his Legion, each and all battering against a foe that desperately clung to safety. And above it all, like a cloud of divine judgement... his eels grew in numbers by every passing second.

He barely heard an ordered series of whistles. Argrave saw the knight that had been blasted towards Kin's End running behind Induen and continuing past him, heeding that command. He would be retreating, looking for allies. *It's fine*, Argrave thought. *Let him run. Anneliese made sure there were no forces for miles. One of his knights is dead or dying, the other is retreating. Fewer foes to contest.*

The assault was noisy and eye-catching, and the residents of Kin's End came to the walls to watch this happen. He could not hide what was about to happen from the world. Countless pointed to the eels above Argrave, and yet more watched the relentless battering of conjured knights, blowing winds across the plains of wintry grass and disturbing the very earth.

Despite the relentlessness of Argrave's assault... his opponent's desperation was no less intense. Even with Durran aiding with the Ebonice axe, his foes seemed to have an unending supply of wards to block his spells. They were better equipped, without a doubt. He felt like a hammer striking down on an anvil.

As time passed, Argrave felt some urgency. Galamon rejoined them, taking the Ebonice axe from Durran and increasing the efficiency of the attack. Though strained... their foes refused to fall. He could see Induen desperately struggling to hold back the tide, both casting spells and using the enchanted items he wore on his person alongside his knights.

And then... the Blessing ended.

Great howling winds moved across the plains as the effect of the numerous [Pavise Gales] faded. Argrave stood there, his hands held out as Induen waited behind a shield of gold, breathing heavy with panic. He slowly rose to his feet, and he and Argrave locked eyes.

"Defend me," Argrave said loudly yet evenly. It felt unnecessary, for his companions and his Brumesingers were already doing that. In time with his command, the [Electric Eels] in the skies came to blanket them, swirling about through the air. They were like divers in the midst of an ocean surrounded by a school of swimming fish. As they were umbrellaed by the eels, the place grew all the brighter. The fountain and grassy hills were illuminated by bright blue light.

Argrave held his hand out and cast a spell with his own magic. Two thick strands of blood erupted from his wrist. They took form in his hands, solidifying into a great recurve bow as tall as Argrave himself. He raised his other hand up, and an arrow took shape. He nocked the arrow for his [Bloodfeud Bow].

Induen could only wait on the other side of the ward, the thousands of [Electric Eels] swirling about around Argrave and the whole battlefield like some grim curtain of white death. He barked something—commands, questions, to his knights. He looked around panicked for any opportunity—any escape, any freedom. But escape was out of the question; Argrave would rain lightning upon them the second they

were freed from the ward. As Induen looked for options, the dark red arrow on Argrave's finger grew larger and larger. The pain kept Argrave focused.

Eventually, Argrave met Induen's eyes. He had never seen this type of expression before. It was panic, anger, indignance, fear, all bundled so tightly together as to become another emotion altogether. The prince was tense, coiled like a rabbit ready to bolt. His eyes were pleading, almost, painted yellow by the golden wards he hid behind.

The eels swelled outwards, then surged inwards towards the ball of golden light protecting Induen. As they passed by Argrave, he released the arrow. The scene ahead became a great blur of power, shattered golden wards, and white light. The electric eels struck the royal knights in the hundreds, turning them into sparking beacons. Dirt and grass scattered upwards and everywhere, as though a missile had struck the earth.

"If he's not dead, cut his hands off, take his necklace," Argrave said somberly, knowing Galamon would hear. It was not cruelty—he had to restrain Induen, for he was a spellcaster.

Galamon obeyed immediately, pushing into the great cloud of dust. Argrave could hear nothing at all. Dirt and grass peppered him from above. As the dust settled, there was a great gash in the earth ahead that extended for hundreds of feet. Induen stood at its beginning. The arrow of blood had struck the prince in the thigh, and his right leg had been severed just below his hip. He seemed to be unconscious. As Galamon ruthlessly obeyed Argrave's orders, though, the prince awoke, screaming in agony.

Argrave stepped up to Induen, past his two dead royal knights. He was dizzy from using [Bloodfeud Bow], but compared to his first use, it was entirely manageable. Hundreds of the eels still persisted, whirling in the air around Argrave as he walked. Induen gazed up at him with eyes full of hate, pain, and fear. Argrave scanned his body for enchanted items, ensuring he was at no risk.

"Search the bodies," Argrave commanded loudly. "Take all of their enchanted items, barring the armor—we can't carry that. After, move to the gates of Kin's End."

Everyone moved to obey Argrave's order without a word, still consumed by the rush of battle. Induen breathed heavily, his eyes fluttering as he struggled with consciousness. Death hung over him.

Argrave picked up Induen's detached hand and began removing the rings from it, stowing it in his pocket. Induen tried to crawl backwards into the crater created by the [Bloodfeud Bow], but Argrave put his foot on Induen's chest.

"You..." Induen said, voice hoarse and pained. "You're no... brother of mine. You were useless. A waste of life," he tried to shout, yet it was weak. "You're not my brother!"

Argrave cast a simple D-rank ice spell that was no more than a spike and jammed it into Induen's eye. It penetrated deep, well beyond the eye and into the brain beyond. The prince spasmed, his body losing focus, and then he sagged back. Argrave pressed his foot against the back of the ice spike, pushing it deeper until it came out the back of his head.

With a hole the size of a fist through his brain... Induen was dead. There was no room for doubt.

Argrave removed all the enchanted rings from Induen's hands, and then moved back to his companions. They robbed the dead as quick as they could, and then moved for the gate.

“Get the armor from Orion as fast as we can, if Induen wasn’t just lying,” Argrave said to his companions as they moved. “If people try and stop us, subdue them—don’t kill anyone.”

“Right,” Durran answered, everyone else responding similarly.

Argrave shouted warnings and assurances, and that was enough to cow the terrified crowd. They treated the four of them like calamities, doubly so because of the cloud of [Electric Eels] above Argrave. Yet the fact remained that everyone saw them, each of them. In time, this event would spread across all of Vasquer. *Let it, thought Argrave. Induen is hated.*

Though Argrave took his time, weakened from casting [Bloodfeud Bow], they made it to the building Induen had been in. The two sets of armor were sitting on a stand within the room. Galamon’s was a set of bleak gray plate armor that shone with protective enchantments on every portion. It seemed ridiculously thick and heavy, yet its prowess could not be questioned. After tossing aside the helmet, knowing his own was better, Galamon started putting everything on, aided by Argrave.

Durran’s was a set of lighter lamellar scale armor. It was still made of wyvern scales, to Argrave’s surprise—he had not known Durran had requested it to be as such. It looked quite formidable, gleaming every bit as intensely as Galamon’s. Durran put it on with Anneliese’s help.

“Don’t see the weapons I asked for... damn,” cursed the tribal. “Do we change our course, travel elsewhere?” Durran questioned as they armored up.

“Dozens of S-rank mages enforce the neutrality in the Tower of the Gray Owl,” Argrave said. “Felipe can’t afford making them an enemy, even for his son’s killer. If we get in before news reaches... they’ll protect us, even if dozens of mages break their oath of neutrality to earn favor with the king.” Argrave stepped to the window, looking at the tower. “So, we travel without sleep. Ride our horses ‘til they die.”

“What about getting out?” Anneliese asked. “The king will surely have the place encircled on every side—he’ll ensure there is no way for us to leave.”

“Magic,” Argrave said. “I’ll have to... curry favor with some people, Castro being the primary candidate... but others exist.”

“...are you okay?” Anneliese said with concern as she finished up with Durran’s armor.

He looked back at her. He was trying not to think of what he’d done. “I can figure that out later,” he said simply. “For now... let’s go. This will have consequences. I’d like to get ahead of them.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 215: Unexpected Guest

Argrave fled from Kin’s End as fast as the horses would carry them. The scouting they did was less detailed than usual in their haste—it would be more important to make it to the Tower of the Gray Owl than it would be to dodge potential ambushes, and much of the area ahead was simply a vast plain that required no scouting.

But the tower was not so far, fortunately. As they grew nearer, it loomed over their head more and more, like a great gray rod planted in the ground by the gods. Even from a great distance, Argrave could

see the sparking enchantments holding such a titanic piece of architecture upright, the magic grappling with both the fast winds at high altitudes and the great weight of the tower itself.

There were stables a fair distance away from the tower. Argrave and his companions moved their horses near them, the creatures panting with exhaustion. They had very nearly ridden them to death. Once there, Argrave dismounted, legs stiff and unwieldy after the breakneck ride.

“You there,” Argrave told a stable worker. “Take care of our horses. Just remember my face, give our horses back when we leave,” he said, handing the boy five gold coins. “Five more when we return,” he promised. He didn’t know if they’d leave by horseback, though.

The boy nodded quickly, seemingly terrified of Argrave. With that, they removed their luggage from their spot atop the horses and left, heading to the entrance of the tower. Argrave felt an urge to sprint.

“Can they enter without badges?” asked Anneliese, referring to Galamon and Durran. “As I recall these places have magical restriction for those without them.”

“First couple floors have stupidly expensive temporary lodgings, yeah. Nobility study here—some of them bring servants, retinues of knights... the Order makes money by charging hefty rent,” Argrave nodded. “Beyond those first floors, no. The restriction will kick in.”

Once Argrave’s foot met the stone of the tower... he took a deep breath and exhaled. “Christ... we made it. Most terrifying horseback ride of my life. Or maybe it was the first one,” Argrave conceded.

“What now?” questioned Galamon, directing their attention back to the important matters.

“Now...” Argrave nodded, recalling what he had planned. “Now, we head to the fourth floor, get you two registered for temporary lodging, establish the purpose of our visit. From there... I don’t know how long we’ll stay. Ideally, it’ll be a very short time. Realistically, I’m not sure how easy Castro will be able to win over. If that fails, we might have to turn to another S-rank mage for aid, which would take... I don’t know,” Argrave shook his head, exhausted.

Already, people were staring at them from their eye-catching appearance alone. Once news of Induen’s death reached here, he was sure they’d be the center of attention. He’d probably be doing no favors for his reputation in the Order of the Gray Owl by blatantly abusing their policy of neutrality, but he didn’t especially care. He’d be paying them back for this favor in time.

“Let’s go, then,” Argrave nodded, steeling himself. He felt like a lion among sheep—he’d just killed a prince, and now he was preparing himself to have a pleasant conversation with a receptionist.

Yes as he walked, he noticed someone distinctly moving towards him. At first, his frayed nerves made him interpret the action in a negative light. As the person grew closer, however, his paranoia morphed into surprise.

Elias of House Parbon approached Argrave. Argrave stared at his waxpox-scarred eye in shock, yet the heir to the Margravate of House Parbon was smiling.

“And here I thought Stain would be wasting all of our time,” Elias said. “Argrave. I—” he paused. “Your eyes. My father told me about it, but I didn’t think that... I suppose seeing is believing.”

Argrave recovered from his shock quickly. "Yeah. It seems we both had some changes on that front. What the hell are you doing here?"

Elias' finger brushed just beneath his eye. "Don't worry about this. I made a mistake, that's the bottom line." He studied Argrave's party. "Nikoletta and Mina are both here, as well."

"What?" Argrave's brows furrowed. "What's going on?"

"We have to talk about the future," Elias said plainly. "My father sent me here to talk to you. Nikoletta's father, too. And Mina... it was a coincidence we met up at all."

Argrave shifted on his feet and looked back to Anneliese. She nodded, confirming Elias' sincerity. He crossed his arms and looked back to Elias. "I just recently had a talk about the future. It ended very poorly for the other party."

Elias frowned, not catching Argrave's meaning. "Is that a...?"

"No, just a stupid joke," Argrave shook his head. "I mean... Christ, you caught me at a poor time."

"We didn't think to catch you at all," Elias admitted. "Stain said he heard rumors you broke into the B-rank and predicted you might head to the Tower to seek advancement into a High Wizard."

Argrave scratched the bottom of his chin, embarrassed he had been so easily predicted. At the same time, he thought of an opportunity. "By any chance... are you staying in a temporary lodging?"

"Yes," Elias nodded, perplexed. "We have guards with us, so it was necessary. Why?"

Argrave smiled. "I'll talk only if we can stay with you. The lodging is stupidly expensive."

"As long as you answer us honestly, done," Elias confirmed.

"You may regret that," Argrave cautioned.

#####

Prince Levin strode through the vast greenery of Princess Elenore's greenhouse, admiring the vibrancy of the garden. Or at least, so it seemed—though his face smiled, his eyes seemed almost bored.

As he wandered, he eventually made it into the central square, where a great fountain dominated the center. He stepped past small streams that flowed out of the water show, walking towards a pink metal table just beside it. Princess Elenore sat there, wearing green just as ever. She heard his steps and faced him as he walked.

"Hello, sister," Levin greeted.

"Levin," she returned passively.

Levin took a deep breath. "It always surprises me that you recognize my voice, considering how infrequently we speak."

Elenore said nothing. Levin pulled back a chair and sat without asking.

"I take it you will not be attending Magnus' funeral?" Levin began, setting his hands upon the table.

The fountain continued to babble and bugs in the greenhouse chirped as both of them let the silence hang.

"I cannot leave the greenhouse," Elenore finally said.

Levin nodded. "Or so father decreed."

She smiled pleasantly. "I imagine Magnus' murderer will not be attending, as well."

The prince laughed and smiled in kind. "Have you not heard? Orion killed his murderer. So he claims, anyway. Who am I to doubt him? I was not there. He died by strange magic foreign to Vasquer. But I will be going, if that's what you were asking. I arranged the event, after all."

He said that he arranged the event with such pride the phrase took on double meanings.

Elenore tilted her head, eyeless sockets seeming to gaze into Levin's soul. "Magnus went to the wetlands to discover why the plague was spreading so fast in the south, you know."

"And such a queer thing," Levin said, leaning back in his chair. "Our selfish brother does something entirely selfless, for reasons I could not begin to guess."

"If only he'd told someone what he'd discovered before he died," Elenore mused. "That someone might inform me. And I might know."

Levin smiled, but it was bitter. "If only." He took a deep breath and sighed, then leaned in and placed his elbows on the pink table. "So many tragedies and near-tragedies to those close to you."

"Are they not close to you?" Elenore raised a brow.

Levin shrugged. "Well, who can say. But I do wonder why my sister expends so much effort to bring Argrave and Induen closer."

"Who can say," she parroted.

Levin turned his head to the side, admiring the fountain as it poured. "It is simply vexing as to why you go to such lengths for a baseborn. So many cards used, favors called... maybe all the favors you've made, trapped here in this greenhouse."

"Maybe," she conceded.

"Something in the air tells me that I may be called upon for my funerary services sometime soon," Levin pondered as he admired more of the greenhouse. "Orion was rather fond of Argrave. I'm sure he'll be devastated by the news. He may do something foolish. How unfortunate."

Elenore simply faced forward, remaining quiet. Levin turned his gaze to her missing eyes. He did not seem to be appalled in the slightest.

"A person is driven by needs and wants," Levin posited. "Safety and succor are foremost among those needs. Men and women will do anything for both. Yet wants... they determine all else. Once safety is obtained, people dedicate all of their time to their desires. If you know what someone wants, you know how to make them move. People might seek empty pleasures. They might seek fulfillment."

Elenore crossed her arms. "An interesting theory."

Levin nodded. "I am wondering who might want Argrave dead."

"You generally dispose of the bastards of the family," Elenore pointed out.

"Well, I was quite young when Argrave was born," Levin shook his head regretfully. "And Felipe forbid it when I was old enough to assume that duty, for reasons I cannot guess."

"Yet you want to?" Elenore questioned.

"Not especially," Levin said ponderously. "Not any more than anyone else, I suppose."

"What do you want, Levin?" The princess finally asked outright.

Levin smiled—it seemed to be his first genuine smile. "Now that is the age-old question, hmm? If you knew what I wanted, you might be able to make me move, as you've made so many others. I'd be in your web. Or your... bat's nest? I can't think of a good metaphor for bats, tragically." Levin leaned forth. "I'll tell you what I want. I want to know what you want, dear sister."

"Well, you'll need to persuade me to tell you," Elenore said casually.

"See? You get it. You know what I want, and now you're trying to make me move as you wish," Levin shook his head. "You were always bright. I question how someone as smart as you ended up blinded and crippled by father, locked up in this elaborate cage. Oh—but then, father didn't do the deed personally, did he? A certain special someone did..." Levin's smile was cruel enough to move people to tears.

Princess Elenore said nothing in response.

At her non-reaction, Levin looked sorely disappointed. He looked off to the side, then said, "By all rights, you're the weakest in the family. Blind, no feet, no magic to your name, no swords at your side... yet sometimes I wonder if you're more dangerous than me... than anyone."

Elenore leaned back in her wheelchair. "Such a thing to say. You could kill me right now, brother."

Levin leaned in. "I wonder," he said, looking around. "I must be going now. We both have each other's weakness, so things will continue on as they are for time eternal. I do wonder how long that eternity will last, though. Allegiances are changing like the weather, and the royal family dips in number day after day. Oh, provided Archduke Regene stays asleep, of course."

Levin walked away quietly. Elenore's eyeless sockets seemed to follow him, watching as he left.

"You are slower to hear than I am, it seems," she whispered, half to herself. Her face had the slightest of smiles. "The jackal surprises once more... a legion of ghostly snakes... hmm."