

Chapter 216: Declaration of Spring

Argrave stepped through the door, mindful to duck beneath the doorframes now that he'd returned to the Tower of the Gray Owl after all these months. Within, numerous recognizable people waited for him alongside a large retinue of knights. Mina and Nikoletta sat near each other, but there was an awkward air between them. Stain sat by the windowsill. Elias walked to a table in the center of the room, standing before it with his hands hovering just above the wood.

"Crowded place. Not enough for a party," Argrave noted as his companions filtered in behind him. "Are you sure we can stay here? And I mean physically."

"Mina and Nikoletta have a room next door," Elias nodded.

"Ah," said Argrave, looking at them pointedly.

Both of them frowned, though one for different reasons—Nikoletta seemed discomforted by his eyes. "You've... changed a lot, I see, cousin."

"Heard that plenty," he nodded. "We can talk about it later. To business," Argrave ordered.

"Well..." Elias began, taken off-balance by the speed of the conversation. Eventually, he nodded in agreement, his one good eye fixing on Argrave. "Yes... to the point, then. It would probably be best to lay it out plainly." Elias cleared his throat. "We'd like you to fight at our side in the war against King Felipe. Not as a commander or common spellcaster—as a claimant. *Our* claimant, to Diraccha and all the lands of Vasquer."

The words were somewhat surreal, so Argrave did not have a visceral reaction. He looked back to Anneliese, and she smiled bitterly. Durran nodded intensely just behind her to encourage Argrave, while Galamon merely kept his eyes on the knights of the Margravate throughout the room.

"Your father isn't blowing steam at the mention of my name?" Argrave turned back.

"My father thinks you succeeded at stopping the spread of the plague," Elias returned. "And Mina corroborates that."

"So do I," Stain finally interjected. "People walking from the northwest are singing about you, Argrave."

With a shrug, Argrave made his way to a chair and pulled it up to the table Elias stood before. He sat.

"Orion did most of the work." His gaze wandered to Nikoletta. "Claimant? Make her do it."

"I refused. I don't want it. Besides, I am a woman, and that alone would stifle support," Nikoletta shook her head. "I only wish for peace and prosperity in Mateth. I am not made for dealing with court intrigues and management of a vast land. Acting as regent for my father alone stressed me beyond compare. To go beyond that in scale? I would rather not."

Argrave rubbed his forehead. "What in the hell... why would you think this is a good idea?"

“Your actions the past few months have been tremendous,” Elias told him plainly. “Going to Veiden, allying us with Jast, stopping the plague... and from what you told Nikoletta, it seems you know of a lot of future tragedies. You will be hailed as a hero by the people—and the people, they’re what’s important.”

Argrave placed Induen’s royal signet ring on the table. It depicted Vasquer’s heraldry—a sword, with twin snakes coiled around it. “I killed Induen, you know.”

The room went quiet. Everyone studied him and the ring as though he was joking.

“You heard me,” Argrave continued. “Kin’s End. He was waiting for me there. Ironic name for the town, I suppose, or maybe it was fate. Tried to name me Prince Argrave of Vasquer, offer me great stretches of southern land. Once Induen tried to suggest keeping Anneliese hostage, negotiations broke down. That was the breaking point, but I killed him for... various good reasons,” Argrave summarized shortly.

Everyone stared at him in pure shock. Argrave couldn’t fully describe the emotion he was feeling. He felt pride in his accomplishment supplanted by guilt at that pride. He felt relief at Induen’s death coupled with fear at possible reprisal. He felt both hopeful and deeply uncertain of the future. All of it melded together to create a strange, careless apathy.

Argrave looked from person to person. “I imagine the enthusiasm of your offer has dulled somewhat. King Kinslayer is not as appealing a prospect as the heroic bastard, protector of the weak.”

Nikoletta stood and walked forward to him. “You killed him?” When Argrave nodded, she continued, “You, personally? You used no proxy, like a... a higher ranked mage? A military force?”

“I jabbed an ice spike through his eye about a foot long,” Argrave described succinctly. “After some... magical dueling.”

Nikoletta put her hand on Argrave’s shoulder to support herself from falling. “Gods above... I need...”

One of her knights came over and helped her to find a seat.

“How many... I mean... who saw this?” Mina asked, aghast.

“Few hundred people. A royal knight escaped—Induen sent him for reinforcements. I imagine word will spread very quickly. That’s why I came here,” Argrave spread his arms out.

“Wasn’t he... I mean, I heard Induen was... not weak at all,” Stain noted from the windowsill. “Gods be damned.”

“World’s a better place without him sucking air,” Argrave crossed his arms. “I saw an opportunity. I took it. Induen deliberately orphaned children for pleasure,” he said loudly and deliberately. “Frankly, he got off easy.”

“And you should be so lucky,” Elias said, his voice urgent. “If Felipe catches you, you won’t get off easy at all. All the more reason we should hurry. The Margrave sent us to bring you back—so come back. We can protect you. Moreover, Duke Enrico is prepared to allow—”

“Do not mention that,” Nikoletta cut in. “We are trying to persuade, Elias. Recall what triggered Induen’s demise.”

"...right," Elias nodded, then stroked his chin briefly. Argrave was perplexed at their exchange, but he could not ask before Elias continued. "The south is prepared to utilize every force at our disposal to safeguard you. So come with us, Argrave."

"Mmm..." Argrave put his finger to his lips. "I like the sound of 'dozens of S-rank mages' better than 'Parbon Margravate.' Tempting, but I think not."

"The Tower? You'll stay here?" Elias sought to confirm. "King Felipe will have this place encircled, and he'll demand you be given to him. He won't... at least, I'm relatively sure he won't attack the Tower, but you won't be able to leave."

"You think I did this on a whim?" Argrave looked to him. "I wasn't expecting to meet any of you. I have a plan. If it falls through, I have other plans. And besides... going to Parbon once again is not in my calendar."

"You do owe me a favor still, Argrave," Mina pointed out. "A big one. And I surely won't forget that fact."

Elias put his hand on his hip and stared down at Argrave. "So... you refuse our offer. You won't act as claimant. Won't even consider it."

"When did I say that? Relax, both of you," Argrave looked between Mina and Elias. "Give me a moment to think."

As Argrave sat there in contemplation, Elias walked away, everyone still reeling from the news of Induen's death. Anneliese put her hand on Argrave's shoulder, and he looked up. He put his hand atop her own and returned the resigned smile she flashed him.

The two of them had already talked about this at length. And the conclusion?

"When spring comes... when the fighting begins in earnest... I will be your claimant," Argrave finally said. "Provided my status as a kinslayer doesn't make the Margrave rethink things."

Elias stepped back up to Argrave, his one good ruby eye fixed on Argrave. "You speak seriously? No lies?"

"On my terms," Argrave put a finger to his chest. "Nikoletta. How much did you gab about Gerechtigkei?"

"Err..." she looked up from where she sat. "I told my father. It spread to the Margrave, and to Elias."

"Once things get worse... a title like king or queen has a hell of a lot less meaning. It'll be a desperate struggle for just about everyone," Argrave informed them, gaze distant. "If only for the sake of stability after the war, I'll do it. I can't promise I won't abdicate when it suits me."

"That's..." Elias bit his lip.

"Hey," Argrave pointed to Elias. "You have no idea the magnitude of problems that we face. The civil war is just one medium-sized checkbox on my list of 'shit that's wrong with the world.'" Argrave tapped his finger against the table. "I'll fix this kingdom. I'll make sure it stays fixed. I'll utilize my status to the best of my ability to stop the world from turning upside down. But when all is said and done?" Argrave

threw up his hands. "I can barely comprehend being a king. I can think of a hundred better candidates. I won't deny wealth and power are enticing, but after all the things I've been through, peace and happiness rank a lot higher in my hopes for the future. A king—a good king, which I'm sure you want—that's a busy job. Early retirement sounds peachy to me."

Elias seemed cowed by Argrave's intensity. After he shifted on his feet a few times, he gave a slow nod. "Alright."

"Alright," Argrave repeated, finally relaxing.

"It might not matter anyway," Elias noted tiredly. "Odds are stacked against us. Most of the south was ravaged by plague. A lot of our fighting force died out, and though the harvest went smoothly... saboteurs burn granaries and assassins attack local lords constantly. It's become a struggle to persuade undecided nobility, while Vasquer does not have the same issue at all."

"Eh," Argrave waved his hand half-heartedly. "We'll win. But I'm starving," he noted. "Do they have food here?"

"We'll win? On what basis?" Nikoletta demanded, standing from her chair and stepping up.

"Relax," Argrave held his hand out. "I told you I have a plan."

"I want to know why you're confident," Nikoletta insisted, crossing her arms. "It's past time for you to include us in this."

"I trust Mina to keep quiet, but you expect me to spill my guts about military plans to people notoriously terrible at keeping secrets? In front of half a dozen knights, all of whom may be enemy informants, no less?" Argrave scowled, then rose up until he stood over everyone. "You learn a lot risking your life day-by-day, foremost among those lessons being caution. I expect you to save your indignance for a better time, Nikoletta."

Nikoletta stepped back from Argrave, not able to meet his eyes. "I-I'm sorry," she said.

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, now aware he was being unnecessarily intimidating. "Don't apologize," he patted her shoulder. "I get your perspective. You're gambling a lot—all of you," he said heartily. "Some bastard-turned-kinslayer being your only hope, I can see why you might want a lot of assurances. So let me give you some," Argrave said, mind pushing past his fatigue as he worked out a speech.

"I won't go into specifics, for the sake of ensuring they fall through," Argrave declared, gaze jumping from person to person. "But there are forces within Vasquer that lay untapped—forces which surpass all of what the enemy's got. I know the inner workings of many factions within and without this kingdom. You want assurances? That's good. Then know this—I want a quick end to this war. I turned down Induen, killed him and four of his royal knights in single combat. That should tell you what I think of Vasquer's chances," Argrave pointed around the room.

"When spring comes... I'll bring a spring of my own. A new beginning, fresh buds that'll make the south and all of Vasquer flourish like never before. Some people you called 'enemy' yesterday... when I return, they'll be at my back." Argrave pumped his fist. "The rot within Vasquer's leadership... I'll make it fester. So you can focus on building an army, Elias, Mina, Nikoletta—and you can keep it. I don't need it. I'll

bring an army of my own. And I can damn well guarantee you it'll be bigger and better. So rest easy. I certainly am," Argrave finished, taking a good look at everyone's reactions.

Missed my calling, Argrave concluded. *Went to college—should have just been a motivational speaker.*

"On that note, I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I've got things to do," Argrave rubbed his eyes. "So, are we done?"

No answer was vocalized, but then Argrave supposed that was answer enough.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 217: Golden Ticket

"What do you think?" Argrave questioned Anneliese. The two of them sat on rather comfortable chairs just before a table. Despite the safety of the tower, neither removed their enchanted armor—the Tower was safe, but it was still better to be overcautious. They were in a private room, warded to block sound—commonplace in the tower.

Anneliese crossed one leg over the other. "Of the tower?" she asked, and when Argrave nodded to confirm, she said, "It is a bit... ostentatious, if I am honest."

"Got that right. It's no coincidence it's in the middle of a plain. It's a big, useless monument to pride. I think Castro would agree. You met him before, now that I think back," Argrave settled into his chair, then sighed. "Induen's dead."

"You feel relieved," she said—a statement, not a question.

"Yeah," Argrave said, voice distant. "The provisional route I made at the beginning of... whatever the hell you call my presence in this realm, it's veered quite far off course. And now, I'm planning to take us further from it."

"I will help as best I can," Anneliese only assured him.

"How are you handling these developments?" Argrave asked her.

Anneliese shifted in her chair uncomfortably. "I have been trying to focus myself on this place, this tower, and what might be within... I suppose that should tell you enough. I am nervous. I am afraid. We have angered something very powerful."

Argrave snorted. "Hearing you're curious about this place just tells me you're the same person at root." He looked to her. "But forget about who we've angered. Induen's death wasn't a crime of passion—it was a great damned opportunity. King Felipe's angry, I'm a kinslayer—all of these consequences pale in comparison to the good that one act did, pragmatically and morally."

"I never said I doubted your actions," Anneliese soothed.

"I know you didn't. I said it half to myself, honestly. But..." Argrave adjusted his sleeve. "Hearing him make that suggestion about your future—that got under my skin like nothing else. If I could have made him—"

The door to the room opened, cutting Argrave off. A short man with a straight back and a wrinkled, almost leathery bald head entered. He seemed kind and harmless. He looked far too small to threaten or intimidate, and the amiable smile practically writ on his face spoke to his kindness. Calling him kind was true enough, but Castro was light years away from being harmless.

Argrave rose to his feet at once. "Tower Master Castro," he said eagerly. "Thought we'd be waiting longer—planned for a long conversation with Anneliese."

"Ah..." his eyes jumped between the two of them.

"I'm Argrave," he put his hand to his chest. "We spoke at—"

"Did you think I'd forgotten?" Castro interrupted, then stepped a bit closer after he shut the door. "No, I was simply... deeply awed by your progress. Both of you... my memory is not perfect, but your improvements seem utterly tremendous."

Castro's words had an intense sincerity to them that practically forced both to smile. The fact he was happy eased Argrave—it likely meant he had not heard of Induen's fate quite yet, nor had the rest of the tower.

He stepped up to Argrave, his smile faltering. "Your eyes, though... reminiscent of certain products from certain schools of necromancy, Order of the Rose-era creatures... large portions of both soul and magic power crystallize in the eye, preventing decay while retaining sight. The crystallized soul is the gold color, while the blackness is the magic."

It was Argrave's turn to be awed when Castro so quickly identified the source of his eyes.

"Well, that's... not why we're here," Argrave redirected, trying not to act nervous.

"Necromancy is illegal. I won't insult you by implying you don't know that," Castro said, raising one finger above his head until he tapped Argrave's chest. "But beyond that, I would not like to see such promising growth sullied by—"

"You know an awful lot about necromancy. Can pinpoint exact details," Argrave noted.

Castro pulled his finger back. "I am a curious person, and I enjoy learning."

"Well, I'd consider myself the same. But for the record—these," Argrave pointed to his eyes. "These are from surgery and alchemy, not necromancy." Argrave shook his head, then sat back down at the chair. "Can we sit, talk? Like I mentioned in the message I sent you, I have more druidic books to offload."

Castro nodded, though Argrave couldn't tell if he was quite content. He turned to Anneliese. "Ah. We meet again, young lady Anneliese. Though your friend here drew my eye... you are no less the achiever, I see. Both of you are well into B-rank. Such a thing."

"Hello again, Master Castro," she greeted with a nod.

"Both of you have grown... and not merely in terms of magic, that is evident." Castro bobbed his head as he thought of something. "Well, I imagine you had other matters to discuss," he said as he sat. "Come to milk me more, hmm? Another offer to turn a profit? How is business in Jast?"

Argrave smiled. "If only I saw a penny of it," he lamented, realizing denying things at this point would just be insolence. Castro did not lead the Order of the Gray Owl because he was powerful alone—he was a shrewd and capable leader, under whom the Order had come to prosper greatly.

"I'm not particularly pleased at what you've done, illicitly distributing spellbooks through Jast," he leaned back into the chair. "But, at the end of the day, more members of the order are learning druidic spells. In time, they will permeate throughout the Order. All is well that ends well. And nothing concrete traces back to you... or your smuggler friends, there. After all, Elaine of Vyrbell might not have recommended Anneliese to be an honorary Wizard had you not done what you did. That would be a shame indeed, being deprived of a talent."

Argrave relaxed back into the chair. "You might start unnerving me if you know what we've done in the Burnt Desert, too."

Castro only smiled. It seemed a little less genial, now. Only a little. "So, what is it you want from me? Do you wish me to expedite your ascendancy to High Wizards of the Order? I am afraid that is impossible, even for me."

"We're aware," said Anneliese. "And we did not come for that."

"I've got two things I'd like to ask of you," said Argrave. "I'd like help with a gift for my sister. I'm going to be visiting her soon, you see, and I can't come empty-handed. And on that note... I'd like a ride to the gift store, and to Dirracha."

"A gift for your sister?" Castro looked surprised. "That's a sweet sentiment. I'm sure it will be appreciated. But how do I factor into this?"

"Well... the gift store in question is a Rose-era living fortress," Argrave disclosed. "Plenty of things of archaeological interest, as well as preserved books from the Order of the Rose that might be recovered. That's my offering to you," Argrave held his hands up. "But within... there's a little artifact that can help my sister out immeasurably."

Castro tapped his finger against the armrest of the chair, staring at Argrave with wonder. "And how did you learn of this fortress?"

"Well, I went through the Low Way of the Rose," Argrave explained. "Hellish place. Wouldn't wish it on anyone. But I learned a lot. Gained a lot." *And made some unexpected acquaintances*, he left that last part unspoken, mind wandering to Garm.

Anneliese nodded in agreement, and Castro's eyes jumped between the two of them.

"You have been busy, I see," Castro remarked. "Well... certainly I can organize a team, have them come with you to this—"

"I was hoping it would be you, personally," Argrave leaned forward, trying to appear as earnest as possible.

Castro frowned, bushy white brows descending. "I cannot. I have pressing matters to attend to here, unfortunately."

“We were planning on going to Magister Moriatran to ask, next,” Argrave said—the man was ostensibly Castro’s largest rival, a councilor on the ruling body of the Order of the Gray Owl who opposed him frequently.

“That one? Well, that is an entertaining notion, young man. Do you suppose he will even agree to meet you?” Castro laughed, then scratched his cheek. “I do not say I have matters to attend to for the sake of dodging this request—I am genuinely busy. My duties are light as the Tower Master, and this tower mostly runs itself... but I do still have duties.”

“What if I give you other locations?” Argrave insisted, leaning yet more forward ‘til he nearly fell off the chair. “I can tell you places—”

“Argrave,” Anneliese cut in. When he looked at her, she shook her head to indicate it was hopeless. Argrave slumped back into the chair, finally admitting defeat.

“I am sorry, truly. Living fortresses are few and far between, and I would jump at the opportunity if I did not have other concerns. Alas, the trappings of power.” Castro scratched the back of his neck. “I am told the Margrave sought aid from the Tower for the plague by your advice,” Castro noted. “And I’ve heard other whispers, too, from the northwest. I am not ignorant of the good you’ve done, and you have earned something.” Castro smiled, then pointed. “Speaking of the good you’ve done—you’ve yet to receive your reward for the dissertation on [Blood Infusion] you submitted.”

“I can’t think of much I want from the Order they’d be willing to part with,” Argrave shook his head. “But... listen. If you can’t help me, can you at least make it easier for me to meet with the other S-rank mages in the tower? The Magisters, the researchers?”

Castro laid his hands on the armrests. “My word to Moriatran may make it more difficult to meet him... but yes to all the others. I will think of something. It is the least I can do. Why are you so insistent on being escorted by an S-rank mage, though?”

“Convenience. Ease. Reliability,” Argrave said succinctly. “Less variables to keep track of. One person to keep happy, and nothing more.”

“It takes a certain insanity to become S-rank,” Castro said bluntly. “Be careful who you choose, young man.”

“I know,” Argrave nodded. “That’s why I wanted you. Well...”

“Master Castro,” Anneliese cut in. “The enchantments that keep this tower upright—they must be something very special.”

“They are,” Castro indulged patiently.

“Do you think I might... learn about them? How they’re powered, how they function, the methods used to inscribe them. Oh—and the strange moving platforms in the center of the tower—I am greatly interested by those. Anything you might give to illuminate me would be greatly appreciated.”

Castro laughed quietly. “I can see why you advanced so quickly through the ranks of magic, young lady. Well... certainly, if it’s only that, I can give you a pass to the lower levels of the tower, where these things are managed. What you learn there—that’s up to you.”

Anneliese nodded eagerly, then fixed her long white hair. "I would have it no other way."

"If that's all..." the old man rose to his feet.

"Have a nice day, Master Castro," Argrave said his goodbyes.

The Tower Master nodded and left through the door. Argrave raised a hand to his face once he left, scratching his cheek with a somber look.

"Gods be damned," Argrave sighed. "Our golden ticket to the blood factory just walked out the door... and we have to find a new one. What's more, they'll have learned of Induen's death, by then. Things are going to be difficult, Anneliese."

"I cannot recall when last they were easy," she returned.

Argrave laughed, then looked to the window. "Almost sunset time."

When Anneliese smiled at his words, he couldn't help but do the same. She stood.

"Let us go, then. Relax, speak of things alone for precious few moments," she held out her hand to help him up.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 218: Shadows

"What do we do about this?" Elias began. He sat at a table consisting of Nikoletta, Mina, and Stain. Their guards were absent, and they were in a relatively clean room within the Tower with little in the way of decoration or even windows—a private room, warded to block all sound. Spellcasters were well-educated and engaged in more intrigue than most, so such rooms had a good place within the Tower.

"I think Argrave's right," Mina interjected. "Losing Induen... it's a blessing. I can say having worked with him, he's an untrustworthy ally... but a far worse enemy."

Nikoletta crossed her arms. "You shouldn't have done that for him. It was too dangerous."

"What does it matter to you what I do?" Mina rebuked defensively.

Elias' good eye moved between the two of them, obviously hesitant to touch this quarrel at all. "What does this mean for the kingdom? For the future?"

Stain lifted his leg up and left his foot hanging off one of the table's edges. "I can tell you now—Argrave's not going to lose any goodwill from the people that matter."

"What people are those?" Nikoletta pressed, unbothered by his lax nature.

"*The* people," Stain finished, pointing two fingers at Nikoletta. "Your everyman has been hating the royal family for a long time, and Induen's the face of all that. King Felipe's had him managing things for a while, and all the harsh taxes, all the injustice? Induen made it happen. So, grand scheme of things?" Stain shrugged, leaving the answer unspoken.

Everyone gave half-hearted nods of agreements.

“...but realistically speaking,” Nikoletta cut in, “If this is to affect anyone, it is to be the nobility. There, kinslaying holds the most... negativity. People that hold stock in blood care more when one is willing to spill the blood of their own kin.”

“There’s ways around that,” Mina noted. “Ultimately... if we get on this ahead of time, influence the direction of rumors... Stain?”

Stain raised his head and fixed his brown hair. “What?”

“You could spread rumors that it was self-defense—that Induen intended to kill Argrave. He only acted in self-defense,” Mina posited.

“Sure, sure. And I will. But...” Stain bit his lip as he deliberated on whether or not to say something. “...did he?”

Quiet set in once again.

Elias leaned forward on the table and placed his elbows down. “I think that’s what we should be talking about.”

“Pedantry about who started the fight?” Nikoletta asked incredulously.

“No, no,” Elias shook his head. “Is Argrave who he once was? Is he worth... supporting?”

Stain raised his hand. “Who he once was? Seemed the same to me. Scary bastard through and through, a little manipulative, but ultimately a decent guy.”

“Your father made that judgement already, Mister Firebrand,” Mina leaned back in her chair. “As far as you told me, you’re just here to bring him back. We’ve already got his answer: ‘I’ll do what I want,’ though in more words.”

Nikoletta looked troubled. “Argrave is... different. Whether physically, or the way he talked, he is not what I remember. At core he remains recognizable, but he has a whole different air, attitude, and appearance.”

Elias nodded in agreement. “But... these changes, they might not be negative.”

Everyone considered that for a moment, looking between each other.

“My father doesn’t want to put a puppet on the throne. He’s told me as much himself. Argrave is firm, decisive, and I believe we all agree that he seems an able leader,” Elias looked between everyone, searching for protest. “But Induen was all of these things. Orion is all of those things. Felipe is all of those things. What’s important... is the core. Their heart.” Elias placed his hand to his own.

Nikoletta nodded in agreement, but Mina and Stain seemed to think Elias’ speech was corny and grimaced.

“Our main priority moving forward should be to find more out about Gerechtigkeits,” Elias said. “Argrave is right on that—it is important. My father showed me the evidence, and gods be damned, it’s very important.” Elias pointed a finger to stress his point. “But it’s important to learn why he’s taken on this

task. And it'll be very important to hear what he wants from the future. Elsewise, we might be putting our support behind yet another snake that's naught but a poison to the land."

"So, what, talk to him?" Stain furrowed his brows but smiled as though the idea was laughable.

"Yes," Elias confirmed. "But just as important as Argrave is the company he keeps. So, here's my suggestion—we should help Argrave with his business here. We should support him as best we can. All the while, we learn everything that we can from him—his plans, his nature, and why he keeps the company he does. It's clear he trusts only his companions. As such, we should be his companions, his shadows, if only for a brief time."

"Your grand idea is for us to be his lackeys?" Mina leaned back in her chair.

"If that's what it takes," Elias said, nodding completely unoffended. "We must ensure a good future, Mina. I'll bow to anyone, lick their shoes even, if it might ensure I'll save people's lives. I must know Parbon throws its support behind a claimant good for the realm. Even a temporary good king would be better than what other options are before us."

Stain crossed his arms. "I'm not licking anybody's shoes, but I've done enough bowing to do that decently. Besides, officially, I work for you," Stain pointed to Elias. "If you want me to do it, I'll do it."

Mina did not answer right away—she looked to Nikoletta, waiting for her to speak. Even while they were ostensibly arguing, Mina still valued her friend's input.

"...I can think of nothing else," Nikoletta eventually conceded. "Besides, I do not wish to see Argrave dead. If I can help him get what he needs to escape from the Tower, I will."

"I'm with Nicky," Mina nodded.

Elias nodded eagerly. "Good. Then let's put this into action."

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The next morning, Argrave was awoken by a knock at his door. Without giving him time for answer, Elias bolted in.

Anneliese and Argrave stirred. Elias paused after seeing them together, but after a brief scan to be sure he wasn't intruding on anything, he launched into his message.

"The news is here. It's spreading like fire over dead grass, Argrave," Elias said feverishly, his good eye jumping between the two of them. "A legion of ghostly snakes? A thousand giant knights of an age past fighting at your side? What in the gods' name?"

"What?" Argrave asked tiredly, the word mixed with disbelieving laughter. He threw the blanket off himself and Anneliese and stood up, already fully armored barring his duster.

"People say you conjured ten thousand snakes—ghosts of some sort. Thereafter, innumerable titanic knights joined your side, battering Induen and his knights into the ground," Elias explained quickly.

"They're eels," Argrave said. "Electric eels. Not ghosts."

Elias held his arms out. "Does that matter? It's what people think!"

“Well, what do people think? Have you heard people talking?” Argrave insisted.

Elias put his hand to his forehead. “There are so many rumors it’s difficult to keep track of. We’ll have to wait a bit for one to prevail. In the meantime, I’m having Stain spread rumors of his own—that you acted in self-defense.”

“Good,” Argrave nodded, his tired mind awakening. “That’s... good.”

“You must add that Induen killed Argrave’s mother when he was not yet ten,” Anneliese contributed, rising as well. “That is all but common knowledge in Dirracha and many places beyond, but it must reach the people.”

Elias nodded. “Good thinking. It’s a good narrative. I will tell him that,” Elias vowed. “Gods, I... I guess it’s real.”

“You really think I made it up?” Argrave stepped aside and picked up his boots, sitting to put them on. “Well... damn, early day. Any breakfast?”

“Sure, I can get my people to make something,” Elias agreed readily. “Are you planning on going somewhere?”

“Castro will call me, soon. It might be I’m called to an official meeting with all the Magisters and the Tower Master, but I doubt that.”

Elias reached into his breast pocket. “Here,” he pulled free a letter. “It’s a letter of advisement. Give that to Castro.”

Argrave took it, looking at it. It had no wax seal, so he opened it and reviewed its contents. It had magic signatures from Mina, Elias, and Nikoletta, and in brief summary, reminded the Order of its vow of neutrality.

Argrave looked up, brows furrowed in confusion. “Thanks. Every bit helps, I—”

A knock echoed out from the front door beyond the room they stayed in. Argrave chuckled. “That might be the inquisition.”

As Argrave walked to answer the door, Elias stopped him. “Anything we can do to help?”

“Not...” Argrave paused, not expecting such earnest aid. “No, Castro will probably want to meet me alone. Ask Anneliese, though—when I’m not here, she’s the one who takes charge. If anything is needed from you, she can handle the distribution.”

Anneliese stepped to Argrave, holding a thick packet of papers. “We spent all this time preparing this. Best not forget it,” she prodded it against his chest.

“Alright. Good luck,” Elias patted his arm as Argrave took the papers.

Another firm knock at the door drew Argrave from questioning Elias’ actions. He stepped up to the door and answered it.

The brown-haired woman standing there raised her eyes up to Argrave in a near-comical fashion, evidently not expecting to see someone so tall. Argrave examined her in kind—she was not a high-ranking mage, meaning this was a request rather than a demand.

“Wizard Argrave?” the woman asked.

“Yep,” he nodded.

“Tower Master Castro wishes to see you right away. He is on the top floor of the tower, sir.”

Top floor treatment, huh? Stellar. Might be Castro’s apprentice is there.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 219: Monitors

“What have you done?” was the question that greeted Argrave when he stepped out of the mystical elevator to the top floor of the Tower of the Gray Owl.

It had been a long, long way up to the top of the Tower, his feet fixed to a slab of stone as it maneuvered around other passengers taking similar rides, each going to the various floors in the tower. The ride was wondrous when one wasn’t expecting an interrogation at the end of it.

Argrave stepped out of the elevator and onto the top floor. “What was that?”

Castro stood before him. Whatever warmth his face usually had was gone, and his lips were drawn thin in a stern scowl. It was intimidating only because Argrave knew what the man before him was capable of.

“You killed Induen? You killed the crown prince, and you come *here*?” Castro pointed to the ground beneath him. “Do you have any idea the consequences—” Castro trailed off. “Why am I asking? I know you do. You have to know how much trouble this would cause for me, because it’s trouble that you’re deliberately placing at my feet.”

Argrave stared down at Castro for a few seconds as the old spellcaster stared at him in a fury. Then, he nodded. “Yes. I know.”

Castro let out one incredulous, shocked laugh. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Thank you,” Argrave smiled.

Castro turned and walked away in shock and awe, raising his hand to his forehead as though to ward off a headache. Argrave took the time to better examine the place.

Each of the lower floors accommodated dozens of rooms, with one central room connecting them all to the elevator. None of the rooms were especially small, and there was plenty of space within the tower everywhere; it was wide at all portions. The top floor, though... it had no other rooms. It was one grand apartment: the abode of the Master of the Tower of the Gray Owl.

Castro had decorated it to his whims. The back walls were all covered by bookshelves, and barring a giant bed well beyond king-size, everywhere else was filled with tables filled to the brims with oddities

and riches. It was incomprehensibly disorganized, resembling a hoarder's stash more than a grand wizard's vault, yet everything within spoke of practicality instead of luxury.

In the very back, there was a small cluttering of things where he could faintly see a shadow moving. The shadow was a person's, but the person was hidden behind a stack of objects.

Ingo is here, Argrave noted. Then Castro doesn't think I'm dangerous.

"What is this they speak of?" Castro stepped back to Argrave, drawing him from his observations. "A legion of ghostly snakes? And don't think to lie to me!" Castro shouted, his voice containing power belying his age. "I'm at my wit's end with you!"

"It's a spell. Can I demonstrate?" Argrave held his hands out, and when Castro didn't protest, demonstrated [Electric Eel]. "An eel, not a snake. I can see how people might be confused."

"An elemental spell. Work from the Order of the Rose," Castro identified at once. "They always fancied using animals, other grandiose constructions like knights or... or mythical creatures." Castro stepped away, shaking his head in exhaustion. "Argrave, you... you will be the death of me."

"You're a healthy man. You'll live a while yet," Argrave quipped.

His quip incited anger, and Castro stepped up to him. "Do you feel no remorse, no shame for so blatantly using the Order for your own end?"

"No," Argrave said at once. "Because what I use, I'll return tenfold."

"Hah!" Castro laughed. "You made my tower a proxy for a struggle of power with King Felipe. How will you return that tenfold? Will you make ten kings my friend? I am not sure ten exist on Berendar, and if they did, not a one could compare to the influence Vasquer wields! Some... some thesis, you think that will compare at all? The locations of some fortresses from the Order of the Rose?"

Argrave reached into his coat and pulled out a packet of letters, handing them to Castro. "Anneliese and I put this together. It's a collection of evidence that leads to irrefutable proof of something you're just beginning to look into. They're all leads you can follow up to find out the truth."

Castro took the packet and held it up. "I don't care what this says, Argrave."

"I guess we'll all die, then," Argrave smiled.

Castro frowned, then looked back to the packet. "Wait here," he commanded, then walked away to go read the document.

#####

"I am not sure what this has to do with helping Argrave..." Nikoletta noted as they walked around the lower levels of the Tower of the Gray Owl.

"It has nothing to do with that," Anneliese confirmed. "Stain and Durran will collaborate to control public opinion in whatever limited capacity is possible confined in this tower. Galamon will go along with Elias and Mina as they talk to various Magisters in the tower, using his influence as the heir to House

Parbon... and I hoped for your insights as to the constructions down here," she said, turning to look down at the woman. "What do you know about the Tower's enchantments?"

Nikoletta crossed her arms. "Argrave said to speak to you about what to do to help his cause."

"You might go with Elias," Anneliese said calmly. "Add the name of House Monticci alongside Parbon and Veden, sway yet more opinion. But considering you hoped to learn more about all of us, I thought it would be more fitting to bring you along with me here in my own endeavor."

Nikoletta froze. "I..."

"I will not betray any of Argrave's confidences, but I will answer what questions I can. And in return... you will tell me about this place," Anneliese looked around, where towering stone statues projected purple light throughout the walls.

"How did you know?" Nikoletta asked at once.

Anneliese smiled. "Curiosity is an emotion, you realize. Deliberate curiosity with a motive is easy to read. From there... I tracked its source, deduced things. Your forthright support was the largest giveaway. Yet none of you are insincere, and that is the important part."

Nikoletta nodded, impressed by Anneliese. "Okay, then... let's do that. Your arrangement."

Anneliese smiled. "Then, please."

"Right," Nikoletta nodded, crossing her arms and gazing at the stone statues all around. "This place... it's a catacomb. When a Tower Master dies, or a notable Magister, their bodies are interred here. Old enchantments allow them to draw magic from the surroundings, keeping their bodies preserved while still constantly refueling the enchantments."

Anneliese looked at the statues in a new light. "Are they kept alive?"

"No," Nikoletta shook her head at once. "Only their bodies are preserved."

"Yet the statues..."

"Those aren't the bodies," Nikoletta shook her head. "They're deeper down. The doors only open for important rituals, like naming a new Magister or Tower Master."

Anneliese nodded, looking to the floor. "Argrave told me necromancy was forbidden in the Order, and illegal in all Vasquer."

"It isn't necromancy. It's something else," Nikoletta shook her head.

"Have you confirmed that personally?" Anneliese tilted her head.

"I... no, no I haven't. But—"

Anneliese held her hand out to stifle defensiveness. "I do not accuse, worry not. I am merely questioning."

Nikoletta gave a slow nod after a few moments of uncertainty. “Then, no, I haven’t confirmed it personally. But everyone who is down here are hailed as heroes, and they agreed to be interred to further the Order. Even if it was necromancy, I don’t suppose it matters.”

“I see. Noble, to surrender even your body to the Order,” Anneliese noted, then resumed walking down the catacomb.

Nikoletta nodded, then looked up to the elven woman as they walked. “Then... I’ll ask now. What does Argrave actually do?”

“He has told you,” Anneliese pointed out. “He is trying his best to ensure this world is prepared for Gerechtigkeits.”

“What does that entail?” Nikoletta pressed.

Anneliese tilted her head. “Well... he preserves life, mostly. The Veidimen invasion, the plague—both prominent examples.”

“But why does he do it? What exactly set him on this path?”

Anneliese turned to her. “We share that curiosity. I do not know what set him on this path, but he travels it willingly.”

Nikoletta was surprised at that. “Has he not told you?”

Anneliese fidgeted with her hands. “Argrave never keeps me in the dark, not anymore.”

Nikoletta processed that. “Then... he doesn’t know,” she deduced.

“Infer what you will,” Anneliese responded simply. “The elevator in the center. Is it powered by this catacomb?”

“No, that’s actively maintained by a select few Wizards,” Nikoletta shook her head. “High-concentration, diligent work that requires a lot of activity.”

Anneliese sighed. “I wonder if I might try it...”

Nikoletta wondered if Anneliese was being serious, but she could not find any trace of anything besides earnest curiosity on the Veidimen’s features.

A question came to Nikoletta, yet she hesitated to say it. She swallowed, gathering her courage, and asked hesitantly, “Is Argrave really your...?”

“Fiancé?” Anneliese smiled. “We have had no ceremony. I am unsure of this custom’s proceedings in Vasquer—in Veiden, these arrangements need only be mentioned to a chieftain to be made official. But... he is unwavering on this matter. Sometimes I wish for him to be pragmatic, such as the matter with your betrothal, but I cannot deny it makes me selfishly happy whenever he expresses his unwillingness to compromise. *He* makes me happy. He has done much for me. I think he would do too much for me... if I let him. I have never had someone who is unwaveringly supportive before.”

Anneliese spoke her feelings so unabashedly Nikoletta was the one who got embarrassed.

"Is..." Nikoletta trailed off. "Is Argrave bluffing about the civil war? Lying to make us all feel better?"

"No," Anneliese answered at once. "He does have plans in line with what he mentioned."

"Good plans?" Nikoletta pressed.

"We are all Argrave's companions, but we are not sycophants, nor are we eager to follow him to his grave," Anneliese stated plainly. "He has had bad plans before, bad ideas—we counsel him against those, and he listens. He has had plans that surprise me. And now... now, I feel that once we get out of the Tower, things may well go very smoothly."

Nikoletta looked at Anneliese for a long while, her pink eyes meeting the elf's. Then, she nodded steadily. "Think it's your turn for a question," she said levelly.

#####

"We understand that your time is precious, Magister Yurent, and I assure you that this meeting will be worth it."

A man sat with his arms crossed. His features were incredibly eye-catching, perhaps because they caught the light. His nails seemed to be made of gold—nothing covered them, but rather, they grew from the finger gold. His hair, his eyebrows, his eyelashes—they all grew gold as well, shining against the light from the window as true as any ring or necklace might. His A-rank ascension focused in earth-elemental magic, and he willingly imbued gold into his features. He was, quite literally, a walking gold mine.

"I only entertain you because the time spent listening to you is less of a loss than offending Parbon would be," Magister Yurent noted, with a deep voice that seemed ill-fitting on his soft, fair features. "Why should I entertain your pet bastard, a kinslayer hiding in the tower? His fate is not a good one, I can promise you."

"We can both ensure that this will be more than worth your time. Argrave is many things, but wasteful he is not. I am absolutely sure he's fully prepared to give you much and more for your time," Mina pleaded diplomatically.

"I just... don't see it," Yurent shook his head. "You give me nothing solid. Empty assurances."

"Please, Magister, I—" Elias began again.

"This is a waste of our time," Galamon cut in. "The last thing Argrave wants is some copper counter. Let us find someone who will not wring us for all we are worth, so that someone worthwhile might be advanced in the Order."

Elias looked to Galamon, then nodded and made to leave. Mina followed just after.

"Hold on," Yurent called out. "I... fine. If it is only a meeting, I suppose learning firsthand about Induen's death cannot be a loss."

"He'll find you when he's ready," Galamon answered, then shut the door behind him.

#####

"That's three of six," Elias noted. "Much better turnout than I thought. Magisters, they're prickly things."

"She gives good direction," Galamon looked to Mina.

Mina shook her head. "You carried the whole thing twice now."

"...you learn things in people's company. The months with Argrave..." Galamon shook his head. "There is more to do. We talk needlessly."

"Right," Elias nodded. "Let's get four of seven."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 220: Talk of the Town

Casto returned after a longer time than Argrave was expecting. He was worried that his companions would grow worried about his long absence, but did not fear he himself was in genuine danger. The S-rank mage and Master of the Tower of the Gray Owl did eventually return, appearing a little more tired than before.

"What you've shared," Castro mused as he stepped closer, his explosive anger from before gone. "It's a ridiculous scenario."

"Life is often ridiculous, I find," Argrave nodded, sitting atop one of Castro's tables filled with all sorts of metal oddities from the same elven civilization he'd once had Galamon lure metal undead from. Most were bizarre, unnatural metal shapes, each and all standing as testament to that civilization's metalworking skills, and Argrave sat gingerly to avoid crushing anything beneath him.

"I endeavored to follow one lead you wrote of, one that seemed simple... I could not finish the path without leaving the Tower. Even still..." Castro shook his head. "Just as important as knowledge is its source. How did *you* learn of this?"

Argrave scratched his face. "Doubt you'll believe me, but I trust you enough to know you'll keep quiet. I learned in another life," he said succinctly.

Castro's expression was inscrutable, and he did not even mention Argrave's assertion, perhaps thinking it mere misdirection. "So, these rumors, these movements of yours, from Mateth to the Burnt Desert to the northwest... this is why? You move to facilitate our defense against this... Ger..." Castro grappled with the word but gave up pronouncing Gerechtigkeith. "This calamity?"

Argrave nodded without hesitation. "Somebody has to."

"You could have brought this before the Order immediately," Castro shook his head.

"I couldn't have achieved anything if I didn't take matters into my own hands," Argrave shook his head. "I think the only reason you even entertained what I wrote is because of what I've already done. Mateth, the plague..."

"You could have tried to rely on others," Castro stepped forth.

Argrave laughed, then stood up off the table he sat on. "Took me long enough to trust the people with me now. I don't think... I trusted anyone, not until recently. As recent events have proven, I have family

issues,” Argrave spread his arms out. “But things are finally reaching the point of overflow. I have to start getting the word out. And if I die... you’ll have to pick up the slack.”

Castro held up Argrave’s packet of letters. “I can’t accept this without significant scrutiny.”

“I hope you do scrutinize it,” Argrave nodded. “Nothing would make me happier than being wrong. But I’m not.”

Castro nodded, then stepped in the direction of a distant door. “Come,” he called out to Argrave.

Argrave followed, and then the Tower Master opened the door. A great howling wind sounded outside, none of it penetrating the door. Argrave stepped outside, greeted by a chill. The air was thinner and colder up here, it seemed. Even still, walls of stone kept the balcony from being too cold. There was a walkway leading out to nothingness, where Castro generally mounted his wyvern. Or he had, at least.

Argrave could see for hundreds, maybe thousands of miles in every direction. The balcony extended along the whole tower, and Castro stood near the railing, waiting. Argrave stepped up to him.

“In time... elite troops will encircle this place. High-rank mages, elite knights... not an army, but more than enough to catch any fugitive. These will be experts at catching and hunting people.” Castro shook his head. “Our relationship with Vasquer will be strained tremendously.”

Argrave looked down at the old man. “There’s a reason why the Order can afford to be neutral, Castro. If Felipe storms this place, not only will his army be obliterated, Vasquer will lose access to the largest repository of magical knowledge in the known world. He’d make enemies with every Magister—must be, what, a dozen here alone, fifty of them across Berendar, each and all S-rank mages? You have a monopoly on higher magical knowledge here in the Tower. Most A-rank and higher mages are loyal to the Tower first, not Vasquer, simply because they can’t get the spells or the knowledge they need anywhere else. No, Felipe will not dare actively hinder the Order... so long as you don’t harbor me.”

“Trying to force me to escort you out, hmm?” Castro smiled and laughed. “I meant what I said. I cannot leave.”

“I’ll get someone else,” Argrave shook his head. “Just... more costly. And less surefire. And I can’t form a closer bond with one of the most powerful spellcasters in Berendar.” Argrave rubbed his hands together, still slightly cold despite his gloves. “Even still, what is holding you here?”

“Active trouble with a... relative,” Castro shook his head.

“Ingo?” Argrave raised a brow.

Castro turned, his face intense. “What did you say?”

“I know about him,” Argrave shrugged. “I don’t care, so don’t worry. But he’s proof enough—Vasquer will not antagonize you.”

Castro stepped from the railing, moving close to Argrave. “What do you know?”

“Felipe wanted to use Ingo’s unique constitution for... cruelly effective purposes. You saved him, brought him here... and the king bent,” Argrave held his hands out, demonstrating his point. “He let you have Ingo.”

"He was a boy," Castro said angrily. "And Felipe did not 'let me have' him. He stays here because he wants to, and because the world is dangerous to him. No one should own a person, not even a king, and especially not if they would grow and harvest him like wheat his entire life."

"We agree there. But Felipe's committed far more monstrous crimes than owning a person, and I don't see any conscientious retaliation from you. Regardless, we're getting off topic," Argrave held his hand out. "It is Ingo having problems, right?"

Castro was briefly taken aback by Argrave's mention of his inaction but did not object to it. He bit his lip, then turned to look over the balcony, out to the vast plains of wintry grass before them. "Yes, it is."

Argrave wanted to say that he could help him... but he couldn't, not yet. Not until the boundaries between realms grew weaker. Ingo was someone like Orion—someone chosen for a blessing from birth. Only... Ingo's god was not so understanding of human fragility, and until more opportunities opened themselves up to Argrave, nothing could be done.

"I understand, then. Focus on him," Argrave said. "Was there anything else?"

Castro leaned out over the balcony. "I want you gone," he said, letting that hang for a while. "...so, whenever you choose a Magister you deem worthy of escorting your noble self... I'll pressure them."

"What about my reward for my thesis on [Blood Infusion]? That is why you brought me here, no?"

Argrave said, trying not to let his joking smile seep into his voice. As Castro turned his head back slowly, Argrave cut back in, "I'm going, I'm going."

#####

"It's that same guy again," Stain noted, lounging idly against the stone wall of the Tower. He wore a relatively inconspicuous gray robe that, upon close scrutiny, was obviously not that of an Order member.

Durran, who was just beside Stain, wore near the same thing. They appeared like nothing more than two Acolytes of the order engaged in conversation. The person they spoke of was entirely ignorant of their presence and spoke to a fairly sizable group of people, each and all Acolytes or Wizards of the Order.

"He's saying the same thing," Durran noted with a quiet laugh. "Same tale. 'Legion of snakes.' This man's either quite committed to accuracy in this little game of rumor spreading... or he's feeding the people something. Him, and the four other people we've seen doing the same thing."

Stain gave the man an inconspicuous glance, then joined Durran in laughter. "Yeah. You've got a good eye. Never would've noticed this trend."

Durran crossed his arms. "Much as I wish I could agree with you about how stellar I am... Anneliese and Argrave told me to look out for something like this."

"Huh," Stain noted, taken aback. "What does it mean?"

"Got some propagandists in our midst. People putting ingredients in the pot, stirring the soup," Durran crossed his arms and exhaled, his golden eyes appearing to grow brighter. "Problem is... hard to tell what the intent of the person behind them is. Doesn't seem wholly negative. There are a lot worse ways you could spin our confrontation of Induen than talking about ghostly snakes."

“How did... how did things go down, there?” Stain asked, hesitating. “Induen, I mean. We’ve been spreading rumors, but you were there.”

Durran looked at Stain. “Well... I wanted to just hit the man from afar, be done with it... but Argrave went to talk to him, led him out of town.”

Stain furrowed his brows. “Why? Was Induen’s death not the original plan?”

“Argrave was hesitant to sever his relationship with Orion, the other psycho brother, so he heard Induen out. More than that... our leader man wanted to try and be sure no one in Kin’s End died. Other than his kin, I guess.” Durran shrugged. “I thought it was stupid—best idea would just be to kill them all quickly and efficiently. But I guess it worked. No one innocent died. We got out unharmed.”

“You thought it was stupid?” Stain noted.

Durran nodded. “Argrave is... dangerous, and precise. I think he could have killed Induen without any risk at all—kill the prince and all four B-rank royal knights simultaneously. He wasn’t as confident, so he took the risk.”

Stain nodded, then watched as a crowd dispersed. “You disapprove?”

“Nope,” Durran said immediately. “I stay in line, do what I’m told. Haven’t felt misled yet. Well... amendment: I do what I’m told when told by Argrave. Or Anneliese, if he tells me to listen to her.”

Stain laughed. “You don’t strike me as a yes-man.”

“I’ve seen some things,” Durran said. “What Argrave says usually comes true. Might be fuzzy *how*... but yeah, he makes it happen. Don’t get me wrong, he makes mistakes. He can be pretty stupid sometimes—man can’t tie a good knot to save his life, and he’d probably be dead thirty times over without Galamon. He’s a bit of a fool for love... luckily for him, he picked well. Or got picked. Whatever. But I lost fingers for him, and I’d do it again with the other hand.”

Stain stared down Durran. “Any more smoke to blow up his ass?”

Durran laughed loudly, hunching over breathless. His action drew eyes from everyone in the lobby.

“Good gods... I knew this would fall flat in seconds,” Stain turned away exasperatedly. “Let me clarify—this whole thing was Elias’ idea, not mine. All these questions are ones he wanted answered.”

Durran finally stopped laughing. “Ah... gods, I had you for a few good minutes, I’m sure of it.”

Stain looked frustrated but gave a good-natured laugh after a few seconds. “Yeah, yeah... eat it up, you pisser.”

Durran stood up straight, standing a good deal above Stain. “Here’s a point to remember, though.” Durran leaned down, his golden eyes and tattoos veritably gleaming. “I didn’t have to make up that much. A large part of deception is telling the truth. If you’re smart... this earnest support you’re giving Argrave? You keep it up. He remembers friends. He repays generosity. And this guy’s got some deep pockets, I’ll tell you.”

Stain nodded. "I got my taste from him. Even still, I'm just a bird perching on the big branches of House Parbon. I can't do much."

"Argrave valued you too much for that to be true," Durrant shook his head. "Well, we've wasted enough breath on him. I'm around that tall bastard way too much to want to talk about him constantly."

"Should we go back to spreading rumors for him instead?"

Durrant laughed. "Gods be damned, you're right. What a bleak existence..."