

## Jackal 226

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 226: Drink What They Bleed

Riding the strange construct conjured by Magister Vera was a wholly different experience than, say, riding aback a wyvern. There, one had a visual cue—something to step upon and hold onto as it soared across the sky, even if it was a flimsy saddle and a scaly reptile. There was no such comfort from Vera's spell, [Horizon Hunter], an A-rank wind spell solely designed for swift transportation of many people.

Argrave was suspended by thick, fierce winds as he hurtled across the vast plains. Hegazar's illusion magic concealed their advance. The spell he used, the A-rank [Pocket of Nothing], hid much from their sight. Under its effects, it was difficult to distinguish Argrave's fingers not two inches from his face.

Fortunately, the sense of touch was not disturbed—Argrave held on to Anneliese like she was an anchor to this dimension, much the same as she did to him. He clung on to the idea that Durran and Galamon might be doing the same thing, warding his fears away with humor.

They passed by Margrave Reinhardt's great host and the warbands of Vasquer scattered around the Tower of the Gray Owl. Countless cities, villages, and castles that constituted a kingdom passed below them like nothing more than the road beneath a car. Everything in this world seemed so monumental on foot, near insurmountable... yet they passed it all second by second like it was nothing.

Once the wonder set in, the fear was a little less intense. Being able to do something like this... Argrave could see why the two Magisters were like they were: arrogant, self-centered. Seeing this, one thought dominated him. He wanted to replicate this. He wanted to do all of this and more. This was fun. It made him feel alive. It overshadowed some of the constant bleakness that had settled into Argrave like some parasite.

"Best keep your eyes open," Hegazar's voice cut in. Despite the tremendous speed at which they moved, no wind disturbed them, and all sounds carried as they might in a simple, stationary room. "You have to tell us where to disembark. Would hate to crash right into that little Dragon Palace your father makes his home. Would certainly make an awkward conversation. As much as I love to intrude on family drama, that fight might be a bit... large-scale."

The overworld map of 'Heroes of Berendar' was drilled so deeply into Argrave's head that he could place where they were in seconds. The landmarks were many and varied.

"Half an hour more, by my estimates," Argrave returned in a too-loud shout. "It's not the most visible thing, so we might have to search a bit. I know the path," he assured.

If Hegazar was contented by this response, no answer came. Meanwhile, Argrave was grappling with a newfound worry brought about by Ingo's comment.

*Enemies near Elenore?* Argrave thought, holding Anneliese a bit tighter. *If she dies... if Elenore is gone... good lord, nearly everything falls apart. Her finances, her information, and just her damn ingenuity; if that's lost, I'm not sure things can be salvaged.*

Above it all... Argrave thought Elenore deserved better than what she had. Not all of the Vasquers got good hands dealt to them in life, but hers had to be the worst.

Shaking his head in dismay, Argrave reflected that now was no time to think of such a thing. An absent mind might let the viper find an opening—with two at his side, he couldn't afford to think of this.

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"I do wonder why the Order of the Rose, with their great skill at working the earth into fortresses, might make a prominent base of theirs in a forest," Hegazar's ever-cynical voice cut into Argrave's ears. "You might picture a hill... or a mountain... but who am I to wonder?"

"Wonder silently," Vera commanded him. "You're distracting Argrave."

Argrave walked forward undistracted despite their constant hostile banter. It astounded him how these people could be so unfailingly pessimistic. Magister Hegazar's presence was like a dark cloud. They travelled along a river—if anything would be consistent from 'Heroes of Berendar,' it would be a river. It was also much easier to remember.

After a long while of Argrave leading while immersed in self-doubt, the river finally proved itself as an able guide. He spotted a large, too-round rock, and hastened his steps.

"We're here," Argrave announced while disguising his relief.

As they walked, the trees thinned somewhat, and the midday light rained down upon a roughly square stone just before the much larger, rounder one Argrave had seen earlier. The large gray rock was perfectly round, and smooth as a rock found within a creek.

"Neat landmark," Hegazar stepped closer, his true body keeping a cautious distance as though there might be a trap ahead. "Nice, smooth rock. Unless there's a little door with a keyhole I'm missing, or an illusion that can somehow fool the eyes of both myself and the spider-woman... I'm lost."

Argrave walked up to the rough-hewn rock before the large stone. His hand hovered near it, but he shied away as though it were something disgusting. "Galamon... has to go hunt an elk, now. That's the key for this thing."

Galamon nodded, setting down his backpack and stringing his bow in short order. "At once," he accepted, and already marched off towards a location as though his target was already in sight.

Everyone spread out, examining the area as though looking for the secret hidden in this place. Argrave had only told Anneliese the full details of this place, and she kept her distance from the small rock just as he did. Her eyes wandered the larger rock, as though looking for imperfections, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Mmm... ornate rituals, a blood sacrifice? Quite the entrance," Hegazar remarked, stepping to the rock Argrave stood before. His illusory body sat atop it, lounging. "Or maybe you just wanted a nice venison picnic, bathe in the sun with your little sweetheart and two Magisters. Well, one and a half..."

Vera stepped up before Argrave, crossing her arms and rolling up the sleeves of her gray robes. "You're keeping an awful lot to yourself, Argrave."

"The Kinslayer can't trust you," Hegazar remarked with a grin. "In his family, I'm sure he's had enough experience with deceit, distrust... and you fit those to a T, little spider."

Durrán strode past Argrave, contributing, “He always does this. He keeps everything to himself. Likes to look mysterious, I’m sure.”

Though Durrán nearly sat on the stone a little way away from Hegazar, Argrave stopped him subtly. The former tribal got the hint and stood just beside Argrave.

“Whatever the reasons might be, I’ll be able to protect you best if I know what I’m going to be facing,” Vera said sweetly.

Even Hegazar did not protest to Vera’s claim, despite her exclusion of him in this scenario of ‘protection.’ Evidently he valued what Argrave would say—he needed to know as much as Vera did.

“It’s difficult to describe what we’ll be facing, considering I don’t know,” Argrave said, acting ignorant. These people didn’t know the extent of his knowledge, and so it was a convenient excuse. When the expressions on the Magister’s face grew discontented, Argrave quickly added, “Perhaps it’d be best if I described what this place was.”

“Go ahead,” Vera encouraged.

“Well...” Argrave looked off to the side, framing his thoughts. “The Order of the Rose is just like the Order of the Owl in that much of their influence derives from having extensive knowledge about magic of the higher ranks,” Argrave explained. “Unlike the Owl, though, Rose didn’t congregate their knowledge in one high-security place, like the Tower. Their library in the Low Way was the closest thing, but even it can’t compare in the slightest. Instead, they had various strongholds spread out in many, many different places.”

Argrave paced around as he explained, “Defending them, obviously, became an issue as their stores of knowledge grew larger and larger. This place... it only really has one guardian. An arbiter of everything within the... fortress,” Argrave said the word delicately, like it was somehow wrong.

“One foe? Of what strength?” Hegazar interrogated, his sardonic tone gone to get the information he needed.

“Ideally, zero,” Argrave explained. “The issue isn’t him. It’s that he can destroy what’s within—books, artifacts, et cetera. As such... I’ll relay deliberate instructions when the time comes. I can end him quickly.”

Hegazar crossed his arms. When he spoke, his usual wry tone was replaced with a slow and deliberate monotone, like it was a carefully enunciated warning. “When the time comes, eh? I don’t like uncertainties, Argrave. Makes me think I’m being led on,” Hegazar’s husky, deep voice lowered into a near whisper.

Argrave took a deep breath. “We have the luxury to take the time we need. What I’ll tell you is precise—it needs to be—”

Galamon returned at that moment, hauling the corpse of an elk over his shoulder with ease. A single arrow stuck out of its eye, clearly piercing the brain.

“My, what a capable huntsman,” Hegazar commented, his wryness returned as though it had never left. “Now, what to do? I don’t see an elk-sized keyhole about anywhere.”

The elven vampire stepped up to where Hegazar's illusory form sat, splaying the elf's body across it. He made the giant creature look weightless. At once, he drew the Giantkillers at his belt, lifted its leg up, and pierced deep. The daggers ran through its stomach effortlessly, displaying their sharpness.

Viscera spilled out all across the stone. Once that was done, Galamon stepped away, cleaning his dagger. Hegazar's eyes lingered on the Giantkillers—evidently he recognized that the two blue daggers were not ordinary.

A great rumbling originating from the ground killed the Magister's curiosity in its infancy. The smooth, round rock behind them began to move, upending great mounds of earth in this process. It twisted aside, like a shell slowly exposing itself to the air. Gradually, a mass of red flesh made itself visible—once it stopped, a gigantic face that looked flayed stared them down, chin half-buried and tongue of stone dug deep into the earth.

"Goods gods...!" Hegazar raised his hand, ready to cast spells.

"Don't attack it, not unless you want to lose all the treasures I promised," Argrave cautioned at once.

The gigantic face's stony tongue moved... and the stone that Hegazar had been sitting atop writhed, coming to life. It moved forward a bit, then rose up out of the earth, wrapping around the elk's body. Then, the face's tongue retracted back, curling towards its mouth. It received the elk, leaving nothing but upturned earth in its wake. Once it had eaten the elk, the tongue returned. It settled into the earth before them, leaving a path of stone like a road into its mouth. The face's gaping maw stayed open wide, its black and gold eyes watching them.

Anneliese stared at the giant creature, shaken, and Argrave comforted her by grabbing her hand. Durran looked a bit nauseous—he poked at its stony tongue with his boot cautiously. Galamon already busied himself, putting his gear back on to prepare for the expedition.

"Shall we?" gestured Argrave, stepping atop its tongue. Anneliese followed him, linked by the hand. Hegazar and Vera watched the both of them as they walked forward.

"You must be excited to explore the inside of a flayed giant, Vera. Why not go first?" Hegazar urged her.

With Durran and Galamon joining, the whole band had formed. Neither of the Magisters seemed overeager to follow... but seeing Argrave's certainty, they did. Argrave and Anneliese made it to the beginning of the face's mouth, where its eyes watched them dispassionately even still... and looked beyond, where a set of stone stairs awaited.

"This is someone's dream," Argrave mused.

"What?" Anneliese looked to him.

"You don't want to know," Argrave shook his head, then stepped beneath the pearl white teeth of the giant and into the stony corridors of its mouth.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 227: Stony Flesh Echoing Whispers**

Argrave came here in part to retrieve a treasure—or rather, a set of treasures—but it was not something he'd consider his primary purpose. He wanted two things from these Magisters—a safe escort away

from the Tower, and then after... well, this living fortress' head wasn't the only thing that could move. But then, maybe he wouldn't need the Magisters for that at all.

Argrave's primary concern was getting through this fortress as quickly as he could while securing his party's position for the second part of his journey. His haste was both for the temperamental Magisters he travelled with, and the disgusting atmosphere he found himself in.

Both of the Magisters wore illusions—Vera's was acting, a metaphorical façade, while Hegazar's was his spells. They agreed in advance Anneliese should stay near Vera, while Argrave focused on Hegazar. Only a rough guideline, naturally, but it was sufficient enough. At least, it needed to be, if the plan they'd brewed back at the Tower would work.

Most of what they travelled was a straight corridor of stone, yet parts of it had chipped away, revealing the pink, smooth flesh beyond that resembled the pink, soft flesh you'd see inside a body. He felt like an endoscope. In addition, what was still stone was oddly shaped—the pathway they walked, for instance, was vaguely reminiscent of a spine.

"This place..." Magister Hegazar looked around. "Magic's dense. It's so dense it's like a gas in the air, pushing against my skin as I walk. There's danger in a place like this. It's like toying with the trigger for a beartrap. Quite a nasty fortress you've come to—we've come to," he corrected.

"If you're afraid, you might leave," Magister Vera suggested.

"No, I wouldn't consider such a thing," Hegazar said smoothly. "I am merely reminded of you, grotesque little spider that you are. Reminds of how disgusting your home in Jast was."

"At least I have a home and a family," Vera rebuked as they walked.

Maybe Argrave was delusional, but he could've sworn that even Hegazar was not entirely unoffended by that comment. If he was, he didn't miss a beat in replying, "Soon enough you'll keep getting older, and they'll all die one by one."

"Near the end," Argrave cut in. "Path branches here."

"Branches?" Hegazar noted incredulously, still walking. "No matter. We have plenty of time."

"We'll need to split," Argrave disagreed. "This place wasn't meant to be entered alone. To open the way, multiple unique magic signatures are required."

Vera stopped. "How would you know this?"

"It was true in the last one of these living fortresses I visited," Argrave anticipated the question.

Hegazar stopped too, and his illusory form grinned broadly. "You'd gamble so much on past experiences, eh? Jerk two Magisters about on a chain?"

Argrave deliberated his response carefully, staring at Hegazar's form in silence. *Let them think I'm gambling*, he concluded. *Might lower their confidence in me, but it's better than giving away too much.*

"I didn't have much choice but to gamble," Argrave said quietly.

Though Hegazar kept his wry grin, his eyes sharpened like they saw an opening. “A correction, Kinslayer. Not ‘didn’t.’ You still don’t. Best hope the dice you’ve cast don’t end up snake eyes, hmm?”

“It’ll be fine, Argrave,” Vera soothed sweetly. “So, we split, yes? Into how many?”

Argrave looked ahead. “Three is all that’s needed.”

“I’ll travel with you, Kinslayer. I’d like you where I can see you.” Hegazar decided at once.

“Alright,” Argrave agreed without hesitation. “Anneliese, Durran... you remember my instructions?”

“Difficult to forget,” Durran said, while Anneliese nodded.

Vera’s predatory orange eyes jumped between all of them, and then she dictated, “I will go with Anneliese, then.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes at once. He didn’t want to display blatant distrust, at least not yet—he didn’t have them attracted enough to this treasure trove yet.

“Sure,” Argrave agreed, though the words felt heavy in his throat. “But why?”

“Want me to stay within sight?” Vera teased. “I merely wish to be away from that one,” she explained, looking at Hegazar.

Argrave glanced to Anneliese. She didn’t seem uneasy by the idea, but Argrave surely was. “If that’s what you want... alright.”

“A blessing, truly,” Hegazar noted. “Come. Let’s enjoy a few moments of bliss, free of the despicable spider’s presence.”

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“So... partner,” Hegazar spoke to Argrave as they walked. It was only the two of them. Galamon remained at the point where the paths branched, ready to help any should the need arise. It was only a small comfort. “Finally, a moment alone... a moment to speak frankly.”

Argrave spared a glance to Hegazar’s illusory form, which walked just beside him. His true body walked a fair bit behind Argrave, obviously maintaining extreme caution. The Magister feared a trap, or general danger. He would be disappointed. The pathway of stone and flesh extended ahead of them for a long while, shrouded in darkness broken by spell light.

“You seem pretty frank generally,” Argrave said—a total lie, but Hegazar would probably believe it easily enough. “With how you talk to Vera...”

Hegazar groaned. “Bleh. Let us not speak of her—instead, let us speak of you... and that little elf girl you link hands with. Well, she’s little to you, at least—quite the giant to the rest of us. I think you could learn from my mistakes. One of few, though the biggest blunder of them all...”

Argrave couldn’t help but stiffen. The change was reflected in his tone, too, as he asked more monotonously than he intended, “What mistake might that be?”

“Well, I’m not one to stick anything where it’s not wanted, be it an opinion or a thought...” Hegazar wrung his hands together as they walked. “...but I will say this. You seem the ambitious sort. When you want something done, you’ll get it done. You’ve got light feet, and you’re running fast towards your goal. Even still, it’s best to travel lighter... partner.”

Argrave looked to Hegazar’s illusory form, studying the bald head and face. “What does that mean?”

“Your lady friend? She’s competent. I can tell that with my eyes alone... quite the beauty, too, though too tall for my tastes. That’s no issue for you, though, and I have nothing but compliments.” Hegazar raised a finger to emphasize his counter. “But that’s just the thing, you see. No one gets anywhere without being like us. Driven. Practical. She has a goal just like you do... and you might like that. I don’t care how statuesque some woman’s figure might be—smart is sexy. I certainly liked that about Vera.”

“You two were...?” Argrave expressed ignorance.

“Oh, yes. You’ve seen her. Quite beautiful, even though I wish she weren’t,” Hegazar mused, stroking his chin. “When she was but a humble Wizard, and I a High Wizard, I took her under my wing... tutored her, mentored her, raised her up alongside me until we stood shoulder-to-shoulder. A regular power-couple—envy of all in the Tower. Handsome me and beautiful her, linking arms, walking into the sunset with petals and doves flying in our wake...”

Argrave saw the apparatus he’d been looking for up ahead, veritably taking form out of darkness. He responded to Hegazar, asking, “Considering the current state, I assume there’s an ‘until?’”

“Yes,” Hegazar nodded very slowly. “There always is an ‘until.’ That’s the point I’m trying to make. We can rely on ourselves and ourselves alone. Things were straight out of a dream... until she decided that walking side-by-side was not good enough. She had taken so much of what I had... and then, she wanted to break free.”

Argrave heard the words... and though he could usually find some position to empathize with someone, he couldn’t find it here. Despite himself, he asked, “But what did she do to you?”

“Do to me?” Hegazar halted. His husky voice was low and sharp as he continued, “You don’t listen very well. Makes me think what you have to offer might not be worth my time.”

Argrave stopped and looked back. Hegazar’s true form walked up until it overlapped with his illusory body, and then both stepped to Argrave.

“I dedicated my time to her. My thought, my effort, diverted from my ambitions to help *her*. I severed ties with my family because of her insistence. I broke the rules of the Order countless times, *because of her*. She killed many people, you know... and I helped her hide that fact. She thinks she can trot off on her own, leaving everything before behind like it never was?” Hegazar’s voice had an icy fire in it. “I don’t think so, Kinslayer.”

As Argrave stared at Hegazar... he saw the dimmest shadow of himself. He was repulsed by the revelation until he examined it further. Hegazar was who Argrave would be if he had not left the Tower when he first arrived in Berendar. Bitter, self-serving, cynical... he’d only do something if he expected a return. He’d be an egomaniac, spouting out empty, wry lines constantly to disguise his nature.

Despite what Argrave had said when the hypothetical was brought up earlier, Argrave was near certain he could stop Gerechtigheit if he had remained in the Tower. Ruthless practicality was a hallmark in optimal gameplay for open-world RPGs—if an NPC had something you wanted, you’d kill them to get it. Argrave could have let everyone suffer, work things out on their own... all the while he prepared only what was needed to end this world-ending calamity. No danger, no suffering, surefire...

The realization was like a sobering drug to Argrave. He felt validated in his choices thus far, seeing the miserable man that Hegazar was. With spirit renewed, he felt words come to him as easily as they ever had.

“At least she proved nothing can bring you down,” Argrave flattered. “Now—the spot to put the signature in is over there. I’ll take care of this. After all, this is a risky thing, relying on degraded enchantments.”

Hegazar looked to the apparatus, then shrugged. “Hmm... I can’t protest. My signature’s got a bit more value, after all... no offense.”

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“Anneliese, I wonder... have you ever been tutored by an S-rank mage?” Vera asked of her as they walked down their path alone.

Anneliese looked down at Vera as they walked, thinking of her answer carefully as she scrutinized the woman’s expression. “Yes, though not for extended periods. There are not as many S-rank mages in Veiden, and as a united nation without a neutral mage Order as Berendar has, each and all are expected to oversee and look after the new spellcasters. So, for a brief time, I received the same tutelage.”

“I see,” Vera nodded, and Anneliese got the impression that she was thrown off. “Quite an interesting place, your homeland.”

“I would agree,” Anneliese nodded. “Berendar interests me more, of late.”

“Yet...” Vera crossed her arms. “In your homeland, are women allowed to hold positions of power?”

Anneliese turned her head. “Patriarch Dras did not seem to care. But, historically, it is difficult for women to inherit anything.”

“Then it seems our two peoples share something in common,” Vera smiled as though she’d finally found a place to rest her feet. “The world is not fair to us, would you agree? I was the eldest of six sisters, yet all of us were passed over for the youngest child... a son. A child of ten. Now, my nephew, Delbraun, rules in Jast.”

“The path of magic is fair,” Anneliese noted.

Vera smiled. “And that is why I came to the Order as soon as I was able. That is why I severed most ties with my family. All are equal when magic becomes involved... or at least, judged by their true ability.” The Magister stopped. “Since then, I’ve been endeavoring to advance women in the Order. I’ve seen your badge and heard news of your promotion to High Wizard. Congratulations,” she said.

Anneliese paused with the Magister. “Thank you,” she returned, surprised by the sincerity.



"I think, given both your already-demonstrated talent and your womanhood... I could be a big proponent for you within the order," Vera suggested. "Despite the Order's relative fairness in terms of equality, even for women and elves like yourself... the fact remains most of our members are from Vasquer, and consequently bear its biases. It can be very helpful for us to stick together. And I'm sure you know, having experienced it... the tutelage of an S-rank spellcaster can be extremely valuable," the ashen haired woman spread her arms out.

Anneliese studied the Magister in detail. Despite everything, none of what she proposed was insincere, at least not to Anneliese's eye.

"That is very enticing," Anneliese smiled. "...but I am travelling with Argrave."

"I see," Vera nodded. As Anneliese watched the Magister's orange eyes, she was surprised by the turbulence of violent emotions hidden beyond them. They flashed for but a second, and then the Magister smiled brightly. "There is always room for compromise. Let's talk more as we walk."

"...certainly," Anneliese agreed, trying to hide her unease as she followed.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 228: Caged and Unafraid**

All of them convened back at where the paths branched earlier where Galamon was waiting. A spiral staircase had opened up, leading deeper into the lower levels. There, the name of 'living fortress' truly made itself readily apparent, as the stairs were constantly intruded upon by overgrown flesh and conspicuous bones.

"This whole place should be burned," Hegazar concluded as they moved deeper. "I see, now, why necromancy is banned. How many corpses went into this project? Thousands? Such a despicable thing."

Durran called from the back of the line, "Who says they were human corpses?"

Hegazar either had no response or did not deign to give one, as their advance went quiet once more. The narrow spiral staircase was not so long, and they soon came to a much larger hall. And this hall... it was precisely what Argrave needed. It was the golden nugget to flash to the ravens to draw their eye.

The sight before them was not pretty. If Argrave had been shown the room in isolation, he might've assumed it was the site of some depraved sacrificial cult. The stone room was held up by a giant ribcage, each of the ribs acting as pillars for the building. Each of the ribs had a crucified body nailed on them—the torsos of these bodies were especially large, and all flesh had been ripped away to leave only bone.

"Good gods," Vera held her hand to her nose, but despite the horrific scene, there was no smell. There was no blood or gore to make a scent. Anneliese looked perplexed by the Magister's action, and Argrave knew right away that Vera feigned disgust. After all, she dabbled in necromancy herself. It was why Argrave was sure this journey would entice her.

Argrave was the first to step forward. "The heart chamber. What we came here for," he explained.

Upon closer examination, the bodies crucified to the giant ribs were unusual in many ways. Their heads had only ears and mouths, both enlarged. The torsos were simply a bonelike cage, and the one Argrave

examined had books locked behind it. They weren't bodies at all, actually—they were necromantic creations that served as lockboxes for the valuables within.

"What's in this?" Argrave asked.

"Now, how would I—" Hegazar began.

"Scholarly works by High Wizard Anders, detailing his unique ascension to A-rank utilizing necromantic magic," the head just above the skeletal cage answered in a groan of a voice. It raised its head up to answer the question, and once it was finished, sagged lifelessly once more.

Argrave nodded, feeling a similar repulsion to the sights around that reminded of his time in the Low Way of the Rose. He turned to where the rest of his party was.

"There you have it, Magister Vera, Magister Hegazar. Ask these what's inside them. I think you'll quickly find that this journey was worth your time. I'll caution, though—don't try and open any of them. Try and wrench them open, cast magic? You risk triggering the enchantments nearby, and the contents will be destroyed. Anti-theft measures. Even a Wizard of the Order of the Rose would resort to common thievery, it would seem..."

Hegazar stepped closer, his head tilted. "I think... you might be trying to upsell your value, Argrave. Why would a magely Order dare destroy any of their knowledge? It's foolish. Nonsensical. No Order would ever install measures like that into their stores of knowledge, the same way no merchant would ever toss gold into the sea. It's far too valuable to lose."

*Try it*, Argrave wanted to say, but he knew Hegazar loathed being challenged or humiliated. He stood before the Magister, smiling as he thought of a way to let him down gently.

"These are just copies to be sold," Argrave looked to the skeletal cage. "The Order of the Rose was strongly devoted to personal freedom—necromancy requires such a thing, after all, given how much it intrudes on others' rights. Wizards pay the one who put these items up, and they're open. Voila."

The cage nearby must've misheard Argrave, for it rattled off, "Scholarly works by High Wizard Anders, detailing his unique ascension to A-rank utilizing necromantic magic," as Hegazar brooded over Argrave's words.

"Yet you said there were enchanted items here," Vera stepped up, crossing her arms.

"Not here," Argrave nodded, "But yes."

The cage let loose its words once again, and Hegazar looked up to it in annoyance.

"Unique ascension to A-rank, hmm? Necromantic?" Hegazar held his hand up. "We don't need that."

He cast a C-rank wind spell, and it cut towards the bone cage before them. Before it even reached its mark, the cage compressed, sparking. The enchantments on the book and the cage both shimmered violently for a moment before the books were finally compressed to a ridiculous degree.

The head above the cage laughed at them—a long, dry, and wheezy laugh that echoed throughout the heart chamber. The laughter was returned by each and every other head, and before long it was as though a whole gallery mocked them.

Argrave watched the heads. It was difficult not to join them in laughter. Vera certainly had no such issue—her voice joined along with theirs in mocking Hegazar. Anticipating the Magister’s rage, Argrave quickly said, “What a useless feature.”

“Yes,” Hegazar agreed at once. “It seems there is a reason their Order has died. They waste their time on foolish things like these.”

“It laughs at fools,” Vera wiped tears from her eyes. “I think it’s a wonderful addition to this place.”

“Well, shall we see what we’ve earned from this trip?” Argrave suggested, tugging at their greed to distract from the tension.

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At a certain point on the path of magic in this era, one reached the end of the line. There was only so much that the forefathers of the Order of the Owl had left behind, and consequently there was only so much that one could learn before one had to study independently. Methods for A-rank ascension and spells of the higher rank were quite rare, even despite the Order’s close attention to collecting and preserving them.

Even if a spellcaster had this knowledge, they might not share it so eagerly depending on their nature. After all, they essentially offered another a key to their power. By sharing knowledge, they ostensibly created a direct rival—a direct competitor. There had to be trust between the two parties, or something binding them.

In most cases, the motive to share was loyalty to the Order—all helped the Order rise, and in turn, each and all would rise up with it. It was a reasonable exchange that created a natural loyalty... in theory. In reality, the higher-ups enforced strict regulation of resources that allowed only a select few proteges of the elite cadre to advance. Even someone relatively benevolent like Master Castro could not change that system. He was one S-rank mage among many, just with a little more authority and a fancy title.

The leaders don’t lead, unless they’re creating new leaders to take their place. An age-old problem, reflected in the Order of the Gray Owl.

All of these factors lent Argrave a great deal of leverage over people on the path of magic. He had freedom from that system because he knew secrets most could not even dream of. He had his A-rank ascension, Anneliese’s, and even Durran’s all planned out. He knew where to get all the spells he needed. Nothing blocked him from advancement except his own ability, ostensibly.

But for the two Magisters he brought with him? That wasn’t the case at all. Everything here was an invaluable piece of knowledge that could help them win talented people to their faction within the Order. For the sake of their future, all knowledge was beneficial to have. Magic was only one facet of their power—knowledge was every bit as important.

Argrave led the two Magisters around like a child through an ice cream shop—they could see their prize just beyond the glass, reading about all of the delicious flavors they might sample. Every new thing they saw made them hungrier. Blood magic flavor, earth magic flavor, illusion magic with mint... he let them engage their eyes and ears with everything nice.

*I’ll buy you ice cream, Argrave thought. So long as you behave on the car ride home.*

Argrave's analogy was a bit diminished by the absolutely vile necromancy around them—it made it a bit difficult to think about ice cream at all. Nevertheless, these two kids he'd brought with him couldn't get what was behind the glass—they'd have to ask him.

"A collection of S-rank spells that deal with earth elemental magic, primarily regarding fine, large-scale manipulation of metal," the head above a skeletal cage described.

Though both of the Magisters were rather adept at concealing what they thought, after hearing that they were both practically trembling from excitement. Hegazar's illusory form stalked to Argrave.

"So... partner," Hegazar began, trying to wrap his arm around Argrave in a friendly, brotherly manner. Given both Argrave's height and his large frame, it was a rather awkward maneuver amounting to a waist wrap. Argrave felt doubly uncomfortable because of the distinct realization he could *feel* Hegazar's illusion, like it was flesh and blood rather than spell. "Now that we've taken the tour... perhaps it's time to divulge how to crack inside these beauties, fulfill your end of the bargain. What do you say?"

"Don't coerce him, Hegazar," Vera reprimanded.

"We've all been dancing around the issue like a boy afraid to confess to his first crush," Hegazar said, freeing his arm. "Fact is, you've clammed up a little, Argrave. I'm a bit hurt. I thought we shared a moment back there. You can trust me... can't you?"

Argrave stepped away, joining back up with his three companions. The two Magisters watched him carefully, their arms crossed.

Before this whole journey, Argrave had been deliberating about how he was going to play this. He'd talked about it with Anneliese and the others countless time, and the conclusion was this: if he said the wrong thing, these two might unite against them. That was the worst possible outcome. And so...

"I know how to open them," Anneliese stepped forth, past Hegazar and to Vera. "Argrave told me everything. And I was there the first time we visited one of these fortresses."

Vera's face morphed quickly—surprise, then pleasure. When Anneliese positioned herself behind Vera, Hegazar's illusory body remained calm. Seeing as how quickly his true body moved in front of Argrave, he was very far from it.

"So you do," Argrave nodded, perplexed. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Piece it together, Argrave," Anneliese said at once. "If you cannot, perhaps you will finally face the reality that you are not as smart as you think you are."

"Hmm..." Hegazar's illusory form moved to stand beside his true body. "What'd I tell you, lover boy?"

Argrave tensed up. Hegazar had been absolutely one hundred percent correct about what he said.

*Smart is sexy*, Argrave thought.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 229: Shooting Star**

“We have to make this look real,” Argrave told Anneliese. This was many days earlier, back when they were still at the Tower of the Gray Owl. “Part of being deceitful, as these Magisters are, is expecting the same from just about everybody. Vera and Hegazar will both be looking for a ruse from the other. They’re enemies—the paranoia will already be up and running. The acting is pivotal. What’s more, you have to squeeze Vera hard, like you’re actually on the fringe and looking to be recruited.”

Anneliese nodded, rotating an empty bowl on the table with her hands as she listened. “What is the plan if one of them, or either of them, suspect a scheme?”

Argrave looked to the side, then leaned back in his chair. “I expect they’ll go along with it regardless. They’ll just have a plan prepared at the end of things to ruin our day. If Vera suspects, she’ll assume this is Hegazar’s ruse. If Hegazar suspects, the opposite is true. If both suspect the other... they’re too mired in hatred to even consider the other innocent, and the whole point of this is to stop them from uniting against us.”

The bowl stopped rotating when Anneliese ceased fiddling with it. “You said Vera is spiteful. If she suspects... there could be danger.”

“With Hegazar on my side? She’d take no chances of escalation. These two are both S-rank mages, and in unfamiliar territory—neither want a fight. They’d gladly kill each other, but only if there was no risk involved.” Argrave leaned forward. “No way in hell I’d ask this of you if I thought you’d be in danger. As things stand, things are more dangerous if we don’t do it. These two can and will cooperate against us for the sake of their own greed. They’d have no qualms capturing and torturing us for information.”

Anneliese stared at the bowl, and then her amber eyes turned to him resolutely. “I see. I will follow your judgement, then.”

Argrave smiled. “Glad that’s the case. Any improvements to suggest, thoughts?”

“I think...” Anneliese put her hand to her chin. “I think I am better at fooling people than I once was. Even still, I am not at all confident in doing this flawlessly.”

Argrave put his arm up on the chair he sat at, thinking. “Beyond what we already discussed... if you want some advice, a lot of lying is being honest. It’s easier to tell a lie if you can think, ‘this is technically true.’ A little trick of the mind.”

Anneliese tilted her head, fixing her white hair back into place when it fell over her eyes. “You have a proposal?”

“Couples therapy,” Argrave spread his arms out. “In a sense, at least. If you have any grievances... things you dislike about me, things you disliked me doing, you bring them up right then. Bring that repressed anger and frustration to the surface. I can understand if it might be—”

“I believe I can do that,” Anneliese interrupted. “That is very good advice.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes, then cleared his throat and moved on. “Alright then. If you think Vera is buying it, undo the braid on your hair. Between that and Galamon...”

Both of their eyes moved to the other person in the room. Galamon sat there, his arms crossed. His stern face was markedly sterner than usual.

“Really, Galamon. This’ll be a big help,” Argrave assured. “Unparalleled.”

“Hmm,” he grunted simply.

Argrave looked to the ground, clearly uncomfortable. In the corner, Durran threw some raisins into his mouth, looking at Galamon with an incredulous pity.

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“You’re going with Vera?” Argrave asked, voice modulating.

“I am,” Anneliese confirmed. “You spared me explaining it.”

“But why?!” Argrave demanded, stepping forth until Hegazar kept him back with one arm. “This makes no sense. What we’ve done, where we are—you want to part ways now? Not to mention, you want to leave me holding the bag here?”

Vera’s demeanor had recovered from the initial surprise of Anneliese coming to join with her. Now, her face was stone cold and apathetic, and she waited for Anneliese’s answer as much as Argrave seemed to want to know.

“The why of things isn’t important, now...” Hegazar cut in, pushing Argrave back a little with his arm.

“Forget that. I want to know,” Argrave said, resisting.

“Security,” Anneliese said plainly. “You keep doing things that endanger everyone, no matter how much I try and talk you down from it.”

Argrave nodded, feeling her true thoughts weren’t that bad of yet. “Alright. I see that. And I hear you—you’ve made your message very, very clear. But let’s... things can’t end like this. I’ll change,” he pleaded, surprising himself with the desperation.

“You hear, but you never listen,” Anneliese shook her head. “Can you change? You said your eyes would change back, too, but they remain as they are. I hate looking at them.”

“All change takes time,” he insisted, starting to feel it a little. “Anneliese. Come on. What are we doing?”

Anneliese crossed her arms. “I never expressed any of this because I thought it might break you. That I can say it now without fear... you have no idea how therapeutic this is. I have to thank you and Magister Vera for this opportunity.” She took a deep breath. “The engagement, the blood magic in the wetlands, or your constant obsession with gaining power... even this thing happening right now. You consult me for only half of what you do, and actually take that advice half again. You charge headlong towards a wall. I do not wish to be there to witness the crash. I will not.”

Hearing that, Argrave did not have to try and act at all. He had no idea those things were bothering her—just as Anneliese said, she’d never expressed any of it. He briefly tried to temper her words with the knowledge she was just being considerate, before remembering he was forgetting the point.

*She thought I couldn’t handle hearing that, Argrave told himself, stoking his own flame. What does she think I am, sugar glass?*

A mix of indignance and hurt, Argrave remained silent. He was glad when Galamon stepped forward, removing his helmet.

"Anneliese. You made a vow before Veid," Galamon said coldly. "Have you forgotten who you are? Have you forgotten your honor?"

Anneliese crossed her arms. "You are another nuisance, Galamon. Step back. I tire of hearing you preach of Veid and will be glad to be free of your reminders."

Galamon advanced forward once more, his helmet held in the crook of his arm. "You might throw away your soul, but I cannot stand by. You made a vow. You—"

Anneliese held her arm up and cast a spell in one swift motion. A spear of ice hurtled towards Galamon's head. He jerked to the side, and then collapsed to the ground in a fountain of blood. Cursing in surprise at the amount of blood, Argrave ran up to Galamon and conjured a B-rank ward with his ring. Hegazar shouted something, but Argrave couldn't hear beyond the ward.

"Good lord," Argrave said in panic. "Your neck..."

Galamon sputtered, holding his hand to his neck. Argrave held his hand, casting a healing spell for show. Though such spells did work on the elven vampire, they actually hindered his natural regeneration.

Argrave leaned in close, whispering, "Thanks for this. Really, thank you. Thanks."

Galamon spit blood at Argrave in what might have been spite, and he flinched away. "Flask... idiot," he commanded, pointing.

Argrave scrambled to get it and handed it to Galamon covertly, blocking people's view with his body.

"You better?" Argrave questioned after a while, watching Galamon's neck. It was too covered in blood to be totally sure it was healed.

"Until next time," Galamon confirmed. "Damn you. Damn her. What foul union have I created?"

Argrave was perplexed, but he quickly lowered himself to support the elven vampire. "Here, let me help you up. Act all weak."

Galamon grunted, leaving much of his weight on Argrave. The Veidimen was ridiculously heavy, and Argrave struggled to help him rise. Once he had, he dispelled the ward.

"You nearly took his head off, Anneliese!" Argrave shouted at once.

"Be quiet, Kinslayer!" Hegazar shouted above him. "I'll clean up your mess. Get behind me. Stay ready," he directed.

Argrave felt Hegazar was amply convinced but had to keep acting his part. He took Galamon off to the side, hauling the great giant of an elf with every bit of strength he had. Once there, he watched Vera and Anneliese like they were lionesses with rabies.

"You should keep your cool, Anneliese," Vera instructed calmly. "Best not waste thought, emotion, on what's in the past. And Hegazar..." the Magister crossed her arms. "Let's keep things amiable, hmm? It

would be a shame if these valuables all around us were destroyed," she looked to the crucified bodies with cages of bone in their torso, each and all holding knowledge of great value.

"Eh..." Hegazar groaned. "Well, Kinslayer, looks like your little plot, whatever it might've been, has been cast to the wind because you tried to be friendly. Told you not to trust her. Told you not to bring her. I could've shielded you, backed you up at the Tower! Now... we go to the damn bargaining table. Great work... partner," he said drolly.

"I think it's best..." Vera looked about ponderously. "...if we discuss distribution. Distribution of both what's here, and what's deeper in."

"On that note, Magister Vera..." Anneliese crossed her arms. "I think we should discuss what the future might resemble. I know we spoke earlier, but... I think I need specificity."

"Hmm." Vera turned back to Anneliese. "Sure. Let's get some distance, and—"

"Oh, forget that," Hegazar said with a laugh. He held his hand out, obviously battle-ready. "You'll walk away, do whatever needs to be done to open these cages? I don't think so. Neither of us move until we come to a consensus. Make a ward, talk there," he dictated. "I'd sooner burn all of this than be cheated by a clever scheme of yours once again, Vera."

"Fine," Vera conceded at once.

Argrave watched Anneliese. She undid her braid, signaling she thought Vera had no doubts. With that, Hegazar grabbed his arm.

"Stop looking. Don't give her the pleasure—believe me, the sooner you come to terms with this, the better," Hegazar advised.

Argrave tore his gaze away, looking at the Magister. "It makes no sense."

Hegazar stepped up to Argrave. "Listen, boy—your star-crossed lover was really just an illusion; a shooting star, nothing more than a wish never to be fulfilled. Now, we made a deal. I'd very much like it kept. I can console, offer kind words, teach you how to cope... *after* this is finished. But business and Vera are both equally cruel things. So... focus on the task at hand."

Argrave took steady deep breaths as if gathering himself for the task. After, he opened his eyes.

"All of these cages can be opened in the brain chamber of this living fortress—it's a control for the whole place. There, you can move the fortress, unlock any locks, open the market vaults..."

"Move the fortress?" Hegazar noted in surprise. "What a ridiculous... well, never mind that. This brain chamber—tell me more about it. How is it operated? Where is it?"

"It's deeper in," Argrave said. "It's got a complex lock, but Anneliese is smart. She'd know how to get the key." Argrave rubbed his chin. "Everything's operated by raw magic power. I'd planned on using the both of you to move the fortress to a sewer system connected to Dirracha. Might've worked, if I could rely on the..." Argrave trailed off. "It doesn't matter."

"Vera's going to be looking for a way to get the most out of this that she can," Hegazar's illusory body looked back. "And so am I. So, let's talk about all the options available to us..."



“Alright,” Argrave nodded.

*Point of no return*, Argrave noted in his head. *Hell, maybe we reached it the moment we left the Tower with these two.*

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 230: Museum Tomb**

A giant gray-green humanoid sat in a strange octagonal stone booth in the middle of a large room with eight paths branching out. It seemed to be wearing a bag made of skin over its head, but where the bag met its neck, eight arms shot out, all identical. Its hands toyed with abacuses on the booth. It wasn't clear what it was using the instruments to count, but it used them adeptly. Stone bead after stone bead slid up and down rods, and the thing's head swiveled from left to right to monitor all of them.

Then, all of its hands stopped at once. It slid some of the counting instruments aside, peering into the stony darkness ahead. A figure materialized at the end of the dark-shrouded tunnel ahead, illusion magic dissipating. Argrave stood there, holding a great red bow. He released the string.

A dark maroon bolt shot across the giant room. It moved quickly enough to generate winds. With a travel time of perhaps half a second, it struck past the stone, the abacuses, and the humanoid all. It slammed the necromantic creature into the stone behind, digging about five feet deeper even after that. The source of its magic was stored in its chest—without so much as a single spasm, it collapsed, nothing more than flesh now.

Hegazar's illusory form seemed to materialize from nothing, and he placed his hand on Argrave's elbow. “Good shot, partner. Must have taken some archery classes—your ma must be proud.”

“Maybe,” Argrave answered, breathing a little unsteady.

The remainder of the group stepped out of the darkness, rejoining up with them. With Hegazar's help, Argrave had easily dispatched the Cipherer, their sole obstacle to the deeper parts of the living fortress.

Everyone reached a consensus after things had calmed down after Anneliese's 'betrayal.' Despite the shifting of the scales, the crux of the matter was fundamentally still one S-rank mage versus one S-rank mage. 'Even distribution,' both Magisters agreed—they might even keep that agreement, provided neither saw an opportunity. With that settled, things proceeded for their party to discover what, exactly, would be an even distribution.

Argrave played the role of the gambler gone bust—he disclosed what was supposedly all of his plans and knowledge to Hegazar without fuss, acting as though the man was his only lifeline. Argrave couldn't say for sure what Anneliese was doing, but they had agreed earlier Anneliese would be trying to get as much from Vera as she could, to play her part as an ambitious and enterprising rising star. Whether or not she went with it was irrelevant—he trusted her judgement.

There wasn't much room to maneuver with the position they'd put themselves in. They would have to earn some leeway by force of necessity. Hegazar and Vera did not offer trust—theirs was an alliance of convenience, and the Magisters viewed them only as disposable tools; Argrave and Anneliese were but gloves with which to handle the other Magister, discarded once dirtied. To get these Magisters to move

like Argrave wanted, they'd have to misdirect, misinform, and misguide the two Magisters *just* right in this living fortress of the Order of the Rose.

Argrave had always loved these living fortresses when playing 'Heroes of Berendar.' The player needed three mage characters in the party to open any of them, but once within, they'd be greeted by a hall of locked-off but high-level loot—the heart chamber they'd seen earlier. To get at the treasure, the player didn't have to endure a long dungeon crawl with countless enemies or solve some needlessly tedious puzzle. Argrave enjoyed those, to be sure, but they were a bit dull on subsequent playthroughs of the game. In these living fortresses, all the player had to do was fight a very fun boss.

Argrave felt no guilt completely ruining all of that 'fun' by masking himself with Hegazar's high-ranking illusion magic and dispatching their foe with [Bloodfeud Bow]. He didn't have the Blessing of Supersession even still, and he didn't care to take risks, even if it meant showing some of his capability.

Vera stepped up to Argrave and healed his arms, cracked from the heavy use of blood magic. She looked to Hegazar. "There. You cloaked him, I healed him—all as we agreed."

Behind, Anneliese toyed with her duster's hood. The Starsparrow, which she'd been hiding this entire time, rushed off into the deeper part of the fortress. Argrave quickly averted his gaze back to the two Magisters. If they had seen anything suspicious, they did not show it.

"So, our accountant giant had the key to all the riches in this little slice of flesh and stone made by the Rose?" Hegazar stared out with them.

"Key to all the riches... burning them or getting them," Argrave nodded in confirmation.

"Let's go together, then," Vera directed.

Neither would dare let the other go ahead. And that was precisely what Argrave had been hoping for.

#####

Durran ripped the bag of skin off the Cipherer's head, tossing it aside like a filthy rag. There, a great lump of flesh that barely constituted a head housed several rather conspicuous fleshy bits. Argrave gave his hands a little shaking, steeling his resolve. Then, he reached down, plunging his fingers into its nose.

Argrave pulled firmly and steadily, doing his best to ignore the slimy noises as he freed a long hollow rod of bone. It had several holes in it, like some sort of poorly made flute. He unscrewed the nose, tossing it aside. Next, he turned the head on its side, then grabbed its floppy, cartilaginous ear. It stretched uncomfortably as he tugged on it, and then popped like a cork. He screwed it in place where the nose had been. Lastly, he opened up the Cipherer's mouth. He tested each tooth, some of them wrenching free.

One by one, Argrave fit all the teeth into their correct slot. By the end of it, he had something rather horrifying in his hand. He sighed, marveling at how far he'd fallen from his days as a clean freak. "There we go," he announced.

Hegazar pointed. "That's all you need?"

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "This'll let us into the brain chamber, where we can communicate with the living fortress."

Argrave looked to the ear, staring at it for a moment. There was a hole in the key, and he could see right past the ear into the ground beyond. Shaking his head and shuddering, he held it and proceeded forth.

#####

The brain chamber was not so far ahead of where the Cipherer had been. The level of the protective enchantments seemed to make the Magisters on edge, but so long as Argrave and company were willing to press forward, so were they.

Before long, a thick circular metal door blocked their advance. Argrave took his cue to step forward, planting the ear key in a slot just beside the door. It took some turning, and then Argrave had to say, "The ear is one key to the mind."

The metal disc slid aside, and Argrave was reminded of the doors in Nodremaid that they had used Garm to open. As Argrave twisted and pulled the ear key free, Vera and Hegazar came to his side, spell light illuminating their path. They did not proceed until Argrave did, ensuring no trap awaited them. The brain chamber was bathed in light as they stepped deeper in, illuminating its uncomfortable confines.

The cramped and damp room did resemble a brain, largely from the wrinkly stone walls. Argrave was certain that if they chipped at the stone, genuine brain matter would be beyond it—that was probably why protective enchantments were so thick there. There was a small stone table in the center with a few chairs near it, while a large fleshy apparatus waited in the background. It had a slot in it that obviously matched with the blocky key of bone Argrave held.

"The key goes in there," Argrave disclosed. "From there, you give commands to the fortress while supplying it with magic power. It can receive and accept commands that it is familiar with. If the key is pulled out, it'll go back to its current state—that is to say, all secure doors or vaults will shut, and all sections will be waiting for proper command. Barring this room, of course—it'd be hard to take the key out of the room if the door shut automatically. I assume it was designed this way to prevent negligence, but I cannot say for sure."

Vera looked to Anneliese, who nodded in confirmation. After, the Magister ran her hands along the stony walls. "This entire thing is alive?"

"If you consider necromantic creations truly alive, I suppose so," Argrave confirmed.

"Enough of this. Pointless to learn of what we cannot touch," Hegazar waved his hand, stepping past Durran and Galamon. "Put the key in, and let's get on with this."

Argrave nodded, then moved to insert the key. As he pushed it past the flesh, he felt like bone touched against bone and shivered. Even still, the key fit snugly. Argrave took a step backwards, but nothing seemed to change. All stood around expectantly. As Argrave turned his head back, a flash of gold passed through Argrave's vision, so quick it seemed fake.

"...now what?" Hegazar pressed.

"Allow me," Anneliese stepped forth, placing her hand on the flesh beside the key. "Open all vault doors. Open all market cages," Anneliese commanded plainly. Argrave could see the magic flowing out of her hand, pulled like wisps out of her body. Vera waited expectantly, and then far behind them, screeching echoed down the stone halls.

When the two Magisters turned to the sound, Argrave held his hand out and cast a spell. His Brumesingers scampered out of his coat, spreading out and climbing up beneath the table. Their dark gray fur blended near perfectly with the stone, but even then, they stayed incredibly well-hidden.

“I don’t trust any one of you enough to leave you here within this chamber,” Hegazar said frankly. “Be it negligence or malice, you might make things go awry.”

“We agree on that front,” Vera nodded. “So, we’ll go to the vaults together. We’ll collect what is within. We’ll bring it to this... heart chamber, we’ll divide things, and then we’ll leave the way we came in. No opportunity for deceit. No opportunity for bloodshed. Fair, Hegazar?”

“It sounds fair. I suppose we’ll find out if it is,” Hegazar said disdainfully.

*Yeah. The people who did all the work will get all the goods, Argrave thought.*

#####

Argrave stared up at the towering vault doors. They were thick, at the very least two feet of dense metal. They had slid to the side enough to allow passage. It wasn’t just the doors, either—the walls they were connected to were just as formidable. This place was surely built to last. It could keep out all comers for a long, long while, be they S-rank mages or behemoths like Orion. It probably had.

“I know—you could stare at them for an eternity,” Hegazar pushed Argrave. “But hurry. I’m eager to see what’s within.”

Argrave looked to the Magister, and then into the vault ahead. Even now, the two of them would not enter this place first. Maybe their paranoia was fitting.

*Not that it matters, Argrave assured himself. Greed brought them here. That greed will keep them going.*

Argrave was the first to step past the vault doors. The area ahead was like a museum entirely divorced from the macabre fortress they’d come from. There were rows upon rows of display cases, each of varying sizes and housing different things. Pushing past his anemia-induced headache, Argrave walked deeper in, eyes wandering for the thing he’d come here to get. It was in the same spot it always was.

Peering down at the matching set of bronze, sharp jewelry locked in its case, Argrave smiled. Just as he turned his head all the others entered the vault, eyes wandering about. Though Argrave’s company looked to the walls, the two Magisters immediately fixated on what was within the display cases.

“Argrave, now!” Hegazar shouted. Though Argrave stared at him in bewilderment, Vera immediately raised her hands and prepared to cast spells. Durran and Galamon ducked away, ready to take cover.

After a short moment, the Magister burst into laughter. He stepped deeper in, letting out a satisfied sigh. “Let’s keep things civil, shall we? It’s the final act,” the bald man cautioned her, whistling as he ran his finger along the glass of the display cases. Vera glared at him in disdain.

“The final act,” Argrave echoed in agreement.

Whatever Vera or Hegazar had planned would surely happen here... or so each of them would be thinking. And it might just be Argrave that would give each the push.