

Chapter 236: First Breath of a Titan

Elenore heard approaching footsteps. She had a clock on the table before her. The set of jewelry that Argrave had given her augmented the sensation she felt from the first ring—with each new piece, it was like a bubble of absolute perception expanding outwards. She had a dim cognizance of everything around her. It was more than sight—it was understanding. She could read a closed book, perceive the gears working in the small clock, or even delve into someone's anatomy if she so wished it.

And she had. Argrave's heart... it pumped black blood and shone like an amethyst. His eyes were black and gold, though bits of the gray she remembered still showed on them. She had enough questions about him before that revelation... yet now, they were doubled. She had not known him very well, but he had evidently changed too much.

A man opened the door and stepped into the shed that was her room.

"Ruleo," Elenore turned her head. "You're early."

"Never hurts to be," he stepped in closer.

As he stepped into her range of perception, Elenore perceived Ruleo for the first time. She had always figured him to be a gruff, ugly man. He was gruff, but she could not call him ugly in good faith. He had dark hair and a well-trimmed beard, with bright white eyes that were especially striking next to his dark features. His heavy, jutting brows make him look naturally angry.

Elenore gestured to the chair across from her. "Have a seat."

"What's with the getup?" Ruleo's eyes wandered the various bronze pieces she wore. "Did you have a change of maids? It's not very... not like usual," he said, softening the criticism.

"It's a gift from a..." Elenore shook her head. "Just sit."

"You actually have people that give you gifts?" he pulled back the chair and sat, letting out a grunt. "So, you've got another job you can't afford to fail? Best pay well. I have some arrangements to keep. I haven't been idle."

"You align rather well with something I've been looking into," Elenore said at once. "And I had some questions for you."

Ruleo leaned back, squinting at her suspiciously. "Go on, then."

"Rancor. I need your investigative capabilities. You're already fairly close with them," Elenore said at once.

Ruleo swallowed, looking more annoyed than anything. "They put a lot of money in my pocket."

"They help you find Order of the Rose ruins to explore, you mean," Elenore said. "They grow your unorthodox list of spells larger every day."

Ruleo tapped the table, smiling. "Well, well. I'm ousted. Given what they offer an unaffiliated spellcaster like myself, you can see why I'm not eager to jump ship."

"It puts some things in perspective," Elenore nodded. "Why you know so many spells, despite not being a member of the Order of the Gray Owl."

Ruleo shook his head quietly. "What's the counteroffer, then?"

"I can give you every bit of information they have," Elenore said. "If it's documented, you'll get those documents. If its members have it memorized, they'll recite them to me. On top of that..." Elenore pursed her lips. "I know someone who might be able to help you find all the Rose ruins you could ever want."

Ruleo raised a brow. "That right?"

"It is," Elenore nodded in confirmation.

Ruleo scratched at his eyes drowsily. "Alright," he enunciated deliberately. "Tell me what to do."

"In time," Elenore nodded. "I want to know why you're interested in Argrave."

Ruleo cackled. His laugh was quite unusual—rapid and loud, like a hyena. "Interested? Was that my phrasing?"

"...not quite," Elenore said after Ruleo's laughter died down. "You must've heard of recent happenings."

"Mmm. When one snake eats another, the rats rejoice," Ruleo noted, lounging. "Kinslaying Serpent, they're calling him. News has been spreading that Induen's body was eaten by ants. Rumor got distorted—apparently, Argrave devoured the corpse himself." Ruleo cackled once again, and then scratched the top of his lips. "Now, he's the Kineating Serpent. Kinslayer, Kineater..." Ruleo trailed off.

"You don't sound happy," Elenore stated.

Ruleo looked down at his hands. "People hated Induen. He was Felipe's hand. Suppressed dissidents, crushed revolts, took a hand in things personally. That hatred was on a perfectly balanced scale, the other side weighed down by fear and respect. That was probably Felipe's design. He's preparing for succession." Ruleo sighed. "Argrave put an end to that. Combined with the already-swirling rumors about his heroics... the plague, the Veidimen... the legion of ghostly snakes, supposedly a blessing from the founder of House Vasquer... it's nauseating to hear them praise him like he's some hero."

"Why do you hate him?" Elenore asked bluntly.

Ruleo turned his eyes towards her. "You have plans for him," he noted.

"You can imagine why I need to know," she said, disguising her intent. "A new variable. Another piece, with ripples to follow."

"Is he a piece anymore?" Ruleo questioned.

"Everyone is. I am. You are. King Felipe is. No one is removed from things. No one can simply watch while things unfold. All are affected," Elenore shook her head. "To that point... talk of your history with Argrave."

“My father was the royal keeper of the hounds,” Ruleo said grimly. “Managed all of the dogs for hunts, searches, and other such excursions.” He leaned in a fair bit closer, white eyes sharp. “That should tell you enough. Jog your memory.”

Elenore did recall a major incident involving the keeper of the hounds. Her memory was not absolutely clear about the matter, so she pressed for more, saying, “You certainly concealed that detail well.”

Ruleo looked surprised, but he quickly corrected his expression and said neutrally, “I took some measures.”

“Did you know Argrave at all?”

Ruleo had a hate-filled smile and said through clenched teeth, “All too well. Nobles and other royals refused to associate with a bastard. But he was welcomed, accommodated, and nearly worshipped by the children of the royal servants.” Ruleo rubbed his hands together. “Awkward. Towered above some adults even when young. He stuttered and wasn’t particularly assertive. Made him feel... innocent, naïve. But all of that was just a mask for the same vindictiveness and cruelty the rest of you snakes have.”

Elenore thought to what Argrave was now. It was such a far cry from the young boy Ruleo described. All of his people seemed undyingly loyal to him—not out of fear, or low manipulation... but respect and even love. He reined in someone like Durran. Someone like him must’ve surely been a nightmare...

“I regret bragging,” Ruleo continued with another sigh.

“Bragging?” Elenore repeated, brought back to the matter at hand.

Ruleo nodded. “Yes. When my father found out I might be capable of using magic, he toiled to earn me a spot in the Order. I bragged to people—friends. Those friends told Argrave. And Argrave... took all of that toil.”

“He took your spot in the Order? How?”

Ruleo crossed his arms, looking ill at ease. “Noble children were having an outing in the forests. Something stupid... can’t remember,” he shook his head. “Argrave released all of the dogs, set them into a frenzy. Blamed my father.”

Elenore tilted her head. “I don’t recall deaths.”

“Of course not. My father was a good trainer,” Ruleo threw up his hands. “But piss-for-brains aristocracy listened to Argrave. They believed him when he stuttered out that it was some sort of assassination attempt. Even when the bastard so blatantly asked to receive what was mine--!” Ruleo tapped his chest, anger rising, yet it waned quickly as he brought himself back under control. “My father was executed. Mother’s still kicking—she’s too bitter to die. And Argrave was on the fast track to becoming a Wizard of the Order. A joke, this kingdom of ours.”

Elenore nodded. “It is.”

“Listen...” Ruleo looked around. “Rancor—they’re particularly attached to a headquarters of theirs. They utterly refuse to give it up, reveal its location, or allow anyone inside. It’s not like your ordinary syndicate, ready to migrate at any moment. I can start there. Your people can, too.”

"That sounds promising," Elenore nodded.

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"An army, like a serpent, goes upon its belly," Argrave declared. "Vasquer is a serpent already, so it's a fitting little quote from someone... I can't remember who, come to think of it. Maybe Sun Tzu. Or was it..." Argrave shook his head. "Whatever. Neither Parbon nor Vasquer have idled throughout the winter. The bulk of that time has undoubtedly been spent preparing provisions for the war."

All of them were in Elenore's safehouse—a quaint place with plenty of storage and sleeping space, though little in the way of privacy. Shelves had been carved out of the stone, and the place had been made into a little home for them to stay. Argrave sat in a bed just beside Anneliese, while Durran sat cross-legged and Galamon stood. All were surrounded by a ward of Anneliese's making.

"It's true. Grand armies... difficult to sustain. An army of ten thousand might eat twice as many meals a day," Galamon contributed. "It's a blight upon the land, constantly eating food without providing any in return. Such is why armies resort to raiding."

Argrave nodded. "Early winter finished off the harvest, preserved the food properly. Now we're nearing the end of winter. Spring is coming. Snow everywhere is melting, and the fighting is sure to bloom just like the flowers."

"Strategy and flowery language don't mix. Wax poetic another time," Durran chided jokingly. "What're you getting at?"

Anneliese leaned in on Argrave. "Argrave and I think that Felipe's handling of obtaining provisions presents an opportunity."

Argrave nodded, a grim smile on his face. "This is only a theory of mine. Elenore's going to be important in helping to confirm it. More than castles and ancestry, money is power. Money is the most tangible form of power—the ability to get others to do what you want. Parbon might've bought extra grain and crops en masse, but Vasquer certainly wouldn't. They'd seize it by force. A lot of people with a lot of money are sorely angered."

Anneliese continued, saying, "Though we already had plans to head to a city called Relize, an effectively self-governed city and financial engine for the north, Argrave thinks there is merit in looking for more opportunities. If Relize is discontent, there are certainly many more experiencing the same."

"Let's say you need to build a supply system in short order," Argrave continued excitedly. "One winter, perhaps. The easiest way is to commandeer what already exists. Caravans, supply ships, baggage trains and beasts of burdens... these people and possessions will undoubtedly be conscripted for the war effort. Vasquer strikes at the supplies of the south directly, but I think our point of focus should be these means of conveyance. Elenore can offer that opportunity."

Galamon crossed his arms and looked around. "It would work," he said. "Doing it... organizing mass coordination between parties of varying interests... execution is always different than theory. Always harder."

"Elenore is rather adroit at that," Argrave said. "Mass coordination, that is."

"I thought we were building an army," Durran leaned back on his hands. "Not that I dislike this notion. I mean, it might turn around on us..."

"Turn around?" Argrave furrowed his brows.

"Might make them pursue the south more aggressively. Our northern adversaries might raid villages for food, attack incautiously for supplies..." Durran shrugged. "My people often went to war for that reason. Rather than starve, we fought. From what I talk about with Galamon, his people are similar. Their way is more so hunting parties and fishing journeys than raids, though."

"The south is disadvantaged. They have to fight defensively. Foolhardy aggression from their enemies might be what they need," Argrave shook his head. "And if they're harried by others on a different front? Well..." Argrave smiled. "We will bring an army, Durran. Mingling with the patricians in Relize is the most important part of it. In a place dominated by the merchant class, ample muscle is needed to protect their interests. If they can be interested in fighting on my behalf?" Argrave raised his hands up. "Well. That's quite the kickstart for resistance in the north."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 237: New Inner Circle

"You controlled me," Durran said, his brows furrowed and eyes staring at the ground. They sat in the saferoom, the other two busy with their own tasks. A ward concealed their conversation.

Argrave scratched the back of his neck. "Well, let's not make it weird."

Durran looked up. "Bit too late for that, Argrave. Are you... you didn't take anything strange this morning?" He scanned his eyes like he was looking for dilated pupils. "Keep going. How?"

"Well, with a..." Argrave held up his hands, fiddling with his thumbs. "A controller. A little object, with buttons and a rubber stick that could move in all directions. That's how I moved you."

Durran stared at Argrave, completely silent.

"Sometimes I'd use a keyboard. It was a little board with a *lot* of buttons, one for each letter and numeral. Plus some... symbols," Argrave shook his head. "Listen—just think of it like this. I've done all of this before. I know this world very well. I experienced things through you and some others." Argrave leaned and patted Durran on the shoulder. "Just thought it was long overdue to tell you. You've been doing good work. And that brings us to the reward I promised you," Argrave continued quickly, retrieving a prepared package that jingled.

Argrave threw the bag at Durran, and the man quickly threw his hand up and caught it with his left hand. It slid out of his two remaining fingers, but the other hand quickly caught it so adeptly he seemed used to doing so.

"Sorry," Argrave apologized. "But that's... well, it's a lot of cash. Two pink coins, fifty of those gold ones."

Durran's face brightened at once. "You're kidding." He grabbed the string binding the bag closed and pulled it, opening it up. At once, some of the sheening rose gold magic coins veritably shone out of the bag, as though the leather concealed rainbows instead of metal. "This is... good gods. This is a lot of

reward. I—” Durran paused. “Forget that. You can’t just cut me off at that point. What in the world is ‘Heroes of Berendar?’ This is the last damn explanation I expected!”

Argrave looked around as though someone might hear, but the ward blocked all sound from escaping. “Well, it’s just like I said.”

“This place was a game for you,” Durran pointed to the ground. “I don’t know. It’s a pretty far cry from some card game or... or a weaved ball you’d kick about on a dune of sand. I don’t get it.”

Argrave leaned back, exasperated. “The reason I dragged my feet is because I hate talking about it. It’s...”

Durran laughed. “I get it—it kills the mystique a little. But I’m just... trying to wrap my head around this. A game that recreates... a different reality.”

“Creates a reality. Or maybe it does recreate, given I’m here, now.” Argrave shook his head in frustration. “I don’t understand half of this nonsense myself. I hate talking about it because I don’t like thinking about it. I’m here. I’ve got you, Galamon, Anneliese—the three of you keep me grounded. I have to focus on the present. But... I think you deserve some honesty, so I’m telling you.”

“You trust me,” Durran stated.

Argrave nodded. “I do.”

Durran looked off to the side. “Just had to give up a few fingers, huh?”

Argrave laughed, but immediately uncomfortably assured, “That’s not...”

“Relax, you bastard. I know,” Durran assured him. “So you, uh... you weren’t ever really ‘Argrave,’ huh? Never lived in this place. Didn’t even have magic.”

Argrave shook his head. “No.”

“No wars. No life-or-death. No cults, ancient gods... no struggle to find a meal every day,” Durran continued, waving his hands as he rattled off hardships.

Argrave stared at Durran. “I was lucky, yeah. My biggest concerns were social.”

Durran nodded and looked off to the side with a blank stare. “I guess mettle must be in the blood. No other explanation for how you got through unscathed.”

Argrave looked down. “I just played things safe.”

Durran focused back on Argrave. “You’ve a strange definition of safe.” Durran weighed the back of coins in his hand, then said, “Well, gods be damned. This is a nice bag to spend. I can do a lot. Try northern liquor, your food, maybe your women,” Durran said with a smile, but for some reason his smile faded. “Maybe... maybe not.”

“Hey. Do what you will,” Argrave held his hands up. “I can’t pass judgement. Ever since my body got better, I’m constantly... well, forget that. The point is to take a break. After you handle some things for me, of course.”

“Ah,” Durran pointed. “I knew it.”

“Of all of us, you’re the least recognizable,” Argrave pointed to him. “So long as you dress inconspicuously, you should be able to get a fair bit done without raising eyebrows. And you’re reliable about matters like this.” Argrave retrieved a paper. “Got a small shopping list for you. While Elenore snoops on Rancor, I have to prepare for the immediate future. We’re in the capital—plenty of shops that have things I need, things only High Wizards of the Order can buy. Specifically... some ingredients. Galamon and I are going to be brewing some things.”

“You’re the High Wizard, not me,” Durran shook his head. “How can I buy anything from these shops?”

“Wizards are busy and wealthy. There’s a system for servants to buy things,” Argrave waved his hands.

Durran smiled and tapped his knees. “Alright, master. As you command. This servant will go and do your bidding. I am infinitely humbled by the grace you’ve shown in allowing me to spend whatever remains.”

“You forgot to bow,” Argrave rose to his feet. “Thank you for this. Have fun. And if you have any more questions about what I disclosed to you, about my past...” Argrave put his hand on Durran’s shoulder. “Ask Anneliese, please. I hate talking about this.”

Durran laughed, then stood as well. He wrapped the string back around the bag and closed it, hooking it to his belt. “How would you function without her?”

“Poorly, I suspect,” Argrave smiled.

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Ruleo ate a loaf of bread as he sat surrounded by a cluster of rocks, waiting and watching. His piercing white eyes stayed on a drainage exit, watching the water pour out and out of a thin, rust-corroded iron grate.

Elenore was acting remarkably human when last he met her. That was an unusual thing indeed. Typically, she dealt with everyone, even her closest agents, in an entirely business-like fashion. Something must’ve excited her—brightened her day, brought some color to her world of unending dark. On top of that, she restricted access to many important areas. Even now, her men watched and guarded these entrances.

Ruleo knew something big was brewing.

In truth, Elenore’s request to examine Rancor could be considered a good break for him. Considering the strange nature of the information the crime syndicate had delivered to him, he had already been looking into them on his own—one of their lieutenants, a shrewish man by the name of Wayn, had seemed remarkably suspicious. From there... he’d looked into things on his own, already got some conclusions. ‘Vampire’ was a word that came to his mind.

Rancor was concealing something gargantuanly profitable in their headquarters. Whatever it was, it was part of the Old Dirracha—the ancient sewer systems, the old streets, all covered by the finely-paved roads of this beautiful city around them. This city was built atop a city after a devastating event in the distant past. It was a baffling thing, and more than a little confusing.

Ruleo would tell her this in due time, of course. He knew every detail about their headquarter beyond what was inside it, and he was certain Elenore would be satisfied with that. The work she'd given him—he'd already done it. Once he told her, she'd order her own men, possibly accompanied by Ruleo, to check things out.

Now, though... the reasons for her restrictions to entrances was far more interesting. Ruleo had been through the drainage grate ahead and recalled that its pathway moved right by a safehouse. Provided she was keeping someone safe, it was his best lead to find out what was going on with her. Elenore had big designs—he was interested in being part of them, even if he needed to be a bit underhanded.

And... she had mentioned Argrave. So far as he knew, Argrave was still locked up in the Tower of the Gray Owl, and that hadn't changed. Ruleo hoped he'd die there. Even still, Elenore brought him up all the same. That warranted his attention.

Ruleo had some of his other men watching other entrances to the greenhouse. They were all skilled, and he trusted them to do the task ably. But instinct told him he'd want to be here, watching this part. Instinct was something without basis, but it had worked for him so many times in the past that Ruleo was content in having faith that trend would continue.

The suns continued to pass over the sky as Ruleo ate, until he was finished and done. He kept watching, legs snug in a nook of a rock close by. He watched and waited, shaded by a larger rock nearby. Eventually enough time had passed that he was hungry again, and the light of the suns was just beginning to fade.

Yet then... the men guarding the hidden exit both moved towards it. Ruleo remained still, watching attentively. A man wearing a baggy set of robes walked out. He carried a walking stick of some sort—or at least, so Ruleo thought at first. Cloth wrapping was dense at the top. It was a spear of some kind.

"Hmm..." Ruleo remained still, doing nothing to draw anyone's attention. He examined the attitude between the guards and the man—it wasn't fully cooperative. "Might be my man."

His eyes followed the tall man with the spear walking towards the city of Dirracha.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 238: Dog on the Heels

Argrave took a long drink of the mildly warmed tea, having let it cool for some time. Elenore watched him—well, perhaps 'watched' was the wrong word, Argrave supposed. Anneliese was present, too. She held the teapot she had been rather obviously fascinated by. Her fascination probably stemmed from the fact that it needed no external heating. It was a self-contained enchanted item that could heat whatever water poured in it, and probably cost an exorbitant sum.

"You're quite incautious," Elenore said. "Or am I mistaking you?"

"Incautious?" Argrave put the cup down, enjoying its warmth. "I'm lost."

"The tea," she gestured. "Snakes are venomous, you know."

"Oh," Argrave nodded, enlightened. He was content to stay silent, let her think him incautious. As something came to mind, he asked curiously, "Do you actually have any poison on hand? Potent poison."

Her brows furrowed. "Why?"

"Just wanted to try something," Argrave shrugged. Anneliese glared at him, and he laughed. "Well, never mind. She won't let me."

"Do not act as though this is some overbearing interference," Anneliese chided him, setting the teapot down. "You speak of poison."

Argrave sighed. "I'm sorry." He stayed silent for a bit, then poked her in the ribs. "You can't deny you're curious, though. What would happen?"

Anneliese swatted his hand away playfully, and then Elenore cleared her throat to break them up. "You wanted to discuss something with me?"

"Right," Argrave spun the cup about with his hands, unembarrassed. "Want to make money?"

"Usually," Elenore nodded. "I think everyone can say that, though."

"I got some other stuff from the place I got your little gift from," Argrave said. "I need some discrete appraisers to take a look at them. Order of the Rose items, enchanted? Some items from the Archduke's Palace, too, in the wetlands. Some of them will be incredibly valuable, both personally and financially speaking. I'd like to entrust them with you. Ideally, they'd be turned around in a week. What I don't keep, I give to you to sell."

"A week?" Elenore placed her hands on the table, bronze tapping against the wood. "That's—"

"More than manageable for you. Don't act as though it'll be costly," Argrave interrupted. "You make the bulk of your money from unlicensed spellcasters who can't get into the Order of the Gray Owl. You've got... I don't know. Probably hundreds here," Argrave waved his hands. "The majority of what I need is combat-oriented. There'll be a lot of utility enchantments you can sell at a very high price."

"Combat-oriented," Elenore repeated. "Commanding troops into battle, perhaps?"

Argrave smiled. "Later, certainly."

"I'll take a look at them," Elenore nodded.

"Good. I presume Rancor will crack open soon. Beyond that, I was wondering if you had any seeds that grow more mystical plants on reserve for this place. Food for Anneliese's bird, you see," Argrave pointed to her with his thumb. "I'll pay."

"Certainly. I don't have details—you'll need to speak to someone else. I trust them, worry not." Elenore nodded, then pursed her lips. "Speaking of animals.... what do you think of dogs?"

Argrave frowned. "Is this code? Are you talking about House Quadreign? That's their heraldry, after all." Argrave shrugged. "One of their daughters is an exceptional mage, but other than that... not much of note."

"A dog doesn't remind you of anything else," Elenore continued, leaning in a bit more.

Perplexed, Argrave looked to Anneliese—she gave no obvious signals of what Elenore might be driving at, implying the question wasn't an emotional one.

"I don't know. A bit messy, overfriendly... they're fun sometimes. Hard to stay sad when you've got a big dog to hug." Argrave cast a spell, and his Brumesingers dropped out of his coat, moving to stand up on the table. "Look at these guys, though. Food's easy to get, no mess, quiet, ridiculously adorable..." Argrave ran his hands across their face, scratching between their giant ears. The four of them competed for his hand. "Hardly a contest."

Elenore kept her hand on the table, observing in silence. "They are cute," he heard her say, so quiet it was almost inaudible.

Argrave heard it, though. He sent the Brumesingers towards Elenore, causing her to lean back cautiously. After a second, her hand stretched out. One of the foxes practically shoved its head into her hand.

Then, the princess pulled her hand back. "It would be best if you head off before others arrive. I have some things to attend to, and this was promised to be a short meeting," she said neutrally. "I will send some trustworthy people to handle what we spoke of. If you'd like to minimize contact with other parties, I can arrange that."

Argrave smiled and tapped the table. Perhaps he should have been expecting this sort of reaction.

"Until our next scheduled exchange of stiff business propositions, then," he rose while quipping, and the Brumesingers scurried back to hide away in his heavy gray duster. Her question of dogs lingered on his mind. He did not feel he could dismiss it so easily... and yet nothing came to mind. "Be careful. Remember what I warned about," he said as he left.

Anneliese and Argrave exited out into the greenhouse. As they walked, Argrave asked, "What was the dog thing about? Any ideas?"

"Curiosity. Uncertainty. Beyond that... little else." Anneliese looked to Argrave. "I cannot say it is something major."

Argrave nodded. "I can't, either. That's what bothers me."

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Ruleo sat on a railing, watching the man with the spear wander throughout the gray stone city of Dirracha. This settlement was giant—it was a great ring that encircled a mountain, the Dragon Palace of the royal family overlooking the buildings like some guardian... or prison warden. This man, whoever he was, had clearly not been around here before. He wandered, following some directions to various locations. It might've been difficult to follow, but the spear he bore made him quite identifiable and Ruleo kept track of him without issue.

His lack of direction marked him as foreign to the city, and as much was evident from when Ruleo saw his face. Though his quarry wore baggy, concealing clothing and blended in with the crowd very well, Ruleo had caught a few glimpses of the man's face. His skin was darker than those of Vasquer and bore

golden tattoos, some marred by scars. Ruleo travelled frequently and had seen his kind before—he was from the Burnt Desert. Not many of them made it past the Lionsun Wall, and even fewer of them were tame enough to survive very long in Vasquer.

Ruleo catalogued what this wayward tribal was doing. The places that he entered all had the markings of the Gray Owl, and he bought materials from them. Considering that he was a foreigner, Ruleo found it quite unlikely that this man was a Wizard of the Order. Perhaps he was a mage of a high caliber, and Ruleo simply saw an illusion. The notion was far-fetched, and so he dismissed it.

If the wayward tribal wasn't part of the Order, he was buying something on someone's behalf—after all, each time he left an Order-marked shop, he had something new. Ruleo knew of this process. The Wizard of the Order would imprint their magical signature on a document using their badges, and servants would use it to purchase items in their stead. It was a relatively common thing.

And since it was common, it was Ruleo's primary lead.

If he could get his hands on the document bearing the magical signature... even if he wasn't part of the Order himself, Ruleo had a few trustworthy contacts who might be able to get the signature checked, see who it belonged to. It might be a dead-end. Or... it might tell him a lot. He supposed it was solely chance.

Instinct told him Elenore was preparing for something. The way she talked, the matter with Rancor, the questions about Argrave... the more he thought about it, the more it stuck in his mind. She'd offered an incredibly generous offer for information on Rancor. Ruleo felt that a storm was coming. Gathering information had kept him alive in the past. And right now, he saw a sort of a lifeline.

The obstacle to that was lifting it off this wayward tribal. Considering the man brought a spear, he was probably a warrior, not at all used to dealing with covert operations. Even then, if he came from Elenore's greenhouse, he was probably associated with her. Ruleo wanted to get information quietly, not provoke a good business partner.

Ruleo opened his pouch, reaching in. He pulled out a severed hand. Where its wrist began, an eyeball roamed about, searching. He set it down, and it scurried away. He had made that necromantic creature with Order of the Rose spells. It knew his will, and could reason well enough to do this job risk-free.

Ruleo turned around, content to let his creation do his work or fail. He crested a corner, looking for a safe place to relax, when an unexpected flash of black tinged with purple entered his view at eye level. He raised his arm instinctively—his gauntlets were artifacts and could take blows well.

Yet whatever was coming at him distorted in the air, warping as dancing purple lights faded in its wake. The thing—Ruleo now realized it was a glaive—struck him right beneath the armpit. The power behind the blow was tremendous and Ruleo took to the air, slamming into a nearby building. He expected to feel warm blood flowing down his side... yet didn't.

"Look at that. Felt like hitting straw. Guess well-enchanted armor does make you stronger," the tribal mused, spinning his glaive until it was ready to strike again. Ruleo saw he was missing fingers. "You're following me. I don't think it's to ask me for a drink, either." The man braced, ready to swing. "Talk. Elsewise, the next blow won't be with the blunt side."

Ruleo rose up, crouching while remaining non-threatening. That one blow might've shattered his ribs if not for his armor. Winded, Ruleo held his hands out, watching the glaive while remaining silent. His eyes darted around, looking for the bag that the tribal had been holding—it was sheltered in a small alcove, fully blocked by the tribal's body. In other words, difficult to snatch easily.

"White eyes, dark hair... definitely a memorable appearance. You can talk now, or I can ask a certain Bat, and I'll learn everything I need to know about you. Maybe you're already acquainted, and that's why you're following me." The tribal took another step. "You can talk to me. I can be a nice guy if I get what I want. Think of me like your dad. One of your siblings has been naughty. If you tell, I won't punish you." He smiled. "Not a bad deal, huh?"

Ruleo eyed the black glaive with bizarre purple runes on its surface, then the bag just behind the tribal. In his peripheries, the glaive started to move. Its very figure was blurry. Rather than try to block again, Ruleo kicked off the wall into a roll, dodging completely. The tribal adeptly redirected his glaive so it wouldn't slam against the wall. He stepped in pursuit of Ruleo, cornering him once again. Ruleo had to admit—no options for retreat, no witnesses... this tribal had chosen his battlefield well.

"Let's put the glaive down, yeah?" Ruleo held his hand out slowly. "I'm not following you. I don't know why you're taking swings at me."

"Uh huh, yeah," Durran nodded. "You pull that innocent act with the old ladies, not with me. It's no coincidence I see you lurking, eyeing me from blocks away. I made circles around the damned streets to be sure I wasn't being paranoid—you were so caught up in admiring my strut you didn't even realize we'd been looping the same place. I'm flattered I've got an admirer, but I think it's about time for the confession."

Ruleo shifted on his feet, realizing now that the wayward tribal might not have been lost in Dirracha after all. He watched the man, debating what happened next. Deescalate the situation? Stick with his plan, try and distract the tribal while his necromantic creation stole the paper? Whatever it was, he needed to choose quickly.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 239: The Controlled Meeting

"I'm thinking you and I work for the same person," Ruleo waved his hand between the two of them, keeping his eyes far off the black bag that was his target. "Let's just take it easy."

Durran laughed. "I highly doubt that. But since you think so, why don't you spill your guts to me? Who do we work for, mister colleague?"

"The Bat," Ruleo held his hands steady.

Durran studied him, running that through his head. Had Elenore sent this man to watch him? Something about it sounded wrong. He'd spoken to her guards as he left—they'd seemed more cooperative than suspicious, and he'd told them precisely what he intended to do. And besides... this man would know Durran worked for Argrave, not Elenore. Elsewise, why would he be watching him?

"How about we go to her together, then?" Durran planted his glaive on the ground. "We can sort out this misunderstanding, ease my suspicions. Might save your life."

On the other side of the confrontation...

Ruleo felt he was getting a handle on things. What were his options? Try and escape, for one. He felt he could. He had plenty of tricks up his sleeve. Or two... he could play along with this tribal, return to Elenore, confess his sins. Ideally, his necromantic creation would do its duty, steal the paper with the magic signature. But if Ruleo's hunch was right, and this was something big she was keeping secret... Elenore might not let him walk away unscathed. She might not let him walk away at all.

Playing along is too dangerous, Ruleo concluded. *You made a mess of things. Cut your losses. Get away.*

"Let's go together, then," Ruleo nodded, lowering his hands to his side.

"Really? Well... not what I was expecting," the tribal seemed surprised. "Let's—"

Ruleo thrust his hand into his pocket and threw out powder. At once, Durran raised his hand and cast a spell of wind. Before the two could meet, Ruleo cast a spell of his own—a simple E-rank ignition spell. The powders roared to life, exploding into loud yet largely ineffectual sparks that scattered from the wind spell. It was only a distraction. Ruleo circled around, rearing his arm back for a punch. Durran was, as Ruleo had expected, prepared for that.

The tribal blocked the punch with the shaft of his glaive and a deafening ring echoed out. Durran quickly kicked at Ruleo's gut, and the two disentangled. The tribal cast a spell at Ruleo as he retreated. A wolf of fire roared out, and Ruleo felt he had ample time to get away.

The black glaive cut through the spell, though, and the spell wreathed around the blade unnaturally. The flames carried with the swing of the glaive far beyond where they typically might, and Ruleo desperately shielded with his gauntlets. The fire whipped at his face, and he heard his skin sizzle.

Pushing past the pain of the burn, Ruleo covertly tossed a hook attached to a very thin line at the closed bag the tribal had been carrying.

"Quite some gauntlets you got," Durran looked at the dent in his glaive's shaft from it had been struck earlier.

"We made a lot of noise. Militiamen and maybe royal guards will be here if we keep at it like this," Ruleo said as he healed the burn on his face. "I'll tell them you tried to steal my bag. They'll believe me over you—I might look like a thug, but you're from the Burnt Desert. Nothing against you, but I'll take whatever opportunity I can get."

"A convincing argument," Durran said without hesitation.

The tribal stepped away and grabbed the bag, closing it and rushing away. Ruleo was surprised the man so quickly believed him. Even still, Ruleo pulled tight on the string with the hook. It caught on the bag, opening it up and causing the contents to explode out. Durran was caught off-guard, but Ruleo had been the initiator and sought his target with razor-focus. The thin paper with a black splotch across it danced in the air like a leaf, and Ruleo seized it quickly.

Triumphant, Ruleo turned to flee. Yet the second his sprint began, two armored men walked up before him, swords ready. He tried to stop himself quickly, but one reached out and caught his wrist. The other

coordinated well, seizing Ruleo beneath the shoulder in a way that immobilized his arm. He felt cold steel at his throat and craned his neck to avoid being cut.

“The Bat would like a word,” one of the men said, laxing the tightness of the blade. “Let’s go together.”

His breathing heavy, Ruleo dropped the piece of paper. He gritted his teeth and stared at his captors as they helped him to his feet. Behind, the tribal walked up to him.

“Good fight. Clever thing you did, using a fisherman’s line... call me a coward if you will, but the moment I saw you, I sent a signal to these lovely gentlemen just as they asked me to,” Durran retrieved the paper with the magic signature and held it up in the air. “Like you, I take any opportunity I can get. Maybe we’ll talk again soon.”

#####

Elenore observed Ruleo, bound to a stake before her and largely stripped of personal possessions. She was not in her greenhouse—rather, she was at another private location. Though bound, Ruleo was still a mage, so spellcasters she trusted were nearby in case he tried something. Additionally, his hands were bound in such a way they could only face downwards.

Argrave had insisted that Elenore watch out for traitors, and Ruleo was one of the first suspects that came to mind. He had no genuine loyalty to her beyond the fact that she offered him significant wealth at times. Indeed, he probably bore some dislike towards most of Vasquer given what had been done to him. She supposed she couldn't deem this a true betrayal of her, not until she verified things... it was merely curiosity of what she had hidden. Ruleo had good instincts, it would seem.

“Last I checked, following people under my protection is not at all related to looking into Rancor,” Elenore began, leaning forward somewhat until her eyeless sockets loomed over the man.

Ruleo looked up to her. “What do you want, an apology? I’m only sorry I got caught,” he concluded, turning his head away. “I’ve already got all the details about Rancor you need. I can give them to you whenever. I think I’ve forfeited my payment... and owe you a debt, now. Would take make us even?”

“Why would you do this?” Elenore continued, crossing her arms. “We’ve been working profitably and consistently for a few months, now. I valued you enough to reveal my identity. So... why?”

Ruleo stayed silent a few moments, then closed his eyes. “It was a gambit to get involved in high politics. You were being heavy-handed. You were hiding something important. You were asking about Argrave earlier—drew my suspicions for long-term moves you might be enacting after Induen’s death. Mostly just a hunch, something to occupy my time. I overestimated myself... or maybe underestimated you. Either way, I’m only sorry I got caught,” he repeated in closing, opening his eyes once more.

Elenore laid her hands flat against one another, her bronze rings clattering. “I find it difficult to continue a relationship in which there is little trust. Considering how much you know of me and my operation...”

Elenore trailed off as something entered her hearing. She sat up straighter, paying attention. Her hearing was better than most, having been honed over the years in light of the loss of one of her senses. It became more succinct—whistling, and footsteps.

Soon enough, Durran entered. Elenore turned her head to him and said in annoyance, "Must you make so much noise?"

"Just happy. Is that a crime?" he said, undeterred. He waved a bag in his hands. "Hey. Told you we'd meet again. You gave me quite a bit of heartache. Broke my bag. You have no idea how difficult it is to haul things about in a torn bag."

"Altogether, things ended much worse for me," Ruleo said, his light cackle escaping for a few moments.

Durran clicked his tongue. "True enough. Can't be too bad if you're laughing, though."

"What did our mutual friend decide?" Elenore asked Durran, cutting into their conversation. She had no time to waste on banter. "It concerns his privacy. I'll leave the decision to him."

"Well..." Durran trailed off, rubbing his hands together. He pointed at Ruleo, bound on the floor. "You're Ruleo, aren't you?"

Elenore hid her surprise by covering her mouth. She had deliberately told her people not to disclose Ruleo's name to Argrave, doubly to preserve the man's life and to answer a question she had. Elenore had gotten her answer; Argrave knew Ruleo, meaning he did recognize him by Durran's description alone. Had he been lying about being ignorant of the incident with the dogs? She could not puzzle that out.

"I am," Ruleo answered unaffectedly, likely assuming Elenore had simply told Durran.

"So you are," Durran nodded. "Well, that simplifies things. Leader man wants you to live. He thinks you'd be of great use in this matter with Rancor."

Elenore observed Durran, using her newfound perception to scan his body. She did not see the wisdom behind Argrave's decision, at least practically speaking. Though she preferred to make no enemies, disagreements like the one between Argrave and Ruleo were inevitable. It was better not to leave active antagonists alive, in Elenore's experience—they could deal damage in the future. Ruleo could certainly be an impediment for Argrave's future, minor or major.

Ruleo sized up Durran. "So, you're the ones spurring the Bat towards Rancor."

"She has a name. A rather nice one, too: Elenore." Durran stepped forward and knelt down. "I think I understand leader man on this one. You're like me. Someone who was controlled. At least, so he claims."

Ruleo frowned. "Don't be vague. What do you mean, 'like you?'"

"If I'm not vague, he'll get mad at me. When he's mad at me, buildings tend to fall down," Durran shook his head. "If you really are like me, I think you can get a lot done."

Ruleo looked to Elenore. "Well... hard to sell my skills when I'm bound to a stake after getting my efforts tossed to the wind, but yeah, I'm fairly confident," he smiled.

Durran rose to his feet. "Do you know how old Rancor is?" Durran spread his hands out, letting the silence fall. "It's 873 years old."

“Old as the kingdom,” Elenore noted.

“Where is this claim coming from?” Ruleo said disbelievingly.

“You probably know...” Durran kneeled once more. “Rancor’s base is in the old city. The buried city. The city this one was built atop,” he pointed to the ground.

Elenore focused on Ruleo for his reaction. After a second, he shrugged. “If you know so much, why do you want people like me to look into it? Doesn’t make sense.”

Durran looked at Elenore pointedly. His words confirmed that Argrave’s knowledge had been correct from the beginning—something was suspicious about Rancor’s inner circle. Her question now was why Argrave had pointed her in this direction.

“I know that look,” Durran pointed at Elenore. “It’s the look that says, ‘how does he know so much?’ I probably had that on my face quite a few times.” Durran laughed and waved his fingers. “I think that’s going to be the least bizarre thing you hear this week. Let me ask—who’s the oldest person you’ve ever spoken to?”

“I don’t know. Some Magister, most likely,” Elenore shook her head, growing irritated by how rapidly the conversation jumped from subject to subject. “Are you implying...?”

“Yeah. Our mutual friend—he wants you to talk to someone very old in Rancor’s base. Other than him, you’re the only one here who can communicate with this fellow.”

Elenore shifted her head to the side. She didn’t like the vagary, but she felt it best to play along for now. “Perhaps you’d best tell me all you know, Ruleo. Even if Durran’s friend wants you to live, I’m not so forgiving. I see no reason to let a liability free. And even if Rancor has a base in the old city, I see no reason to disrupt my dealings with them of yet.”

“Fair enough,” Ruleo nodded. “I gambled. I lost. Now, I pay up.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 240: Imprisoned Snake

“Things were as you claimed,” Elenore told Argrave, her hands entwined as they laid across the table before her. In the past few days, she had integrated the bronze jewelry into her movements, and now already had a practiced grace even with the ungainly objects on her fingers and wrists.

“I see,” Argrave said nonchalantly, smiling at Anneliese as she filled his cup with tea.

“Rancor is heavily involved in human trafficking. Captured victims never left the city, though, so it was difficult to monitor. On top of that, they were the primary exporters of a vicious alchemical drug. These were both matters I was looking into already... they were attracting undue attention from authorities, disrupting things.” Elenore tapped her fingers against the table. “Yet you gave me their source directly. Rancor is being dealt with as we speak, with Ruleo heading things per your recommendation. I appreciate you placing him in debt to me. Now, I’d like to know why you asked me to clear my schedule today.”

Argrave sipped the tea at once, savoring the warmth in the cold winter morning. He never liked fruity teas like this one, but the warmth itself was nice. "I think Durran told you," he said as he set the cup down, staring Elenore in the face.

"I will speak to someone old," Elenore nodded. "As though that explains anything at all."

"Not just that," Durran chimed in. "Someone only you two can communicate with," his fingers waved between the two of them.

Argrave placed his elbows on the table as he leaned in. "Vasquer. What do you actually know about her?"

Elenore frowned. "Don't launch into a story to defle—"

"The snake, not the kingdom," Argrave held his hand out to interrupt. "She fought alongside Felipe I. Why? For what purpose? What happened afterwards? It's just a hole in the histories."

Elenore's brows rose, and she took a deep breath. "You mean to say with these allusions... Rancor houses Vasquer itself?"

"Yes," Argrave nodded. "The majority of its upper-echelon members captured her, once. They're vampires. A very old coven. Once your men deal with them, we're going to talk to her. You're going to get some answers. I'm going to confirm what I already know to be true."

Elenore looked greatly disturbed. She turned her head to the side, then faced him again with conviction. "What happened to you?"

"Me?" Argrave placed his hands to his chest.

"Livia. Does that name mean anything to you?"

Caught off-guard by the non-sequitur, Argrave ran the name through his memory.

Elenore laughed as Argrave stayed silent. "That's your mother's name you're struggling to remember. Or Argrave's mother's name, at least."

Argrave frowned. He did recognize the name now, but it was too late—the milk had been spilled. Trying to salvage it, he said calmly, "She died when I was young."

"Eight. She died when you were eight. You're twenty, perhaps twenty-one now," Elenore told him. "I've been looking into you, Argrave. People knew you here in Dirracha. But no one knows the person I speak to now," she shook her head. "The profile is entirely different. Your character does not match."

Argrave remained steadfast. "People change," he suggested. "I was at the Order of the Gray Owl for two years."

"Your heart is unnatural. Your eyes... I've observed Ruleo's necromantic creations last he was here. Their eyes have the same color," Elenore listed out. "Now you come to me with these unnatural knowings... you slip into the heart of this place without being challenged and tell me the secrets of Rancor as though you are a part of it."

Argrave shook his head. "These are far-fetched conclusions, Elenore."

"My logic is sound," she disagreed. "What is your game? What do you want from me?" she asked, voice trembling slightly.

Durran leaned in and said firmly, "We've told you from the beginning. Argrave wants you as an ally."

"You give me vague warnings to build my trust... treat me kindly to curry favor... reveal secrets to establish usefulness and reliability... I cannot afford to trust it. Gifts are the most expensive things," she shook her head.

Argrave took a deep breath. "Elenore, we're on the verge of putting all the obfuscation to bed. I just need you to follow along a little longer. After, I can divulge everything. I fear you won't believe me if I tell you now."

Elenore rose—she was wearing her prosthetic feet. "I appreciate your gift, Argrave, both of this jewelry and of Rancor's activities. However, I think this will be the end of our association."

Argrave felt battered by the volatile shift. "What?" he asked, though she was already moving to leave.

Galamon stood aside to let her pass. Argrave stared at the doorway in shock, trying to piece together a course of action.

Durran leaned back in the chair. "I wonder if she realizes she left her own bedroom," he mused. "Wonder where she'll go."

Argrave looked to Anneliese for guidance. "She was scared. Terrified," Anneliese told him.

Hearing that, Argrave could only rub his forehead in confusion. He feared chasing after her might exacerbate the issue—perhaps when she discovered Vasquer in Rancor's base, she would come to him again. That might be his opportunity.

"Well, that's enough for me." Durran rose to his feet and grabbed Argrave's shoulder. "Hey. This time, destroy a smaller tower," he joked, then ran out of the room.

"What...?" Argrave began, but Durran had already left. "That...! Anneliese? Starsparrow," he said, scrambling to his feet. He knocked over the wooden chair.

"My advice? Let him go," Galamon contributed.

Argrave looked at Galamon. "Why in the world would I do that?"

Galamon stared at Argrave without any words to offer in answer. Flabbergasted, Argrave looked to Anneliese.

"I would agree," Anneliese said after a second.

Argrave looked between the two of them, completely lost. Galamon picked up the fallen chair and corrected it, gesturing kindly for Argrave to sit.

#####

"Hey. Hey!" Durran shouted, rushing after Elenore.

The princess barely paused, turning her head from right to left with tightly clenched teeth. She stopped and turned. "Why do you follow me?!" she demanded.

"Why else?" Durran questioned, stepping slower and breathing heavily as he stopped his run. "To fix things."

Elenore shook her head and turned, resuming walking down the path. Her prostheses clicked out in angry haste against the stone pathway. Durran rushed ahead of her.

"Come on. You don't even know where you're going, and you know it," Durran insisted, holding his hands out.

Elenore scoffed and stopped fully now that she was blocked. "What would you know of me?"

"I know you're scared. You're not scared you'll get hurt—well, not physically. You're afraid of accepting anyone in, allowing yourself to be vulnerable," Durran pointed to her.

Elenore laughed angrily. "Don't speak such shallow, rehearsed lines intended to enchant some feisty barmaid with father issues. You speak to a person who was blind not days ago," she said, temper flaring. "Have you any idea what that is like? Every person that comes before you leaves you vulnerable. You can hear them, smell them, feel them... but that does *nothing* for you.

"They could stab you, and you would have no opportunity to even see the attack coming. They could set your hair aflame, or hurl boiling water at you, or any number of terrible things you might concoct. I sat alone in the unending sightlessness, waiting for the world to do as it pleased to me. 'Allowing myself to be vulnerable?' My existence was vulnerability itself. I have courted it for over a decade now," she finished, voice a tight whip.

Durran shifted on his feet. "Did people do those things to you, set your hair aflame, the like?"

"That-that's beside the point," Elenore waved her hand, bronze bracelets clattering against each other. "You have no idea what I've been through. I got where I am by avoiding ill portents like those that surround Argrave, if that even is his name."

"Does anyone know what you've been through?" Durran questioned. "Other than yourself, I'm betting the answer is no."

"You're correct," she said with a droll anger. "So step aside, and let me continue as I always have."

"Blind in a greenhouse of beauty?" Durran snapped back. "I'm afraid it's too late. You can't go back. Like you said, gifts can be the most expensive things. The price is suffering our presence as we help each other."

Elenore swallowed. Then, she reached for her fingers, prying free the bronze claw rings. She collected them in her hand, then removed the bracelets, the necklace, the earrings... each and all clattering to the floor.

"There," she said. "I think that puts an end to things."

Elenore walked forward, expecting to bump into Durran and push him aside. Instead, nothing was there. Perhaps he'd stepped aside, or perhaps she'd guessed wrong. She proceeded forth with unduly

confident steps in blackness, trying her best to roughly maintain a straight line. Suddenly, a branch bumped her head and she ducked. Her prosthetic feet offered poor maneuverability, and she slid and fell. Her body turned in a manner she could not place, and before she knew it her legs were propped in the air by some bush and the back of her head was planted to the ground.

The princess struggled vainly to get up, but her position was quite awkward. After a time of struggle, a voice cut in. "You want some help?"

Elenore said nothing. She tried to feel out her surroundings, and once she had a decent feel for them, approached the task smartly. She grabbed a low-hanging branch and started to pull herself up... yet with a snap, all her effort was undone, and she came crashing back down.

"Do you want some help?" Durran asked again, tone dry.

"Yes, damn you," Elenore finally said.

At once, she felt an arm wrap behind her waist and pull her up, propping her on her feet. She was dizzy and staggered a little, and before she knew it, Durran led her somewhere to sit.

Elenore sat in embarrassed silence, waiting for the speech to come. 'See? Just like I said, you need to ask for help,' Durran would say. She could predict the whole speech coming. 'You cannot walk alone. Together, we can both walk forward, aiding the other. It's what they do in the Burnt Desert, to keep each other from veering off course. There's no shame in asking for help.' She could not recall the last time she'd lost her composure so much. She felt ashamed, humiliated beyond measure.

"Here," Durran said. "I picked them up."

Elenore felt cold metal against her hand and grasped the claw ring once more. She didn't want to put it on. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to be dealing with this situation.

"Fine," Durran said, taking it back. They sat in silence for a moment. Then, she heard a buckle unfasten, heard something fall to the floor, and tensed for what might be happening. "Woah. Good gods. This is a weird experience."

Elenore turned her head but saw nothing as ever. "Are you... are you wearing it?"

"Yeah, I am." He gasped. "It's... gods, I can perceive my blood flowing through my hand. How the hell did you adapt to this so quickly?"

"*Why* are you wearing it?" she asked incredulously.

"Why am I not wearing it? You don't want it," Durran rebuked. "Huh. With my eyes closed, it's... wow."

Elenore turned her head to the side, listening as Durran rattled off his experiences with the relics. After a while, he just kept repeating, 'wow.' Something about the way he said it started to get to her. Finally, she laughed and fumbled out, ripping it from his finger after a brief struggle.

"You stole from me," he said, wounded.

"I hate you," she said, slipping the ring back on.

"I think you're okay," Durran retaliated. "Only okay, though."

Elenore took some time to gather her composure and wash away the shame from that encounter. Finally, she turned and said, "Thank you for helping me."

"Hey, alright," he said nonchalantly. "Let's talk hypotheticals for a minute, though. Let's say, for the sake of argument, Argrave isn't your brother, despite the fact he's got the same freakishly tall body that most of you Vasquers have."

Elenore took more of the discarded pieces of bronze out of Durran's grasp. "Yes?" she pressed.

"Considering your family, shouldn't that be a point in his favor?"

Elenore laughed and said nothing for a while after. As they settled into silence, Elenore asked, "Why do you follow him? Really?"

"He's doing something important," Durran said. "And my family disowned me. I... I don't know." Durran clicked his tongue. "Sometimes it feels like he's my brother."

Elenore watched Durran for a while. The distant look on his face was quite sincere. Yet then, Elenore heard rushed footsteps. She rose to attention, trying her best to fix her appearance.

"Princess Elenore!" a man she recognized shouted, coming to a stop while breathing heavily. "Thank the gods I found you... while we were storming Rancor's headquarters... Ruleo discovered a gargantuan golden snake, still alive, and imprisoned. Rancor had been keeping it there. The thing is as thick as an elephant and miles long, my princess!"

Elenore clenched her hands into fists.