

Jackal 241

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 241: Vasquer

"It's a wonder you three fit at all," Durran noted as they rolled down the road in a tightly packed and humble carriage.

Moonlight made its way through the thin decrepit cloth that covered the top of the carriage, illuminating a group crammed left-to-right on one side: Galamon, Argrave, and Anneliese respectively. Argrave was awkwardly holding his shoulder up so it was not jammed against Galamon's plate armor, while Anneliese contentedly peered out at the city, comfortably nestled against an accommodating Argrave.

Opposite them was Durran and Elenore. Elenore wore a hood and a completely black mask to disguise herself. The bronze jewelry she wore didn't need exposure to work—it could see through walls, even. As if taunting them, Durran put one of his legs up. There was ample room on his side. Argrave didn't care one whit if Durran put his feet anywhere—after his talk with Elenore, she returned with a change of heart. That meritorious feat would not soon be forgotten.

"Better than driving," said Galamon.

Argrave chuckled quietly, briefly reminded of the days back when they travelled and fought with the Lily Lurkers. "That week was something. Remember running from that horde of the bugs?"

"No," Elenore turned her head. "I don't remember."

"What, you don't want to hear me reminisce?" Argrave's smile was undampened. "Sourpuss," he called her.

"I'm—" Elenore began fiercely but paused and took a deep breath. When she spoke next, her tone was businesslike once again. "Since you've been proven right already, can you at least tell me what we'll find down here?"

"Vasquer," Argrave told her plainly once again, then winced when the carriage bounced and Galamon's pauldron dug into his shoulder. He was not especially worried about how this meeting might go—Nikoletta could converse with Vasquer, so he had some experience about this matter to rely on. Things might go differently... but the giant snake was not dangerous.

Argrave saw Elenore was annoyed by his simple answer, so he smiled and continued, "Don't worry, things aren't dangerous. No traps. I imagine Ruleo has been thorough in his cleansing—he always is. I think some of the older members of the vampiric coven will still be alive deeper in, but they'll never leave their little sanctuaries. They have defensive measures in an old catacomb—poison. Your men will be stopped there, I guarantee it. I have something in mind for that."

Elenore gestured towards him. "And what of Ruleo, your history with him?"

Argrave shrugged. "Has to be resolved someday. Put a stop to any conflict."

"You essentially murdered his father," Elenore said dryly.

Argrave scratched his chin. He always hated hearing about his old self. "I did," he agreed.

"You want to stop any conflict? Stop his heart," Elenore suggested to him.

"Not my way," Argrave shook his head.

"Mmhmm. Yet you agree to having murdered his father. And these rumors of kinslaying are baseless, I suppose?" Elenore asked wryly.

Argrave bit his lip, realizing he'd been called out. "Induen's dead because he tried to solve all of his problems by domination or destruction. He was cancer growing on the world." Argrave turned his head to meet her eyes, but his gaze fell upon only her jet black mask "I think Ruleo can do good work if kept alive."

Elenore kept her head facing forward. Maybe it was only Argrave's imagination, but he thought she was observing him, judging him... maybe it was her reputation, but Argrave thought all of his secrets might be revealed in seconds.

"Ruleo will be kept away. I'll send him to the palace to observe things up there before we enter," Elenore concluded. "I think my answers come before this potential resolution. I hope I get them," she said pointedly.

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After their lowkey carriage travel through the dead of night in Dirracha, they arrived at a place at the foot of the mountain leading up to the Dragon Palace. The mountain wall was steep here, forming a natural barrier from the higher reaches of the mountains. The mountain was not what was interesting—instead, they headed underground, wearing cowls and robes to hide their identities. Little use, given their size... but every bit helped.

Though Elenore's servants were prepared to lead the princess down to Rancor's conquered territory, she relied on Argrave to give her an escort to disguise the effects of the new jewelry that she had received. The princess seemed insistent to keep her partially recovered sense a secret for the time being—Argrave thought it reasonable, being that he had done much the same thing in the past. Keeping her cards close at hand even with her own loyal servants proved she was taking Argrave's advice to be cautious seriously.

Rancor's headquarters was a cleverly disguised place, seeming an ordinary gentleman's club on the outside—as they walked through, Argrave saw it had all manner of high-class drinks, plenty of books for the average high-class aristocrat of the capital to read, and ample lounge space for all to socialize. An enchanted glass display meant to keep high-class liquor secure and displayed hid a stairway down into Rancor's base of operations.

At the head of the stairway down, Galamon scratched at his nose behind the cowl. "Blood's thick ahead. Mostly fresh, but some centuries old."

"Well, no need for the commentary," Argrave told Galamon, hoping that Elenore wouldn't ask too many questions about why his companion would say such strange things.

It appeared that this place had some strange effect on Galamon just as the area housing the vampire coven below Nodremaid had: his tongue was looser than normal. Galamon nodded, catching Argrave's point, and they began their trek into the underground.

Argrave kept his arm upright so that Elenore could hold on as he escorted her. The fact she remained silent unnerved him a bit, but he only remained arm up and available. She didn't like touching people all that much, Argrave knew. He related and acted accommodatingly, even if that dislike of his had subsided the past few months.

The place was a grim and winding stone complex. It was well-maintained, though gruesomely decorated. If the upstairs had been the aristocrat's gentleman's club, this place was much the same: a gathering spot for well-to-do vampires with pompous attitudes harboring a desire for close relations with similarly well-to-do vampires. Instead of high-class liquor, they kept high-class people.

To say the least of the scene... Argrave was glad he had not arrived at this place first.

Elenore's people were tending to the former captives of the vampires. The majority of them seemed mentally unstable, having been used as veritable drinking taps for years. Other, fresher victims showed relief and remorse. If only all could be so lucky.

Argrave studied Elenore for her reaction to the horrific happenings around them. Though her face was blocked by a cowl and mask, he noted her grip on his arm was a bit firmer—a subconscious reaction, perhaps, though of anger or unease he could not say. She would likely try and find a use for the people who were still sane. Elenore might ransom them back to their families, put others to work. The rest... Argrave could not say. Could they even rejoin society?

Making a mental note to ask Elenore her thoughts later, they proceeded deeper. Past the entrance, the more business-like operations were revealed—distilleries, alchemy labs, great collections of weaponry, and yet more cages. These rooms were littered with corpses, each and all badly mutilated. Vampires did not die easily, and their corpses reflected that. Having seen the earlier rooms and the broken people, he thought being butchered might be a bit too merciful.

"Turn right ahead," Elenore whispered to Argrave.

"What?" Argrave turned his head. "But the path..."

"Do it," she said. "And shut the door."

Argrave obeyed. Durran was the last to enter shut the door behind him, and Elenore moved to sit on a crate. Fortunately, this room was only a storage room of some kind. Argrave wondered what this was about... until he saw her holding her stomach. She was nauseous, Argrave finally placed.

Her display of humanity shattered some of the image of the ruthless spymaster Argrave had in his head. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He wanted to say something to help, thinking back to the things he'd endured at the druid's camp. That was his first taste of gore. First taste of killing.

Before Argrave could act, Durran strode up and crouched before her as she held her stomach. He stared at her face, saying nothing.

"I'm fine," Elenore broke the silence first.

"I can see that," Durran nodded drolly.

"The long stairs were exhausting. I am unused to exercise," she excused. Argrave thought she said it naturally enough it wasn't a lie, but Anneliese tapped his foot with her own to indicate she had been lying.

"Exhausted, huh? I can carry you," Durran offered.

Elenore lifted her head up. "I'm fine," she repeated, making Durran shake his head and laugh.

They waited patiently for Elenore to get her composure once more, and then they left the room. There was one final steep stairway downwards. As though she had some sort of sixth sense, Elenore stalled like something tremendous lurked below. Their descent was slow and cautious. This final stairway was not as well-constructed as the others, and Elenore's prosthetic feet offered no grip or control. It was a laborious and slow process, and Argrave's arm started to grow tired of supporting her.

Yet soon enough... the stairway's ceiling became low enough to see beyond, opening up into a gargantuan room lit by magic lamps on the wall. The majority of Argrave's companions had vocal reactions to the sight before them.

"What? What is it?" Elenore said, panic lining her voice. Her jewelry offered only a complete perception of what was near—she could see nothing that was far away.

"It's Vasquer," Argrave said.

The golden serpent before them was the biggest living thing that Argrave had ever seen. Her shining head alone was the size of an adult elephant, and her body wound in a tightly compacted S-shape for miles and miles. A great mane of feathers began at the back of her head, lining all of her body. These feathers seemed like genuine gold. Her body was trapped, bound by thick steel rings linked to the ground and inscribed with enchantments. Each ring had about ten feet of distance away from the other. A particularly heavy ring kept her mouth contained, and all the others kept her bound nigh immutably. Precise, surgical cuts lined the golden body of the serpent, slipping in between the scales. There, blood was harvested.

A silence slowly settled over the place even with the presence of Elenore's men. A faint stir echoed throughout the room, like a broom against the floor. After a while, Argrave placed what it was. Vasquer was breathing. When he realized that, his eyes met with the serpent's. Like her scales, they were bright and golden... and he swore they saw him.

"Is it..." Elenore began. "Is it before us?"

"It is," Argrave nodded.

He heard Elenore swallow. "Is it..."

"It's safe," Durran assured.

"We have to make contact," Argrave told Elenore. "Then, we can speak to her. You'll know what's coming."

He could feel Elenore shudder as she held his arm. Her grip tightened, and she said, "Let's go. Let me see what you so desperately wanted to show me."

Argrave looked ahead at the serpent. He had been so confident entering here... yet now, faced with the centuries-old beast, he found it a wholly different experience. As ever, Argrave only steeled his courage and advanced, the serpent's breathing growing closer and closer. He was reminded that he, too, could speak with the ancient snake before him. After all, he shared the bond of blood.

And Vasquer might answer.

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Chapter 242: Golden Conduit

Elenore stepped forward, and more of the gargantuan golden snake that was Vasquer entered her range of perception. Though the jewelry Argrave gifted to her had enhanced her life tremendously, she once again felt envy for those that could still see. She could only judge the size of the snake based on what she saw... and its head alone was large enough that she felt cowed.

"Just touch her snout," Argrave instructed her.

She wished to tell him to shut up, but she kept those words locked in her head. She could feel the air move as the snake inhaled into its two nostrils. This snake could eat a wyvern, she was certain—she did not know how the beast was sustained over the years. In truth, she was deathly afraid of touching Vasquer.

Nonetheless, Elenore reached her hand out and rested it upon the tip of her nose. Her first impression was that it felt like touching real gold.

The second impression was a rush of cognition unlike anything she had ever experienced before. Her fear flared, realizing too late this might've been a trap by Argrave... yet as she examined this cognition, she slowly started to grasp what it was. It was not a second internal monologue, per se, but rather a second consciousness—at the very least, a branch of a second consciousness.

Elenore could explore this branch as easily as her own memory. It did not possess words. It was only base thinking without the structure offered by words and numerals to shape and refine memories. Though it took her some time to grasp it... the snake offered Elenore unadulterated curiosity. These branches of curiosity swam about in her mind like sprites, not daring to harm her. And once she perceived that, Elenore found she could offer her own answer.

And so she did. Elenore sent forth her own thoughts, memories, emotions—a summation of her existence as understood by her mind. She surrendered the idyllic years of her childhood, when her father was firm yet generous. She offered the years after Induen's birth, where her father grew cold and distant yet still remained proud of her. And she recounted his descent into low sadism, where she was blinded and awakened to the world in the same turn.

Once these thoughts had been conveyed, a great resonance formed between the two of them. Elenore's emotions echoed back, redoubled by Vasquer's own empathy. She cared for Elenore. She felt sorry for her. She wished her to feel better. The feeling of love was so incontrovertibly real as to shatter many of

the barriers she had built. At once, Elenore's throat seized, and she nearly started to sob. Hearing boots scrape around her kept her grounded, though, and she remained steady and stoic.

With the sadness came an indelible connection to Vasquer. Elenore felt more tied to this snake than any other person she had ever spoken to. She pressed forth once again, mimicking the curiosity Vasquer had sent into her mind—how had this titanic snake ended bound so? Why was she trapped in this den of depravity?

The answer came, detailed and segmented unlike Elenore's crude deluge of thought. Vasquer had been betrayed by her own blood, the second son between Felipe I and herself. This man feared death and envied Vasquer's immortality. The thread of memories led from one to another, each so complicated it made Elenore's head throb.

But she gleaned valuable information. Vasquer had never intended to found a kingdom. She only ever led an order of warriors, each and all dedicated to overthrowing elven cruelty in a time past and preparing for a future Vasquer had only barely survived once before. Elenore questioned what this future was, exactly.

Elenore received her answer in the form of a single scene. In it, the hands of gods and demons both reached down from the skies, grappling with titanic, malformed creatures larger than mountains. Strange men wearing feathered armor Elenore had never seen before battled against armies of unparalleled scale. They battled demons, elementals, golems, corrupted men, elves, and towering mobile trees that formed a roving jungle of carnage. A million men alone must've been fighting... and her vision blocked off at points, so she could not be certain. Behind it all, lording over all this carnage...

Elenore could only distinguish a humanoid form before absolute horror set in and she reeled away, falling to her knees and bloodying them. Argrave knelt down in concern just beside her. There had been no words exchanged with Vasquer until then, yet now, one existed on the tip of her tongue so absolutely it was impossible to forget.

"Gerechtigkeit," Elenore said loudly, cutting past Argrave's words of concern.

Argrave stopped fussing and relaxed his hands. He sat on the floor just beside her. "That's right."

"That... thing. That event, that cataclysm. *That* is what you want my help for?" Elenore asked, feeling the answer was already set in stone.

Argrave adjusted his position until he sat cross-legged. He healed Elenore's bloodied knees with a healing spell as he said, "Precisely so."

Elenore raised her hands to her head, utterly floored by this new knowledge. Her breathing started to quicken as she saw the monumental task he was asking of her. Part of her wished that this truly was some trap designed by Argrave to brainwash her—the alternative was that it was all true, and they would be fighting that thing. Could they...?

"I know what you're thinking," Argrave said, lowering his hand as he finished healing her. "Can we even beat Gerechtigkeit? Seems like a tough customer," Argrave leaned back on his hands. "My answer would have to be, 'Christ, I hope so, otherwise we're all going to the promised land.' Do you see another option?"

Even thinking of that horrific scene spawned revulsion, Elenore found. She took some time to gather herself and her breathing, then felt guilty for leaving Vasquer in silence after parting.

“How did you learn of this? Why are you... why are you trying to stop it? How did you know this would work?” Elenore rattled her questions off one after another, finding they’d only increased now that Argrave had shown her what he intended to.

“So many questions,” Argrave mused as he shook his head. “I’ve got a lot of answers... but how will you know if I’m being honest? How can you tell how I might actually feel about you?”

Elenore’s mind, though overloaded, still worked quickly. She got what he was driving at.

“You want to use Vasquer as a conduit for tacit understanding. Can that...?”

“Since we’re of her bloodline, yes,” Argrave nodded. “Durran, for instance, would just feel a big angry snake and nothing else.”

Elenore thought the claim was dubious at best. As she deliberated on whether or not to go through with it, she realized there was a third party she could ask. She rose again and stepped up back to Vasquer. The branch of cognizance returned. At once, Vasquer displayed sorrow for having shown such a gruesome scene. Elenore, too, offered her sorrow for backing away without a word of goodbye. This amused the giant snake, and even Elenore laughed at her own foolishness.

Elenore conveyed her conversation with Argrave in the strange, mystical communication. The snake returned with an answer, and Elenore pulled her hand away.

“She does not know if you are truly of her bloodline,” Elenore said. “You’ll need to touch her, first.”

Argrave rose to his feet and wiped his gloved hands off. He pulled one glove free without a word. His fingers danced with hesitance, and then he jutted his hand out. At once, his face contorted bizarrely—surprise, shock, discomfort, curiosity... it made Elenore amused until she supposed her face had probably gone through much the same ritual.

After a time of silent communication, Argrave pulled his hand away. His face was that of anger and trepidation, and Elenore wondered what had occurred. His breathing grew a little heavier, and he clutched at his chest.

“Unpleasant... that resonance. Made me confront some things.” Argrave turned his head to Elenore. “Not sure I’m ready for as long a talk as you endured. But... we can gain that tacit understanding you wanted.”

Elenore touched Vasquer once again, and the snake expressed sympathy for Argrave. She did not know if it was merely a sympathetic creature, or if his past was hard... though she kept those thoughts contained. Nevertheless, the snake confirmed what Argrave had said—they could communicate with each other the same way as she had with Vasquer.

A fear and anxiety stronger than any other welled up from an unknown source, and Elenore removed her hand. For some reason, the prospect of learning Argrave’s true intentions was a greater source of anxiety than confronting Vasquer had been.

“Ready and waiting,” Argrave held his hand to Vasquer. “No holds barred. Time to learn the ugly truth of things.”

Elenore didn’t reach her hand out at all. She felt paralyzed.

“Gods above... you threw such a fit and now you’re taking minutes to get the answer you wanted,” she heard Durran call out behind her. “Hurry up. I can’t wait for you to see how wrong you are,” he said confidently.

Durran’s words ignited a quiet fire of anger within her, burning away some of the unease. It did not disappear... but it faded away enough to free herself of that paralysis. Elenore reached her hand out, touching the gold scales of Vasquer.

The feeling did not come instantly. That stoked her anxiety, nearly compelling her to pull her hand away... yet then, she sent an inquiry into Vasquer. All of her hesitancy, doubt, about this situation. It carried with it her fear of abandonment. Even Induen had expressed he would discard her if she displeased him—why would Argrave be different? Why had he come to her?

Uneasy seconds passed. Then... she felt a branch reach out. Though carried by Vasquer... it was not quite Vasquer’s. Elenore accepted it and felt human emotions spring in her mind.

Argrave’s thoughts of her unfolded like a brilliant flower. Pity loomed overhead, like a raincloud over the landscape. He knew her situation—not the common perception given to those at large, but how she was truly butchered. He knew the utter depths of her betrayal—not her father, but the other. She could not deny he understood her situation. That terrified her.

Anxiety was next. Argrave was anxious he would ruin things with Elenore. He feared that if he could not gain her support, all would be lost, and those he loved would perish. He loved all of his companions, she could tell. Barring that... no others.

Dozens of other feelings existed in equal measure. He respected her abilities. He felt nostalgia looking upon her. He felt some minor affection towards her. There was greed, too—he knew the extent of her finances, and how it might service his goal. There was awkwardness. He was her brother, but hesitated to call her his sister in case it might not be appreciated.

Elenore turned her face straight to Argrave. “I tried to kill you. I tried to use Induen to kill you.”

She watched Argrave’s face change—a raised brow, tightened lips... and the emotions came back again through Vasquer. They were unchanged. And running beneath it all, like a river formed of the various currents of emotion... Argrave wanted her to be a part of his journey so that both of them might have a happy ending in this miserable situation.

Elenore’s hand slipped off of Vasquer, like she could keep her arm up no longer. Argrave stepped back, too, staring at her. Having experienced what she had, it felt like she could comprehend every expression he made and what it might mean. She stepped up to him and fell forward, wrapping her arms around his back.

It was quite an awkward embrace. Elenore was a fair bit shorter than he was, reaching only the bottom of his chest. After a time, though, he hunched down and wrapped his arms around her. Durran turned away and scratched at the back of his neck as though he was looking at something he shouldn’t.

“...guess I’m not as big an ass as I thought,” Argrave said quietly.

Elenore could think of nothing to say. She merely felt that this was what she wanted to do... and she could do so without repercussions.

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Chapter 243: Unexpected Truths

Argrave had always been an only child. Well, not ‘Argrave,’ but rather Vincenzo. From the beginning, he hadn’t been quite sure how to treat Elenore. He hadn’t dealt with either sisters or brothers before. On the other hand, he had at least eighty cousins, and their parents had insisted on numerous occasions wherein he was forced to interact with his ridiculously large extended family. Those occasions were probably the reasons he turned out the way he had.

Thus far, he had been treating Elenore much like his cousins. Though he was never rude or unkind, they had always been strangers who happened to be closely related. As far as he was concerned, that was where it ended. Books—and later in life, games—had always been infinitely more interesting and convenient to him than people. Much less likely to disappoint, too. That isn’t to say he didn’t want a reliable friend. The key word there, though, was ‘reliable.’ People are fickle.

Argrave’s hand hovered just above Elenore’s back as she hugged him. He was happy that things had gone as he wanted them to—Elenore didn’t sever things irreparably and seemed more than amenable to close association in the future. He merely hadn’t expecting things to go *quite* this well. He was expecting some significant buildup before things came to this point.

“You... seem to like it there,” Argrave noted, a little unsure of what to do.

“I tried to kill you,” Elenore said, her voice muffled in his duster.

Argrave raised a brow. “You said that already, I hope you know.”

“Why don’t you care?” Elenore pushed him away and lifted her head until her eyeless sockets seemed to gaze upon him.

“Anneliese and I put things together on that front from the beginning,” Argrave scratched his arm, and then put a hand on her shoulder. She was quite bony, he found. “And Induen... well, he wasn’t exactly subtle when we talked. He’d suspected the same, tried to use that fact to win me to his side.”

“Induen... hah, of course,” she lowered her head, biting her lip. After an uncomfortable silence she lifted her head again, fire in her features. “Then why in the world do you trust me so much?” she questioned, voice quiet and tremulous. “Why do you hinge everything on me? Do you expect a different result? Why don’t you care?” she repeated.

I’m the last person to deride others for fratricide, Argrave wanted to say, but he knew most didn’t like those kinds of jokes and felt it was inappropriate given the situation.

Hiding a smile, Argrave said, “Because I know you can still be good. To me, to the world, to whoever the hell,” Argrave shook his head.

“Good,” she scoffed, turning her head.

Argrave shook her shoulder a little to draw her attention back, then said, "You might think it's a joke, but yeah, you can do good. If there was ever a line in the sand between good and evil, I think 'fell calamity that endeavors to destroy everything' is quite obviously on the evil side. Thwarting that is good. Not a particularly complicated equation. I can't afford to hold grudges. I know you've done some pretty cruel things, but now you can do something to outweigh that completely."

Elenore looked like she found it difficult to wrap her head around that. She stepped away, and Argrave spared a glance to Anneliese—she confirmed things were going as well as he thought they were with a thumbs up.

"What is the future you want?" she asked Argrave, back facing him.

"Pretty simple. In my hypothetical future, I'm alive. Everyone I care about is, too."

Elenore turned. "I mean, what is it you hope to achieve by allying with me?"

Argrave nodded, understanding her question now. He deliberated on his answer, running through what he and Anneliese had discussed.

"There is much you don't know, much that Vasquer can tell you," Argrave pointed to the snake, though hesitated to touch her once again. "Much of my aims are in preparation for these coming events. I'll give you the brief version of things: my priority presently is putting an end to this civil war—a decisive victory that minimizes loss of life. Vasquer is a part of that plan. If I can secure her help, she is an undisputed signal of legitimacy that will wipe away almost any stain on my name—bastardry, kinslaying, you name it," Argrave said, keeping his eye on the snake. "She can fight no longer, but then I don't need her to fight."

Elenore crossed her arms. "Then you'll assume the role of king. You've agreed to it already."

Argrave nodded. "Yes. I'll need your help to get the title, obviously, but I'll need it much more after. I don't know what you've seen of Gerechtigheit, what Vasquer has actually shown you... but thousands of problems of his making brew in all of Berendar, like blisters pushing against the skin. There are things that I have to confront in-person for any hope of success. Consequently, my intent was to have you serve as my regent in those absences."

Elenore took a deep breath of surprise, and her fingers danced as she toyed with the notion. "You would have me as regent?"

Argrave stepped forward. "You're hyper-competent. You have the status for the role. No one else fits better."

"A regency is a dangerous thing for a newly crowned king," she warned subtly.

"Yes, a disloyal regent could ostensibly take control of the kingdom," Argrave nodded. "But the stakes are too high to risk disunity. I trust you."

Elenore gestured towards him. "You trust the sister who tried to kill you."

"Tried to have me killed," Argrave waved his hands to dismiss it like it was no big deal. "And you didn't do the best job at it. If we're talking about kinslaying, I've got the better record, here," he said with a smile, then added awkwardly, "That's not a threat, I hope you know, just a joke..."

“Why not the Margrave? Why not Duke Enrico? Nikoletta, or... or even your companions?” she said, searching for more names. “Why in the name of the gods would you choose *me*?”

Argrave didn't skip a beat in answering, “You're better at the job than they are.”

“Do you even want to be king?” Elenore questioned, catching on to something. “I don't think you'd actually care if I took the kingdom. That's my impression of you based off what I... what we experienced with Vasquer.”

“Sharp,” Argrave noted, giving an impressed nod. “I'm a selfish man. I want to live wealthily and do so with those lovely people behind me every step of the way. Out of most jobs, 'king' doesn't sound bad... but it's still a job. Do it poorly, relax a little bit too much...” Argrave ran his finger across his neck. “I'll end up fired.” Argrave shook his head. “I don't know what happens after *Gerechtigkeit* is gone. But all I need is a temporary position of supreme power, and nothing more.”

Elenore swallowed. “You're completely serious.”

“Completely? Hardly,” Argrave shook his head. “Levity is my favorite spice of life. But I am resolved to fight until I die. If I don't fight, I die anyway. Bum deal,” Argrave shrugged.

“But what...” Elenore turned away, running her fingers through her hair. “Why is this happening? *Gerechtigkeit*—what... why?”

Argrave turned his head back to the gargantuan golden snake that seemed to be patiently listening to their conversation. “Those are questions for her. She's the reason I asked you to clear your schedule today—she can explain things far more succinctly and in much more believable terms than I can ever hope to. We have all of the time in the world.”

Elenore crossed her arms, and looked to grow quite uncomfortable. “...time in the world,” she said quietly.

“What?” Argrave asked, stepping closer to hear her better.

“We don't have all the time in the world,” she said a bit louder. “I... what you told me, about a traitor near me. I managed to isolate one leak, managed to draw some information out. Coming here, personally, was intended to spur them into action so that I might get more information. Induen's death led some to believe that my position was greatly weakened, but whoever this leak is connected to... the force they're working with isn't small.”

Argrave frowned and clasped his hands together. “That sounds suspiciously like you're saying some people are coming to hunt you down.”

“That's precisely what I'm saying,” Elenore turned her head to him. “I had intended to... well, never mind. No, I have to say. It's important I be honest,” she said, debating with herself. “I wanted to test how strong your party really was and get information of my foes in one fell swoop. It was also a probe of your loyalty... seems pointless now,” Elenore crossed her arms and shook her head. “The forces I have are abundant. You can stay back, let me subdue them. I'm eager to get to the bottom of things, even if this is most likely to be a dead end.” Elenore sighed. “Still, we'll have to wait and see if I'm right about this at all.”

“We’ll help,” Argrave held his hand out. “Perhaps I ought to show you something, bolster your confidence in me. I can show you why I’ve got a fair bit of resolve fighting against Gerechtigkeit.” Argrave turned his head to the distant entryway.

Elenore tapped her foot against the ground. “Overconfidence got Ruleo bound before me, fearing for his life. Always assume you’re worse than who you fight.”

“Such a sweet thing to say,” Argrave said, distant gaze still on the steep stairway that led to this room.

“I... I’m sorry,” Elenore grew flustered. “Be careful. I’ll help if you need it.”

Argrave put his glove back on. “Rather the opposite of what you used to feel with me, isn’t it?”

“I’m no longer sorry,” Elenore decided, realizing now he was being sarcastic.

Argrave smiled and laughed, and after a second Elenore did, too. “You stay here with Vasquer,” he told her good-naturedly. “She can answer your questions. Then, we can reconvene.”

“Certainly. My men know what could be coming, and when—I’ll tell them to cooperate with you,” Elenore nodded, and both directed their attention towards the big snake. “I think... I would like to help her. Help her as you helped me.”

“See?” Argrave lightly patted her shoulder. “Who says you can’t be good?”

Elenore scoffed and walked towards Vasquer once again. “Let me inform Vasquer, then we can go and deal with things.”

Argrave nodded, then turned back to his waiting companions. Durran had sat down and lounged, while Anneliese and Galamon both waited diligently. “I take it you heard?” he asked them.

“Indeed. Touching little thing you two had,” Durran called out. “More hardships for us, too. Been a while since I’ve fought normal people.”

“It may be respite, even,” Galamon noted, eyes closed.

Argrave was surprised his usually stoic companion would express such confidence. Both Durran and Galamon walked past him, moving to Elenore. Anneliese stepped up to Argrave.

“When you touched Vasquer...” Anneliese began, leaving words unsaid.

Argrave nodded. “Elenore wasn’t the only one who found unexpected truths.”

Anneliese inched closer. “What does that mean?”

“Not sure. I got out of there quickly. It... was overwhelming,” he excused weakly. “Something to do with ‘Argrave.’ And maybe, something to do with the Brumesingers—why I had the reaction I did, all those months ago. My affinity with death.”

Anneliese touched his shoulder. “You want to deal with the matter at hand first, I understand. But this might be key to some of the questions you have.”

Argrave raised his hand to her own and took a deep breath. “Let’s go,” he said stoically, trying to push past the apprehension of this new discovery.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 244: Forced Hand

Argrave had grown familiar with making use of whatever he had on hand to get through all his problems—oftentimes, all he had on hand was himself and his companions. At the village near Mateth versus the Veidimen, or versus the Lily Lurkers, or the battle at Sethia... he'd always felt like he was at a disadvantage. He'd carved advantages from his own wit and the great blessing that was foreknowledge.

Working with Elenore, things felt fully reversed.

Once aware a threat might be approaching, Anneliese scouted out for approaching foes with her Starsparrow immediately. Elenore seemed quite impressed with druidic magic—she saw its tremendous utility just as Argrave did. And just as Elenore promised, a group did indeed come to ambush them. Elenore was quick in adapting strategy to accommodate the Starsparrow's utility, contacting some of her people on the outside to better coordinate an encirclement.

The attackers were cautious and numerous—perhaps thirty elites poked near the entrance near the entrance to what was Rancor's base. They took residence in a nearby building, waiting. Perhaps they waited in ambush, or perhaps they waited for an opportunity. Either way, they were ignorant they lacked the element of surprise.

"I don't want a fight between armed men out in the city, even if we can get them inside that building," Elenore said in irritation once Argrave informed her of this development. She had set up a bedroll beside Vasquer, where she'd been conversing with the snake while they kept watch. "The last thing I need is attention from the guard anywhere near the gentleman's club marking the entrance to this place."

"I believe we might draw them inside to the lower levels," Anneliese suggested.

"Why would you think that?" Elenore asked, suspicious of the notion.

"The impression I get, and the things I overheard," Anneliese continued confidently. "These men are decently trained but have a strange sense of urgency. So long as weakness is shown..."

Elenore looked uncertain.

"Anneliese knows people," Argrave backed her. "Do you have people that can act well?"

Elenore nodded hesitantly, seemingly lacking confidence in Anneliese's ability.

Argrave directed Elenore's men to take guard on the second floor as watchmen but leave parts undefended deliberately. The opposing party stayed steady as steel until night fell, whereupon they got antsy and sent a man to probe things out. Seeing a route to the hidden entrance, they all mobilized, proving Anneliese's hunch right once again.

When the enemy pressed deep within, Anneliese sent direction with her Starsparrow, and encirclement occurred rapidly and optimally. Their foes proceeded down the long, narrow flight of stairs that comprised the entrance. Those on the outside took position at the top of these stairs quickly, preparing bow and arrow before peppering their foes with projectiles.

The foes, though disciplined, had fallen into the trap. They smartly tried to retreat back, the mages in their number screening the archer's fire as they pushed towards the top. Galamon and Durran, freshly

clad in armor forged for royal knight standards, took the bottom of the stairs. Their foes panicked, clearly not expecting this level of coordination nor resistance.

“Surrender!” Durran shouted at them.

Surprisingly... they did so almost at once.

Once captured, interrogation revealed these men were quite out of their depth. Whoever employed them kept them in the dark, downplayed the numbers they were facing, and had essentially sent them headfirst into failure. Their leader asked too few questions, took a risky job... and now, he was here.

When Elenore, still by Vasquer’s side, received this news, she deliberated for a few seconds before asking for paper. She quickly scribed a note which she requested Anneliese deliver to a certain place with her Starsparrow and wait for the reply. News came back quickly.

“I see,” Elenore said, enlightened. “It was a distraction. A royal messenger came by the greenhouse, inviting me to Induen’s funeral. Undoubtedly some ploy designed to reveal the fact that I’m absent,” she said scornfully. “They seek to use Felipe as a cudgel. Not the first time this has been tried against me.”

“Then nothing will come of it,” Argrave nodded.

Elenore turned her head, once again uncomfortable at the depth of his knowledge. “...yes,” she said after a time, rising to stand. “I have people able to impersonate me. Plenty have hair color this shade of black, and with a blindfold... I’ve gone out before, and I know how to avoid risks. This person, the betrayer... they’re not inner circle enough to know my tricks, but they know my identity. They’re a fearless soul, too—I’ve made examples of organizations that tried to do something like this in the past...”

Anneliese tapped her fingers against her elbow, a frown on her face. Argrave took notice of that and questioned, “What?”

“If Felipe is not the royal this traitor intends to draw in?” Anneliese asked a leading question.

“Levin knows of me, but if he exposes me, I can end him in the same fashion—Felipe would want him dead as much as me if he knew what Levin has been doing behind the scenes. Levin isn’t willing to go for mutually assured destruction, given how safe and comfortable he is at Felipe’s side,” Elenore shook her head. “Orion... he’s been missing for two days. He hasn’t visited in years, so I doubt he’d recognize me. And I suspect the traitor would simply send Orion directly here, instead. I don’t think my men could subdue Orion.”

Argrave mused on her words, looking for a hole in her logic. Orion’s absence worried him. “Things don’t normally go this easily...”

“Really?” Elenore raised a brow. Galamon, Anneliese, and Durran nodded to confirm her query.

“I’ve got some stories,” Argrave shook his head.

Elenore walked around. “Well, things aren’t going easily. I suspect it’s a probe rather than an attack.” Elenore shook her head. “The worst has yet to come. The malice is exposed—they think I’m aware of them, now. They’ve shown their hand, and now they have to play it all. Things will get louder, messier... this is to be a sustained assault that’ll draw unwanted attention from the royal guards, and no one can remain secret forever. Maybe that’s their intent.”

Elenore stopped walking and shook her head. “But I don’t like card games. I’d much prefer to burn the table. I hadn’t planned to do this so early...” she took a deep breath, like her excitement was rising. “Gods. I...” she paused, swallowing. She looked more alive than Argrave had ever seen her. “Argrave. You’re going to Relize next, aren’t you?”

Argrave smiled, realizing what Elenore was getting at. “Indeed I am.”

“I think that I’m ready to leave Dirracha,” she declared. “My original intent was to wait until the civil war advanced some, profiting from both sides until I eventually chose the winning team... yet I cannot afford to do that now. No, that’s not true.” Elenore walked up to Argrave. “I don’t want to do that now.”

Argrave reflected on things, thinking back to the game that he knew. In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ Elenore’s questline was one of the first points the player could discover Gerechtigkeid. Discrepancies with Rancor led her to the great feathered serpent, Vasquer... from there, things progressed as one might expect. Elenore discovered and understood the danger of Gerechtigkeid and worked alongside the player to prepare for his advent.

Yet it took a great deal of time for Elenore’s shell to crack. She certainly could come to a point where she would trust the player, yet it took time, and one had to make the right choices. Now, things seemed different—better, even. Not just for her, but perhaps for all of Berendar. For the first time in a long while, Argrave had a sense he might be able to take things in a direction not simply matching but exceeding what he perceived as the best ending to ‘Heroes of Berendar.’

“Life is no game,” Argrave said, referring both to his inner monologue and her analogous card game. “Let’s work this out together. With Vasquer discovered, I imagine your plans have become complicated, somewhat...”

Elenore caressed her forehead as his words crossed her mind. “You’re right. A clean departure will be difficult to arrange... I suspect this will take time.” She appeared absent for a moment, yet then she lifted her head up. “I... I am glad you came. And... to answer a question I know you have... yes, you can call me sister.”

With that, Elenore gave him another, slightly less awkward hug. Argrave was still as unprepared as he had been the first time.

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With Elenore’s new plan in mind, she decided to remain at Rancor’s base near the feathered serpent Vasquer until the time came for departure.

“You’re sure?” Argrave questioned. “I mean... there’s only one entrance. You saw what happened with the vampires.”

“I have much I would ask of Vasquer—a full grasp of the situation coming,” Elenore said. “Besides, the force here with us is not small. They were meant to suppress a vampiric coven, some of whom were high-ranking mages.”

Argrave could not begrudge her those answers. And besides, the remnants of the vampire coven were still an active issue deeper within, holed up within a catacomb shielded by poison smoke as Argrave predicted. Even with its pest issue, this underground base was a rather defensible place, and Argrave

joined Elenore in settling here temporarily. Their party retrieved all their possessions from the safehouse.

After resting what remained of the night, Elenore's people intended to pursue and rout the vampires in detail. A good thing, too, because Argrave needed what was within. He could help with the smoke problem, too. That would happen tomorrow.

He had much to discuss with Elenore, but she was asleep now. Just about everybody was. Argrave and Anneliese sat a fair distance away from Vasquer, watching the great snake. It was a bit awkward staring at a sentient being, but he supposed she had been through worse than being stared at.

"Can you tell me what you saw when you touched Vasquer?" Anneliese questioned curiously.

"Not 'saw.' It just..." Argrave trailed off, rubbing his palm. "Vasquer can know things. I perceived... her recognition. Her recognition of death, of the fact my soul was not Argrave's. Vasquer is old—thousands of years old. Maybe she has answers about my situation. Maybe this sort of thing isn't unprecedented. Maybe I'm not the first like myself that's been here."

"Maybe, maybe not," Anneliese agreed. "But you remain ignorant so long as you avoid this."

Argrave let out a sigh and collapsed on his back, staring up at the ceiling embedded with magic lights. "If I had a gold coin for every time you've been wrong, I'd be destitute."

"I think you would be well off," Anneliese disagreed with a laugh. "Admitting ignorance and acknowledging when you are wrong is a very important trait for growth."

"I don't need to grow. I'm tall enough," Argrave rubbed his face warily.

Anneliese straddled him and sat on his stomach, and he curled inwards in surprise. "Just do it," she said frustratedly. "Gods be damned, I want to know what Vasquer has to say of you."

Argrave laughed, grabbing her thighs to prevent her from putting her full weight atop his gut. He got his body into a good position then sat up, planting his feet to the ground. He rose, picking her up at the same time. Anneliese gasped in surprise and apprehension, fearing to fall, but Argrave came to his full height without issue.

"Fine," Argrave said, voice strained from the lift. "You've given me no option."

"Careful not to hurt yourself," Anneliese said in concern, one arm wrapped around his neck to support herself.

After a kiss, Argrave lowered Anneliese back to the ground with a huff and stood straight, fixing his clothes. "Alright. Let's get this over with."

With those words, Argrave moved towards Vasquer like he was about to jump into an icy cold lake and simply wanted to do it as quickly as possible. Anneliese trailed closely behind him. The giant golden snake awaited them both, eyes following him as he came closer.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 245: Behind the Veil

Tentatively, as though he would be sparked by electricity if he touched it, Argrave raised his hand up to the golden scales of Vasquer. His fingers met her scales. The feeling was nearly identical to touching cold metal. He could practically feel her presence rushing into his hand like water running through a hose after the nozzle was turned.

Argrave did not like interacting with Vasquer, admittedly. His mind had always been his temple—all anyone else could see of him was only what he showed them—his words and deeds could be adjusted as he wanted. In a way, his mind was the only thing he viewed as his. His body, his clothes, his mannerisms... they were borrowed, and could be changed. That feeling had faded over the months he'd grown more connected to Berendar, but he still valued the privacy of his mind. And that privacy was being violated.

In terms of invasions, Vasquer was quite a polite invader. She acknowledged that he was uncomfortable by the act and did nothing sudden or jarring to stimulate that feeling of unease. Argrave took some time to acclimate to the feeling, steadying his breathing. He felt Anneliese grip his hand. He hadn't known how much that would help until she did it—it felt like an anchor to the world, something keeping him grounded in this bizarre mysticism.

Argrave first addressed his largest concern—he inquired Vasquer's thoughts on his ownership of this body despite not being the original soul belonging to it. This thought of his echoed out to the branch of consciousness extended to him.

Vasquer barraged him with her philosophy on the matter. For her, the origin of the soul was less important than the body. The soul is, after all, a cumulation of experiences, thoughts, memories—in essence, it made no difference to her the origin of the soul, as she had never known the original owner. Argrave supposed it was a reasonable stance to take. He questioned if she viewed him as a thief, yet she merely reminded him she could see him as he truly was and knew him to be as much as victim of circumstance as the old Argrave was.

Argrave sent his worry at how much Vasquer could see, fully exposing his feelings of his sanctity being violated. In response, a wave of reassurance and panic came. Vasquer could not see all of his thoughts laid bare—she received things he sent consciously, or things he wanted her to know subconsciously. This process revolved around the soul, and consequently, she had great insight on the makeup of all souls she saw in general. To see the process laid out was immensely reassuring, and Argrave finally found some measure of relaxation.

With the process codified, Argrave comfortably expressed his curiosity about her knowledge of his affinity with death. For the first time in a while, the constant flow of thoughts stopped. The branch of consciousness seemed to wriggle and worm. Argrave grew anxious, yet before he could express that his answer finally came.

Argrave was shown a scene—one person viewed through Vasquer's senses. To view life through her perspective was wildly jarring. He saw fewer colors, and light was difficult to distinguish. Sounds, meanwhile, were vastly enhanced, and he could feel vibrations in the ground. Smells were so potent as to be offensive. And this person before her...

Vasquer's mind guided him towards a particular spot of the image she displayed: the soul. It was a nebulous thing permeating the body, and Argrave thought it was reminiscent of the way magic existed

in a strange, almost mist-like state beneath the skin. The soul Argrave saw was golden and shining. In contrast, Argrave was shown another's soul. It was still gold, though shone not half as bright as the former's. Then, lastly, Argrave saw himself and his own soul. As the first, his shone brilliantly.

Memories not Argrave's own flashed through his mind. This bright-souled person was once close to Vasquer, and their journey passed by like Argrave was recounting things that he'd done. And at the end of it all... the man changed. He was human no longer—he was immortal, bound to a vessel and possessing various bodies of his choosing. He was a lich, Argrave recognized. He had continued to collaborate with Vasquer long after becoming immortal, yet at Gerechtigkeits advent, his lich form was vulnerable to influence. He became corrupted and fought on the side of the calamity.

Like this, the memories ended. Argrave found he was crying and wiped away his tears in shock. He didn't feel sad, and even now the tears ceased. It appeared this method of conveyance was not without side effects. Argrave searched for the meaning in what he'd been shown, and Vasquer sent another image to elaborate.

A tall, obsidian-haired man with stony gray eyes held a corpse. Vasquer's memory influenced him, and he knew at once the man's name: Felipe. The corpse he held was the bright-souled man.

"Braulio was a man who had a gift. He was one for whom death was not an end." Felipe lifted his head to Vasquer. "Yet he turned it to a curse. An accident of grave proportions..."

As the final memory settled into his mind, everything clicked into place. Argrave, just as Braulio, possessed a different kind of soul.

He was one for whom death was not an end.

What did this mean? Argrave recalled the term from 'Heroes of Berendar.' His soul was resilient, persistent. If he was stabbed through the heart and perished, he might become a specter of some kind. Or, just as Braulio, he could become a lich if he underwent the proper ritual. In terms of necromancy, his soul was a hot commodity about as valuable as red diamonds.

In-game lore dictated it was an incredibly rare thing that no playable character possessed. It wasn't decided by strength of will, or presence of mind—indeed, it was solely dumb luck... or poor luck, depending on how one looked at it. For Argrave, it only led him towards one question.

Was that why he was here?

Argrave relayed everything to Vasquer—how he'd come to be here, what he experienced before. It was the first time he'd shared his previous life with anyone beyond his inner circle, but what was Vasquer going to do? Tell Elenore? That'd just save him a conversation. If anything, it was a boon.

It truly was throwing caution to the wind—a last-ditch effort to see if anything more might be learned. Argrave felt the ground stir beneath his feet, and heard Anneliese call his name. He opened his eyes to see Vasquer writhing somewhat, yet the great rings of metal holding her down kept secure.

Though her reaction was visceral and obvious, it came repeated to Argrave a few seconds afterwards through their link. The revelation of a potential other dimension entirely, wherein their current reality was one simulated rather than simply existing, was no less of a shock to the gargantuan feathered serpent than it was any other person. Vasquer expressed much the same stupefaction that Durran,

Galamon, or Anneliese had. Though Vasquer was thousands of years old, never before had she encountered such a thing.

Argrave asked his true question, perhaps already knowing the answer. Did she know why he was here?

The answer was as he expected. No, naturally—she had not a single clue as to why he was here, how he had come to be here, or if there was even any purpose to it at all. Though hypotheses persisted about his unique soul for which death was not end the end, in the end, they were only guesses to fill the void of ignorance.

After all, Vasquer posited such a thing as taking a soul from one dimension and putting it in another would be the realm of the gods. The why and how of things was unknown, perhaps unknowable.

Argrave sighed, getting the answer he expected. Though he had feared finding the truth, it was just as disappointing to step away empty-handed. It seemed he would be moving forward with more questions than before.

One more matter remained. Argrave was certain Elenore would come and speak to Vasquer first thing in the morning—as he recalled, she was obsessed with the snake. Perhaps she saw something of herself in the creature. Both had been betrayed by their blood and confined powerlessly.

Argrave expressed a simple desire to Vasquer. He hoped the snake could accept some of his thoughts as a parcel of sorts and convey it to Elenore. He had no desire to obscure the truth from his newly found sister. It might simply be easier if Argrave could once again use Vasquer to convey his honest intents.

Expressing sympathy for his situation, Vasquer sent forth a wave of affirmation. An image flashed in his head: both Elenore and Argrave faced the darkness together, side by side. Argrave understood what Vasquer was trying to convey—she wished for the two of them, brother and sister, to cooperate in the coming years. It was a genuine reassurance that wiped away much of Argrave's unease.

After a long while of deliberating what to leave for Elenore to parse through, he left memories and knowledge he felt would best explain things. Argrave said his goodbyes and pulled his hand away. The bizarre sensation of interconnected consciousnesses faded, and Argrave found that the whole world seemed to be spinning. He clutched at his head with one hand, and Anneliese steadied him.

"Be careful, now. You emit heat as a furnace might," Anneliese said worriedly.

Argrave realized she was right—his whole body felt hot. "I feel fine," he assured her, the dizziness fading with every passing second.

"What did you learn?" she asked him.

"I don't..." Argrave blinked. "I'm not sure. Something new to pursue in the future, maybe. The vaguest hint of a lead. My soul is... one for which death is not an end." Argrave shook his head. "I need to sort through my thoughts. Let's return."