

Argrave and Anneliese sat at a table. Argrave had his head supported by one hand, his gaze looking off into another dimension. Anneliese waited for him to speak patiently, her hands placed before her almost politely.

"I feel lost about this development for the first time in a while," Argrave told her plainly, waving his free hand about to support his vocalization. "I had a general route of how I wanted to grow stronger, prepare for fights... and I can't see how I might slot this in."

Anneliese nodded, her hands moving to braid her long white hair back. "Then perhaps you ignore it. Shelf it away."

Argrave sighed. "But... that's unambitious. There's a lot of potential for this. People could die if I don't do everything I can to become stronger."

"You would jeopardize everything for a vague chance?" she said quickly, hands braiding faster. "What Vasquer told you—"

"Obviously, lichdom, things like that—they're off the table," Argrave said, holding his arms out wide. Anneliese agreed at once with a nod. "Gerechtigkeit can corrupt necromantic creations, turn them against their creators—something to do with the nature of that magic. I'm the last person who'd want to fight against any of you, least of all because you'd all put me in the dirt."

Argrave rose to his feet, pacing around to work his mind. "But a soul like mine... it's a valuable thing. It might be I can get something good from the gods from it. An unparalleled blessing."

"Please do not profane your soul for strength," Anneliese pleaded so earnestly Argrave felt a tug of guilt at his throat.

"That's..." Argrave walked up to her, pulled his chair closer and sat down. "My soul—a deathless soul—it's really, really damned resilient. Liches are incredibly hard to kill. Specters born of deathless souls are nightmarish to deal with. The last thing I want is to corrupt myself, or... or whatever you might be thinking. I've just got a valuable thing I might leverage. A strength—something that's actually special about me. A real talent."

"It is not 'a valuable thing.' It is invaluable," she disagreed. "So, please do not try and assign value to it. You know little about this matter, and I know less—but I do know you should *treadcarefully*," she said deliberately.

Argrave scratched his forehead. "Think about how much I benefitted from the Alchemist and becoming Black Blooded. That was leveraging my knowledge to gain a tremendous boon. My heart was torn from my chest—it defied all logic, threw caution to the wind."

Anneliese leaned in, abandoning her task of braiding her hair. "Would you like to do it again?" she asked, the first hint of anger bubbling up.

“Damn it all, I don’t *want* to do any of this,” Argrave leaned back in his chair, slouching exhaustedly. “The plan I had so far... strive for a particular A-rank ascension pertaining to blood magic, as that’s a prerequisite for Blood Infusion—that is, infusing all spells with blood magic. After, I try to earn the goddess of blood’s favor, alleviate the side effects of blood magic by performing sanctioned sacrifices,” Argrave told her. “All of this... you knew.”

“And what is wrong with it? We kill plenty. Sacrificing our foes is not so big a step away, and alleviating your blood loss is no minor thing. Do you recall how utterly dominating [Bloodfeud Bow] was? Imagine suffering nothing for using that spell,” she urged him. “On top of that, your A-rank blood magic ascension would change the whole landscape. Every spell you cast could be imbued with blood. A simple C-rank spell could destroy B-rank wards and tear through countless foes with ease.”

Argrave stared at the stone ceiling of Rancor’s headquarters, saying nothing in response. Internally, he was running through his head the people he knew in ‘Heroes of Berendar’ who had a deathless soul. There were three liches, each and all terrifying fights. The Alchemist might be another, though that detail had only been discovering from datamining ‘Heroes of Berendar’ and was dubious at best.

Argrave paused, running through his head the reason deathless souls were valuable in hopes of gaining some insight. He knew they could handle burdens that other souls could not tolerate. They were pliable. If used to reanimate something, they could be reused, and retained experience. Memories of obscure lore came rushing back as he thought more—a deathless soul had been used to reanimate a dragon, he recalled.

More and more memories came back. These deathless souls had many purposes, mostly in helping stabilize vast amounts of magic. All of them... unusable. They required him to be dead, to be devoid of a body, and even then, he was but a tool by that point. He wasn’t fond of the idea of being utilized after death to make an undead dragon, and it didn’t serve his ends.

“For the first time, I am glad to see you disappointed, hopeless. It means you have thought of no foolish venture to gamble your soul on,” Anneliese said, irritated.

“Anne...” Argrave leaned in intently. “I would never do a damn thing this serious without consulting you first. But if we’re found lacking in the final stretch... nothing else matters,” Argrave shook his head. “I have to look into this. Please understand.”

Anneliese crossed her arms and looked away, blinking a little quickly. Her amber eyes were a bit watery. “Sometimes, I want to... seize you, freeze you. Anything to keep you safe.” She laughed at her own words and looked back to him. “I apologize. As much as I try to remain calm and objective... the stress has been eating at me, lately.”

Argrave softened at once, feeling a fool. “Tell me. Let’s talk about it,” he grabbed her forearms. “What you’ve done for me, letting me talk to you about my time as Vincenzo... it’s been helpful. It can work for you, too, you realize.”

She placed one hand atop his and smiled warmly. “I... no, I think you’re right. I like helping you, supporting you. Didn’t want to talk about things. My problems, my concerns... I wanted them to be background.”

“You have no idea how much I want to help you,” Argrave told her sincerely.

"I think I do," she disagreed. "Argrave..." she sighed, lowering her head until her hair covered her eyes. "We are setting things up to move to the world stage. You plan to be crowned king. I will be at your side." Anneliese shook her head. "The idea has never made you seriously nervous. It terrifies me, frankly."

Argrave rose his hand up and brushed away some of her hair to better see her face. "What is it? The idea of scrutiny from so many people? I know you dislike crowded places, large crowds..."

"In large part," she nodded. "Yet... I was taught a monarch, or ruler, or tribal chief... they have a responsibility to the people far heavier than the people do to them. Some I've seen disregard that rule, but I value it above all others. That responsibility..."

"Anneliese. You are a brilliant strategist, and a genius in most senses of the word. Don't tell me you're too blind to see how damn amazing you'll be?" Argrave asked her incredulously. "Need I tell you more stories about the Anneliese in 'Heroes of Berendar,' how much of a badass she was?"

Anneliese lowered her head and smiled embarrassedly. "I believe you have told me quite enough."

"Do you know what's the most important thing in leadership?" Argrave questioned. Anneliese looked at him curiously, and he poked her cheek. "Intent."

Anneliese swatted his hand away, saying, "Intent can only—"

"Intent can carry you everywhere when leavened with diligence and wisdom. If you intend to help the people, and you diligently apply yourself to that goal, using the wisdom of yourself and trusted council..." Argrave shook his head. "That's a recipe for success. After all... it's a position of power. And power is the means to get something done."

Argrave rose to his feet. "You already have the intent to do well. If you weren't diligent already, this half year of travelling has certainly made you so. And wisdom?" Argrave spread his arms out. "You're infinitely curious. Gods be damned, if there's one thing I'm confident about, it's being king. Especially if you're here." Argrave brushed his fingers against her cheek affectionately, then knelt and hugged her.

Argrave stayed kneeling a long time, and after a while, Argrave grew used to the quiet pattern of breathing. Then, Anneliese whispered in his ears, "I think you should check Garm's writing."

Argrave leaned back. "What are you talking about?"

"You avoided them, but I perused some of them. I recall mentions of things that burden that soul—non-necromantic spells, other rituals. I believe that would be a good starting point. I did not read them all as it all made me rather sad, yet Garm had invaluable knowledge on the soul."

Argrave smiled broadly. "This means you don't object to looking into this matter?"

"Someone has to ensure you do not harm yourself," Anneliese rose to her feet, seeming a bit more alive than before.

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Argrave woke up quite groggily, having stayed up later than usual perusing Garm's writings. They were dense books, and frankly, the man had a rather esoteric way of putting things that made it difficult to read through them quickly.

After recognizing the stone ceiling of Rancor's base, Argrave felt a rush of nervousness when he was reminded Elenore had probably spoken to Vasquer by now. His grogginess faded. He cast a glance to Anneliese beside him, and seeing she still slept soundly, decided to go off and see if he might speak to Elenore about things.

Slipping out quietly, Argrave passed by Galamon and gave him a slight nod. The elven vampire was brewing some ingredients that Durran had fetched in his outing. Elenore's men were becoming more and more abundant in this place. He passed by a room of wounded. Some bore bite marks, and he knew at once what had happened.

Argrave went down the steep stairs leading to Vasquer's great prison. He saw Elenore standing beside Vasquer, her hand held to the golden snake as she spoke to a group of her people. Two were palace maids, likely greenhouse attendants, while most were the gruff men under her employ. Some of them he recognized—he'd received side quests from them, he remembered.

Elenore was entirely oblivious to Argrave's approach until he entered a certain distance from her, whereupon her head jumped to face him immediately.

"Leave me for a moment," he heard her say distantly.

At once, her men dispersed without so much as a word. Argrave watched them go, then came to stand above her.

"Good morning," he greeted, keeping both hands at his side.

"Good morning," Elenore returned, not unkindly. From the way her tone and posture were, he could tell she had received the message he left with Vasquer. She would know his soul was not Argrave's. "You come alone."

"Hoping to see someone?" Argrave raised a brow, keeping a comfortable distance in case he made her uncomfortable.

Elenore frowned at once and denied, "Of course no—" she paused, shaking her head. "You seldom move alone, that's all. Maybe you thought I'd want to talk alone."

"Didn't want to wake Anneliese," Argrave shook his head.

Elenore rubbed her hand against Vasquer. "Your message was relayed."

Argrave observed her. "Awfully... calm."

"I had already been given hints and had my suspicions. I cannot deny I was shocked..." her eyeless sockets turned to his eyes, seeming to gaze upon his face. "Vasquer claims the blood is more important than the soul. But I wonder... having never known Felipe, can you truly claim to...?"

"You know how I feel," Argrave shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, the blood relation is the most important thing. This situation is no different than finding a long-lost sister I didn't know I had. I'll endeavor to be a good brother."

Elenore turned her head to Vasquer, then said, "You left much out."

"...I made it easily digestible," Argrave rephrased.

"My stomach is quite strong. I wish you had told me everything." She took her hand off Vasquer. "But no matter. If we are family, we have time for these things later. There is a more urgent matter. Today, we have to seize this place fully, make it our own. The vampires struck back last night. Vasquer tells me of artifacts within the deeper portions related to the founder, and—"

"I'd like you to allow me and Galamon to lead a group of your men down to purge the vampires," Argrave requested. "Rancor won't fight fair. Galamon and I can endure poison, things of that nature... Anneliese and Durran can't."

Elenore crossed her arms. "There's poison smoke at the entrance. Are you certain?"

Argrave smiled. "Quite."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 247: Unwanted Wanderer

Orion wandered for a long, long while, much of it aimless. As a prince—now crown prince, he reflected—of Vasquer, his lone outage was something largely intolerable. His presence was noted and reported everywhere he wandered. Though he could wander as he pleased, he could not do so alone... or so his father decreed.

But Orion ignored that. He ignored them, avoided his pursuers at every turn, and simply wandered. He drank water conjured by his blessings and ate animals raw in the snow-covered forests. He wished to be alone with his own thoughts. He did not have the same success at avoiding the voices of the gods. They hounded him every waking minute, intent and instructive. At the very least, Orion was growing better at shutting them out.

Yet this relentless escape made his introspection dubious in quality. Often, he thought more about avoiding people than the problems that plagued him. Eventually, he knew he would need to get to a place that Vasquer could not reach. This conclusion gave him a destination... and the infancy of an objective.

And so, wearing an ill-fitting ratty robe given to him by a mendicant priest, Orion chose his direction and walked it relentlessly. The environment changed from the wintry forests and sprawling hills of northern Vasquer to long plains of dead grass with mountains miles off watching like guardians.

Though the royal knights seeking to persuade him to allow their accompaniment briefly redoubled their efforts once his route was more predictable, eventually... their pursuit began to taper off. They had little reach in these lands. Their number was fewer and fewer, and then soon none at all.

Orion swam with the rivers, walked through the hibernating forests, crawled through the plains, only taking pause for food and rest. He hunted stags, eating his fill and donating the remnants to local

villages. He slept sparingly, as the time needed to sleep forced him to hear the whispers of the gods clearly.

The prince stepped to a hill a fair distance away from a large city, one hand held up to block the light of the early morning suns. The settlement was flat and wide, and housed innumerable people. Even now, caravans came into and out of its walls. At the foot of the mountains, miners began their day, heading into the depths while followed by an overseer earth mage. Walking opposite them were others ending their day in the mines, hauling ore and debris.

Orion's gaze fixed on something beyond that. At the point where two mountains ended, a miles-tall wall of taupe stone bridged the gap, two keeps wrought out of the stone of each mountainside. A gargantuan metal door rested at the bottom of this manmade wall, a great golden lion emblazoned on it. Just beyond a mountain cliff, one could see a lion statue, an orange sphere clutched in its jaws.

Seeing the wall, Orion took a deep breath and smiled. With certain steps, he walked towards the Lionsun Castle.

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"No matter how much wind magic we cast, the smoke returns. It's being actively piped from ports in the ceiling, I believe. It would make sense, given how long they've been holding this place. This must be their last-measure fortification," Elenore noted, standing behind a large gathering of black-armored men. They were wrapped up in Argrave's ward to block sound from leaking. "Other means to combat the smoke would just result in heavy casualties. Getting proper gear for an assault will take time—time our foes might take to better prepare, or even try and escape."

Argrave nodded along with Elenore's words, staring beyond into a vast dark space from which a beige smoke steadily poured out, dissipating in the vast openness of the room meant to keep Vasquer. It was difficult to imagine how much smoke would be needed to fill this room, but it would certainly take a long while.

"How's the situation in the rest of Dirracha?" Argrave questioned, staring ahead. "Plans for Vasquer, too? The snake, not the kingdom."

"I gathered," she said. Elenore remained silent for a minute, gathering her thoughts. "I think we'll be fine to remain within this place. Worst case, we cave in the upper levels. Enemies might try and flood us out if they're smart. Place is too big to flood, though. Doubt they realize that. Regarding moving Vasquer... it'll take a long, long while to take off those bindings. They're centuries-old, enchanted, and some of them are trapped. I have to be cautious. Vasquer has been through enough."

Argrave nodded distantly, aware of this already. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' Vasquer was only liberated after the civil war ended. He pressed on, asking, "And the royal guard: any trouble on that front?"

"As I mentioned already, a royal messenger went to the greenhouse under the guise of permitting me to come to Induen's funeral. There was no incident. Our foe remains well-hidden, annoyingly," Elenore scratched her forehead with the bronze claw ring. "They aren't capable of getting the royal guards to cause us trouble. At least, they haven't tried it."

"His funeral..." Argrave scratched at his chin. "I still have Induen's signet ring. Do you want it?"

Elenore shook her head. "It's not as useful as you might think, I'm afraid. I can sell it for a handsome sum if you wish. On that front... my appraisers came through. You can look at that gear from the Order of the Rose fortress and the Archduke's Palace in the next few days, I suspect."

Argrave rubbed his hands together, glad to change the subject. "That's excellent. Could be some valuable stuff in there—Rose enchantments are quite varied from what we can make today, and Archduke Regene was rich. A shame I can't get my hands on them before we enter this little poison zone."

"You're certain of doing this?" Elenore turned her head to Argrave. "You cannot be poisoned?"

Argrave nodded certainly. "Nor can he," he looked to Galamon. "We'll go first, put an end to the smoke. Once the flow ceases, we'll return. Your people can press in and clean up."

Elenore nodded along slowly, then said, "...I don't like it."

"We have that in common," Anneliese agreed, looking quite dissatisfied. Durran didn't seem to mind, though. He seemed happy he was about to see a good show.

"Well, I'm not too fond either. But it'll work. I've fought vampires before—these were spellcasters, too, not piddly thieves with blood diluted over centuries." Argrave popped his fingers.

"You nearly died," Galamon looked to him.

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek. "That's beside the point."

Galamon looked back to the entrance, unaffected. Argrave scratched his cheek and said, "Anneliese is a more-than-suitable replacement for me while we're busy with this. Please, talk to her. She knows all of my plans, and I trust her to make any adjustments. She can catch you up to speed on what I wanted to do—shortly put, we're going to try and erode the north from within, then stage a devastating strike comprised of forces in Relize to further sow discord."

Elenore gave slow, steady nods, digesting his words. "I don't think I'll be able to focus well while you're assaulting this place alone. I'll wait for your return."

"I see," Argrave nodded. "Well, still, feel free. After all, it'll be good to know your future sister-in-law."

Argrave patted Elenore on the shoulder and walked away, dispelling his ward in a fluid motion.

"Be careful," Anneliese called out. "Be safe."

"What she said," Durran called. "Have fun, too."

Galamon joined at his side, matching his stride perfectly. As he walked, Argrave brought a Humorless Mask to his face. They had used these solemn white masks to combat the plague, yet now it sufficed as something of an oxygen mask. It wouldn't prevent poison from entering, but its air-generating enchantments would supply sufficient oxygen in places where it was otherwise absent.

"It's like the good old days," Argrave mused once they stepped past all of Elenore's men, walking alone to the dark and foreboding entrance. "You and me, overwhelming odds..."

"They were terrible days," Galamon disagreed.

“Suppose you’re right,” Argrave reflected, reminded of illness and deadly fights and approaching armies. “I guess... right now is the good old days. You never know what the best time was before it’s passed.”

“Stop talking,” Galamon informed him curtly. “Need to hear.”

Argrave grew silent, and they came to the great curtain of rippling beige smoke. Galamon knelt, reaching into a satchel at his side and pulling free a potion. He hefted it carefully. Argrave retrieved his own brew—a foamy substance locked in a bottle. The liquid had stained the entire bottle orange.

“You’re sure this affects vampires?” he asked Argrave uncertainly. “When brewing it, I felt nothing when it touched my skin.”

Argrave nodded, swishing his bottle about. “Only poison that does. Stops regeneration when it meets their blood, and only that. Used some high-end ingredients Durran picked up... but considering our newfound wealthy patron, don’t be afraid to use it all.”

Galamon lowered the substance, peering ahead. “Don’t notice anyone. Confined area...” Galamon pulled free one of the blue daggers at his side—the Giantkillers. He opened the bottle and poured it generously on the blade, emptying half of it. After, the elven vampire rose to his feet, looking to Argrave.

Argrave raised his bottle of orange liquid to eye level, grimacing, then passed it to Galamon. Neither potions nor poisons would affect him. The elven vampire popped the cork free and downed the liquid. It smelled like drain cleaner in the brief second it was exposed to the air, but Galamon didn’t even grimace. He was practically drinking pure gold, that potion was so expensive... but it enhanced the senses and reflexes, and Argrave would sorely need his protector to be beyond able.

“Let’s go,” Galamon took the first step forward. “Slow, steady. When we encounter enemies, pounce on them and end them. Big groups—you’ll handle them.”

Argrave nodded, growing serious at Galamon’s methodical approach to things. Vampires were no simple foes—intelligent, and monstrously strong, and often with years of fighting experience. Argrave felt good about having one of them on his side, doubly so when that vampire wore armor made for Vasquer’s royal guards and bore a crown of elven enchantments.

Galamon paused just before the smoke. “These vampires...”

“Yeah?” Argrave stopped.

“What are their origins?”

Argrave rubbed his hands together. “They’re betrayers of a betrayer. Vasquer’s second son started a war, killed his older brother, killed his father and stole his possessions, imprisoned Vasquer, declared himself king, became a vampire...” Argrave shook his head, reflecting how terrible this guy really was when his deeds were lined up one after the other. “But he was betrayed by the very vampires that turned him. The kingdom was assumed by the third son, and the second brother’s ‘legacy’ is... Rancor. One of the oldest groups of vampires in all of Vasquer, kept alive by their ancestor’s deeds.”

“...you meant what you said. About a cure,” Galamon looked to Argrave.

“No, I made it up,” Argrave said drolly. “You’re asking that as a joke, I hope. Of course. It’s one piece of a larger whole, but it is a piece.” Argrave waved him ahead. “Look at that potion drip off the blade. Let’s go.”

Galamon turned wordlessly and walked. Argrave couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Times like this, he was reminded how much he relied on Anneliese for things. Yet as he stepped into the poisonous chamber, Argrave was glad she would be far away from this place.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 248: Siege of Smoke

Galamon pressed forward a fair bit ahead of Argrave, his metal boots impacting with the cold stone impressively quietly. Their strategy for the advance was quite simple—these vampires would rely on their senses to search out living things. Galamon, being a vampire, would have a better chance at surprising his foes. Argrave would serve as the eye-catching distraction.

To that end, Argrave had three electric eels swirling around his body, illuminating his surroundings through the beige smoke that assailed from direction. The smoke stung at his eyes, the sensation reminding him of swimming eyes-open through a pool with chlorine in it. He remained ready.

This place was a catacomb. It appeared to be a warrior’s tomb specifically, with statues depicting armored knights erected just behind stone sarcophagi. The opening section was a long, long hallway of stone coffins. Primitive traps, detectable even by Argrave’s unskilled eye, lined the floor—snare, caltrops, the like. It was the beginning of the vampire’s preparation. They thought the smoke would be able to stop any from entering for a long while, evidently.

Deep in the tomb, Argrave could hear the faint scrape and stir of scrambling. The long hallway opened up into many a larger chamber divided by a pillar down the center, and Galamon knelt down, gaze intent. He scanned the place. Argrave counted six openings, each leading into different rooms—offering rooms, he recalled, where the living could leave gifts to the departed. After a long silence, Galamon pointed to each opening, displaying on his fingers how many people were in each room.

Heaviest on the right side, was Argrave’s conclusion. With that in mind, he gestured right, and Galamon gave a nod of confirmation. He moved slowly and quietly, while Argrave remained in place. Once Galamon took his position just beside one of the rightward entrances, Argrave advanced.

Once he passed a certain point, a great roar echoed out, and three pale-skinned people wearing clothes too fine for a tomb stepped out of their recess, tossing daggers adeptly. They did not seem like monstrous beings—they appeared like ordinary men and women, and even resembled particularly well-dressed aristocrats.

But their daggers flew through the air as quickly as any arrow. Having been given ample warning, Argrave conjured a B-rank ward with his ring. Metal clashing against magic and battle cries echoed across the tomb, giving signal the battle had begun. Argrave scanned the three foes for any spellcasters but found none. Not all had the magic affinity for such a vocation, fortunately, otherwise vampires would be a much more potent force.

Galamon lunged and grabbed the closest, clutching his wrist. He pulled the vampire forth effortlessly, slamming him into one of his partners. The third reared back, retrieving more throwing daggers.

Galamon's speed had always been astounding, but with royal-forged armor and the crown both empowering him, he seemed naught but a dark gray blur. He jammed his Giantkiller in the vampire's neck before he could ready another attack, then turned and cut it out, severing his head.

Vampires on the rightward side emerged from the other two prayer rooms—Argrave counted seven besides those Galamon engaged with, and once again found no spellcasters. One barked something about getting help, then fled deeper into the tomb. Argrave was pleased his enemies would be gathering closely together, but quickly dismissed the thought when the six rushed towards him and Galamon.

Though Argrave considered this a fine time to use [Pavise Gale], he knew it was important he conserve his magic. Argrave remained behind his ward and sent the electric eels swirling above his head forth, using their presence to suppress the six rushing at them. It worked—they stopped in their tracks. It gave Galamon ample time to deal with the three he'd surprised.

With one's head severed and the other two reeling from his slam, they proved no match for Galamon. He was faster, stronger—the two he'd thrown recovered and tried to throw more knives, but Galamon ducked low, grabbing one by the foot and tripping him. The other he slammed against the wall with his forearm, suspending him in place for a dozen lightning-quick stabs to the stomach. The poison was working—the wounds did not heal, and he left the vampire to bleed. He turned back, kicking the vampire he'd tripped in the teeth. It was a devastating blow that sent the vampire sprawling, and yet Galamon pressed forth and snuffed out his life as one might step on a cockroach.

Seeing both Galamon's butchery and Argrave's magic before them, the six vampires lost their boldness. They were thieves—even as vampires, they had mostly subsisted on captors rather than actively hunting. They did not seem accustomed to struggles where death was a possible, even likely, outcome.

When the seven from the left side's rooms joined up with them, that battlefield fervor was reignited. One of them was a spellcaster—C-rank, by Argrave's heat-of-the-moment estimation. Given their regenerative qualities, vampires were a prime candidate to use blood magic. C-rank blood magic could break through his ring-conjured ward. Argrave regarded this new arrival cautiously.

After putting an end to the last of the three, Galamon turned, bracing for the coming horde.

"Green tunic, spellcaster," Argrave informed him with a shout. At once, Galamon pulled free the Ebonice axe, holding it at the ready.

Rather than target Argrave holed up behind his ward, the spellcaster directed his attention towards Galamon. He shouted a command to halt, then advanced before his vampire kin. Two C-rank [Skysunder] spells surged out of his hands, yet the Giantkiller in Galamon's hand attracted the white lightning, absorbing it harmlessly.

Galamon advanced, Giantkiller faintly sparking. The spellcaster, panicked, conjured a wave of fire and retreated. The elven vampire batted the flames aside with the Ebonice axe. Argrave urged his [Electric Eels] forth and rushed in, forcing the vampire to conjure a ward. With the ward up, the vampire was sealed in place. Galamon lunged and swung his axe again. It stalled at the ward, yet broke past. Even still, the vampire managed to fall backwards and dodge. He scrambled to the protection of his kin.

Not content to let his foe get away unpunished, Argrave stepped up beside Galamon and cast [Pavise Gale]. A knight of wind formed before him, swinging a thick and tall shield. The vampire had reflexes fast enough to conjure a C-rank ward, but it shattered like sugar glass before the giant knight of wind. The pavise struck the spellcaster directly, slamming him against the right wall. The group of vampires he'd been seeking protection behind scattered before Argrave, tossed by the powerful gust to the walls, the floors... one even managed to hit the ceiling.

With the twelve of them tossed aside so effortlessly, they were routed. Those quickest to gain their bearings did not dare rejoin the fight—they fled. Galamon seized the initiative ruthlessly. He severed the dazed spellcaster's head with his Ebonice axe and pursued those fleeing with his Giantkiller. He dealt haunting wounds that would not heal, but it was difficult to stop all from fleeing. He killed two more and injured several, yet they did largely escape.

Once he dared not pursue any longer, Galamon returned to Argrave. "They'll group up," he informed Argrave with a voice too-calm in the wake of their slaughter. "Whether they retaliate or fortify themselves, I cannot say. Their leader will decide."

Argrave nodded, adrenaline still pumping through his body. "Our goal remains the same: deal with the poison smoke. We break their bellows, put out the fires, the smoke stops flowing. If they chase, I'll deal with them. If they don't, we'll do our job, join up with Elenore's men, and then I'll deal with them." Argrave glanced around at the gore, mind scrambled. He shook his head to gather himself. "Come on. We head deeper, then turn right at the second hall. You take point."

After a quick moment to clean his weapons of blood, Galamon nodded, reapplying the vampiric poison on his Giantkiller. Argrave paced around, driven to constant motion by the adrenaline. Once finished, Galamon advanced, and they proceeded deeper into the tomb with him far ahead just as it had been the first time.

They were unharmed in their quick advance to the furnace rooms. The moment they turned right to proceed into them, Argrave saw movement at the opposite end. Through the smoke, it was difficult to distinguish how many there were. Yet lightning surged across the gap directly at them, gravitating towards Galamon's Giantkiller.

"God damn it," Argrave cursed—a long corridor was the worst place to be caught in, and he couldn't afford to endure a protracted magic battle: it would cost too much magic. "Rush. Just rush!" Argrave commanded, sending his electric eels darting forth to assault whoever was opposite them.

Both of them sprinted, Galamon slightly ahead. It became immediately obvious there were multiple spellcasters on the opposite end as the attacks came very quickly. Lightning, blades of wind, balls of fire—even despite Galamon's diligent protection, Argrave took painful blows that cut past the haze of adrenaline. When they finally made it to the other side, their foes rushed at them with blades of blood in hand: two spellcasters, both using the C-rank blood magic [Putrid Paramerion].

Though more skilled than those they'd fought earlier, Galamon still effortlessly outskilled his foes, breaking the blood magic with his Ebonice axe and stabbing one through the eye. Argrave delivered three C-rank spells in quick succession on the other—three loud white bolts of [Skysunder]. Though kept alive by his vampiric blood, the spells stunned him long enough for Galamon to crush his head against the wall.

Argrave leaned against the wall, finally with the liberty to inspect the damage dealt. His gut had been pierced slightly by an ice spike that still persisted. Without his armor, the wound would have been incapacitating, he was sure. He pulled it free and healed it and tended to another cut on his thigh.

“No more ahead. I hear fire, though,” Galamon informed Argrave.

“That’ll be the furnace,” Argrave said, rubbing the now-healed spot on his gut. He had other, lesser wounds, but those could be healed later. “Let’s hurry.”

Pushing past things, Argrave stepped over the fallen vampires and proceeded into a room that felt as hot as a volcano. Twelve iron furnaces persisted here, fires blazing hot within them. There was a vast pile of herbal bundles in one corner of the room, while now-unmanned bellows beside the furnace collected the beige smoke and pumped it into ports that undoubtedly distributed it throughout the whole place.

“I’ll douse the flames. Destroy the bellows just in case,” Argrave commanded.

With that, Argrave conjured water into the furnaces, flooding them out. They hissed in defiance as they died, and the heat persisted in the air long after they’d left... but the smoke immediately began to thin. To ensure those herbs could not be burnt more, Argrave doused them in water, too, all but flooding the room. Meanwhile, Galamon ripped apart the bellows by hand. Once that was done, Galamon grabbed the furnaces and pushed them over. They were mounted to the wall, yet the elven vampire easily ripped them free.

“Excellent work,” Argrave commanded as the last iron furnace fell to the ground. “They might salvage this... but all we need is a window of opportunity to press in. Back to Elenore’s men—time to begin the real assault. And I can get my hands on some ancient relics that’ll help quite a bit for the task ahead...”

Galamon nodded, and Argrave adjusted the Humorless Mask over his face. They both ran to where they’d come from.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 249: Relic Regalia

Argrave and Galamon emerged from the thinning beige smoke. Judging by the reactions they received by Elenore’s gathered men, they struck quite a harrowing pair. He saw Elenore beside his companions—the princess crossed her arms in uncertainty, for she could not perceive things a long distance away. Argrave walked confidently forward.

“Mages! Gather,” Argrave commanded. “The pump of poison in the air has stopped. The vampires are preparing for our assault—we dispel the smoke, then press through to put a stake in the chest of these foul bloodsuckers before they can prepare!”

Elenore had already given Argrave significant authority, and his words themselves had a commanding atmosphere. Her people rushed to obey, the mages taking the head of the pack to dispel the smoke. Argrave stepped up to Elenore.

“Things went well,” Argrave told her, watching the mages as they worked. “I’ll take the helm for the second assault. They’ve grouped up—perfect for me.”

Elenore studied him, evidently unsettled. "You... encountered trouble?"

"Not enough," Argrave commented. "Anneliese, Durran. You're ready, I trust?"

Durran hefted his glaive. "Naturally."

Anneliese did not answer, but instead came to his side to tend to the wounds he'd left untreated wordlessly. Argrave smiled at her.

"Perhaps you should hang back, let me handle things from here," Elenore suggested.

"You've done enough. Barely let me participate last battle. Besides, they have spellcasters in their number. I still have something to show you," Argrave grinned broadly.

Anneliese gave him a sideward glance for his words but did not protest.

"The smoke clears!" one of Elenore's men shouted.

Spurred to action, Argrave turned on his heels. "Won't be long, now. I'm looking forward to getting to brass tacks when we come back," Argrave left her, then ran speedily to take the vanguard as he'd promised.

"Galamon—give Durran the axe. Durran—here," Argrave removed his glove and his ring, then gave the thing to him. "You cast wards to defend. I imagine they'll try something they already have—holding a chokepoint, like a corridor. I'll break past, but I need you to defend me."

"...right," Durran acknowledged, then turned to Elenore. "Hey. Keep this safe, will you? I appreciate it," he thanked before her answer, then tossed his glaive towards her.

"That's—!" she shouted, alarmed, yet caught the glaive all the same. "That was dangerous!" she admonished him.

"Hey, come on. Look after it well and you'll go from me being okay with you to me liking you. Big step up!" Durran laughed.

"I hope you...!" Elenore began to curse him but deflated in half a second. "Treat this task seriously, lest you perish."

Durran waved her goodbye, and then with his new equipment, advanced alongside them.

"Ladies, gentleman!" Argrave shouted with bravado as he stepped past Elenore's band, his companions at his heel. "Your role is simple—cleaning duty. Now, I know you might hate cleaning... but this time is a bit different than scrubbing floors. I'll kill everything that moves, and you catch anything I miss."

Argrave felt he was tempting fate with such arrogance. Argrave knew people, though. A confident, arrogant leader who'd already proven himself in battle was a great boost for morale. They'd seen him emerge from a poison waste covered in gore—if that was not a proven fighter, what was?

And so, with fighters of renewed confidence at his heel, Argrave once again dove into the catacombs. The smoke had thinned tremendously already, and the mages still worked to dispel it. Despite that, all the warriors bore cloth wraps over their face for added protection. For a long while, only the sounds of

their footfalls echoed through the stone halls... yet after a time, they spotted vampires. They were scouts setting traps, and once their warband was spotted, they retreated.

"How kind. They lead us to where they're gathered," Argrave said sarcastically.

Galamon gave Argrave a signal—a great bulk of them were gathered ahead. Argrave triggered his Blessing of Supersession and began creating [Electric Eels]. Galamon held his Giantkillers at the ready, prepared to protect from errant lightning cast by distant spellcasters. At first, he heard surprise behind him, and nothing more... yet as the eels became dozens, hundreds, there were disbelieving murmurs. He heard his newfound sobriquet muttered: Kinslaying Serpent.

They passed by where Argrave and Galamon had halted their initial assault and entered a long and wide corridor lined with stone sarcophagi. Lightning attack spells bridged the gap almost at once, yet Galamon caught them with the blue lightning rod daggers in his hand. Long passages were the best place to restrict large group of foes, and their foes intended to hold this spot so as not to lose an advantage... but they'd done Argrave an unwitting favor.

The spells changed form, soon enough—spells of other elements came, coupled with blood magic. Anneliese and Durran took the role of defense.

"Stop here," Argrave commanded the men behind him. "Wait for my signal to advance."

The men complied, fearing the barrage of magic ahead of them. Their party advanced steadily into the constant barrage, dispelling and conjuring wards in short bursts of movements. He kept the eels at their back, and they illuminated all ahead with light blue light. He was sure the spectacle would appear as though they were standing in front of the sun—to dark-accustomed vampires, it would be blinding.

Argrave stopped midway through the corridor, unable to press further without dispelling their wards. Argrave held his hand out, and two thick strands of blood took the shape of a recurve bow. It was as tall as Argrave, and he laid one point against the ground. In his other hand, an arrow of blood took shape. He nocked the arrow.

Echoing impacts struck their wards again and again, less accurate on account of the wall of blinding light behind them. Argrave spotted a few mages possibly of A-rank in their number... but given the price of failure, each of their foes would use an A-rank spell as a last resort. Prevailing magic wisdom dictated spells were to be conserved and used at the right opportunity.

Prevailing magic wisdom didn't account for the Blessing of Supersession.

Argrave's arrow grew larger, and his vision danced as he put yet more blood into the attack. Once he was content it would be able to shatter any defense the foe might form, A-rank or no, he spurred the electric eels at his back past him. They swarmed like a beam of unimaginable power, hissing and sparking past Argrave's ear. They were so many, he could see nothing beyond them... yet once they reached a certain threshold, Argrave released [Bloodfeud Bow].

The area ahead became naught but chaos and lights. [Bloodfeud Bow] was used to shatter any wards, allowing passage for the [Electric Eels] to kill en masse. Confident in this theory, Argrave started to walk forward before the scene had settled, using what little time remained in the Blessing of Supersession to

spawn more electric eels at his side. He felt a little woozy after using the blood magic, but he was certain he'd be fine.

Sparkling electricity danced along the walls and the ceiling from the attack of eels. Most of what remained of the enemy could only be described as charred corpses. A great gash of overturned stone lined the floor and wall, until his arrow of blood hit a stop and dug ten feet through. What few living dead remained were in no condition to mount a serious defense, and even the unharmed fled in a panic deeper into the tomb.

Argrave turned and called, "Cleaners! Advance!"

The spellcasters had congregated here to stall them in the corridor and had paid the price. Elenore's men could handle what few remained. If they couldn't... well, even now, near a hundred eels swirled above Argrave's head, and Anneliese and Durran were unspent. He was sure he would think of something.

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"Seems the last of them locked themselves inside here," Argrave said, looking around. He knelt down, examining the lock to the vault before them. "Doesn't look like part of the construction of this tomb. Some kind of puzzle lock."

Argrave stayed staring at it. He was sure that Ruleo would be able to handle something like this... but that would take time, and he wouldn't be able to be present for the opening.

"...sir," one of Elenore's men said respectfully. "Jerard might be able to handle this. I'm... I'm not sure where he is, sir, but things have nearly finished up. Sir," he lowered his head, out of both fear and deference.

Argrave rose back up to his feet. "The two of you—go looking for him. Stick to areas that've already been cleared, and be careful," he directed them seriously.

When the two of them departed, Argrave was alone with his companions once again. Looking around, one could see the bodies of vampires everywhere. Elenore's men were quite skilled. He would have to ask her how she assembled so many talented and reliable people. She had never elaborated on that in 'Heroes of Berendar.' He supposed there were a lot of questions he had that could finally be answered.

"I can feel it," Galamon said abruptly.

Argrave turned to him. "What?"

"A tugging. At the heart, the mind." Galamon rubbed his breastplate of dark gray steel. "At... the beast. The relic is ahead. It's exactly as you said."

Realizing he was referring to his vampiric nature, Argrave looked around to be sure none were listening. "Well, now's not the time to let others know about that. I'll handle it."

Galamon's white eyes refocused, as though he had been drawn from a haze. He shook his head and slapped himself in the face, to Argrave's surprise.

"I'm fine," he finally said.

Argrave looked to Anneliese and Durran, giving both a silent signal to keep an eye on Galamon. They waited by the vault. Not much time passed before the two he'd directed to find this locksmith returned. They were out of breath, obviously not wishing to keep Argrave waiting.

"You're Jerard?" Argrave asked.

"Yes. Yes, sir," the man lowered his head.

"You know locks?" Argrave crossed his arms.

"I do, sir."

"You know enchanted locks?" Argrave pressed once again.

"Yes sir," Jerard nodded confidently.

"Take a look," Argrave gestured.

Jerard shifted on his feet, then slowly walked up to the lock. He hunched over, examining it, then knelt to get a better view of it. After a time, he reached into his satchel wordlessly, pulling free some bizarre-looking instruments. Judging by the crude nature of the tools, they were handmade. That alone was promising.

He watched Jerard as he worked. Though he caught a few sideways glances, once the man began to get involved in the work, he could not stop. He started craning his head, muttering observations. After a time, he drew out more tools from his satchel, some of them with enchantments gleaming on them. After his preparations, he stuck two thin metal tools into the hole.

He counted numbers up, then paused after a certain point, shifted the tools, and started again. Anneliese knelt down to see what he was actually doing. She seemed ready to ask a question, yet then a louder click echoed, and Jerard rose to his feet.

"Opened," he declared.

Before Argrave could give a command, Galamon grabbed the thick handle to the vault door and turned it. He yanked it open, and Argrave had to jump aside to avoid being slammed by the thick reinforced door. Three people waited within. Though most they'd seen before were passably human... these people had extended fangs, pale skin, and eyes that glowed red. They seemed inhuman.

Galamon rushed towards them with reckless abandon. They, too, surged at him like rabid dogs. He did not meet them with his typical efficiency... instead, he engaged in a simple and ruthless struggle with all of them at once.

The vampires tried to overpower him with brute strength... and succeeded for a time, unprecedentedly. Durran hacked one foe in the back as they grappled, and that brief moment of pause was enough for him to break free. Galamon ruthlessly seized one, slamming the vampire to the ground and crushing his head with bare hands. The other two buffeted his helmet with blows, trying to return the favor, yet he rose back to his feet and disemboweled one with his bare hands. The other he seized by the neck... and then grasped something at the vampire's chest.

Galamon pulled free a black blade, holding it up in the air. A simple elbow to the face dispatched the vampire he still held, and before the body even fell, Galamon stared at the black knife with runes along its surface with a terrible, inhuman fascination... and something changed in his expression.

“Galamon,” Argrave stepped forward, more than ready for this situation. Ever since he’d been seized by the vampire all those months ago, he’d been preparing for another situation like this. “Remember Muriem. Remember Rhomaden,” he listed off Galamon’s wife’s name, his son’s name.

Galamon’s gaze broke from the black dagger for but half a second.

“Come on. Think,” Argrave urged. “How old would Rhomaden be now? Do you remember the day Muriem gave birth to him?” he urged, trying to ground him back to reality.

“It was...” Galamon said, voice shaking. “Seventeen years ago.”

Argrave stepped a little closer, hands outstretched. “Remember how you felt that day?”

“I...” Galamon swallowed, his intense grip on the black knife slackening.

Argrave took the moment, gingerly pulling the knife from the vampire’s grasp. He looked to Argrave, anger rising... yet then, his face grew slack. He briefly held the wall for support.

Argrave stowed the gleaming black blade in his duster’s inside pocket, hoping the enchantments might muffle the dagger’s primal effect. Once it was, he looked around. His eyes fell upon something in the back of the room—a set of black ceremonial regalia, many pieces missing. The most prominent pieces remained, though—a royal mantle, adorned with a giant golden snake on black silk, and a crown. The crown of the first king of Vasquer.

“It’s over,” Argrave stepped forward cautiously.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 250: Weight of the Crown

Argrave gazed up at the pitch-black regalia. The set was enchanting enough to make him forget what Galamon had done not moments ago. The fact that a stand had been made to accommodate all its pieces hinted at the true value of it all. There was a spot for a scepter, bracelets, gloves, a ring, a ceremonial sword... much of that was gone, however, having been sold of centuries ago to sustain Rancor in times of poor management. The primary pieces remaining were the royal mantle and the crown.

The royal mantle was an ostentatious thing. The collar was black ermine, and even from here the fur appeared soft. The cloak proper was made of a flowing black silk, a snake of gold emblazoned on the back. It was giant, accommodated for someone of a similar height to Argrave.

The crown, though... its central band was a black metal, though it was concealed by gold at many points. Gold encircled each studded jewel—diamonds of various colors, sapphires, rubies, and emeralds all pushed its frame to the brink. Some of the jewels were the size of chicken eggs. Though this vault was filled with riches, they all paled before this single crown.

Argrave reached forward and took the crown. Everyone watched him, waiting to see what he would do. It made him far too self-conscious to genuinely put it on. He pulled off the mantle, too, putting it beneath the crook of his arm. When Argrave turned, Durran stared at him disappointedly.

“What?” Argrave frowned.

“Coward,” Durran declared, then shook his head and turned around.

Argrave felt insulted. His mind whirled for a comeback, and then he reached out and put the crown over Durran’s wyvern-scale helmet. The tribal jumped, and Argrave ensured the crown didn’t fall off his head.

“Hold that. You break it, you’re paying for it,” Argrave decided, then turned back to Galamon. “You alright, Galamon?” Argrave asked loudly, so that Elenore’s men who’d seen the scene could hear him clearly. “That knife—it possesses people. Probably turned those vampires crazy. I know how to handle it, don’t worry.”

Galamon’s head turned to him. Some redness remained in his eyes, yet they were fading back to white quickly. He gave a curt nod. “I’m... fine.”

Argrave grabbed beneath Galamon’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get you out of this place. The cleaners can do the rest. Here, have a drink.” He pulled free the flask at Galamon’s side and handed it to him.

Galamon took the flask and stared at it for a moment before drinking it like it was some foul swill. Once done, he closed his eyes, gathering himself. He stood straight once again.

“I’m fine,” Galamon repeated. This time, Argrave believed him a little.

#####

Argrave and his companions headed back to where Elenore was waiting, leaving her people to clean things up. He felt he’d demonstrated his prowess sufficiently. Durran walked with the crown in his hands, holding it gingerly and walking slowly like it was fragile glass.

Before they reached outside, Argrave stopped, looking around. He nodded towards Anneliese, and she conjured a ward for them to speak privately.

“Alright. That knife you held—I’m sure you curious about it,” he said to Galamon.

“You said that would happen. I tried to be ready... but it was stronger,” the elven vampire shook his head. “I apologize.”

“Don’t,” Argrave waved his hands. “This knife... a vampiric relic. Althazar, it’s called. It...” Argrave shook his head. “It partially actualizes the vampiric ‘beast’ you describe. Even being near it frenzied you somewhat. If you stab yourself in the chest... some of the dormant powers of your vampiricity awaken. Every ability you already have will be enhanced greatly—regeneration, strength, senses... and the side effects, too. They’re enhanced.”

Galamon lowered his head, eyes growing distant. “They were.”

“These vampiric relics were meant to enhance you as a vampire. They’re generally intended for those who intend to lean into their powers, rely on them more.” Argrave tapped at his chest. “Considering how much you hate that aspect of yourself, perhaps it’s best I hold onto it.”

“It’s useless. No, it’s worse than useless—it’s harmful. I’ve spent years reining this side of myself in...” The elven vampire lifted his eyes back to Argrave. “How will this cure me?”

Argrave stared back despite Galamon’s intensity, knowing his companion would not harm him. “This relic, in combination with others, can fully actualize the beast you have. If it’s made real, it’s somewhat separate from you. And if it’s separate, we can kill it without killing you. You’ll be cured—freed of the beast forever, made mortal once again. These relics will be rendered impotent. And... well, a bunch of other stuff will happen,” Argrave waved his hand, feeling now was not the time.

“I don’t like it,” Galamon growled.

Argrave frowned. “Well, it’s... I mean, there are other... what? Why?” Argrave asked, puzzled.

“No, not...” Galamon sighed. “Not your proposition. The knife. I dislike its mastery over me.”

Touching his chest where the knife rested, Argrave said, “I’ll keep Althazar hidden, fret not.”

“No. In time... at another date, I hope to train myself to resist it. I cannot afford to act as I did,” Galamon said determinedly.

Argrave looked to Anneliese for guidance, but she seemed just as undecided as he did. He looked back and said, “I hope you won’t be offended if I say I need to think about that.”

It did look like a difficult pill for Galamon to swallow. He stared back, then eventually sighed, seeming more disappointed in himself than anything. “You’re right.”

“Let’s get going. I don’t want to hold this million-gold exhibit any longer,” said Durran tensely.

Argrave looked back. He reached down and took the crown from his hands, then left behind the word, “Coward.”

#####

Argrave emerged from the catacombs a second time, some of the fatigue of the battle finally settling in. He had taken the lead role in most of this, largely by his own design. If Elenore had an adequate grasp of his abilities, she would be able to manipulate things in their favor better. He would need her to be at her best, and people functioned at their best when they had as much information at their disposal as possible.

Elenore waited not as nervous as she had been the last time—their departure had taken some time, and Argrave supposed news had already reached her of what had occurred within. Flanked by his companions, he stepped up before her.

“We went through, cleared them out,” Argrave reported. “They hid in a vault, but we managed to get them out without incident. Not sure how many casualties, but... not many. Not on our side, at least.” Argrave held the crown up a little higher. “Got a crown, a royal mantle. You might see how these items help bolster our cause.”

Elenore crossed her arms and nodded. "Of course I do." She tapped her foot against the ground, then suggested, "Let us take a walk."

"Sure," Argrave raised a brow.

Elenore held out her arm, and Argrave took it. They started to walk away. Elenore was leaning on him quite heavily, and explained in a whisper, "These prosthetics are digging into my legs. I apologize, but it's difficult to stand. I cannot be seen to be so weak before my people."

"Don't apologize," Argrave assured quietly. "Happy to help. Maybe I can carry you."

"Those rumors... I thought they were exaggerations," Elenore proceeded, changing the subject to hide her embarrassment at the notion. "Most firsthand testimonies came from peasants in Kin's End, or a defeated royal knight. Both had reason to talk up your power. Yet... none of it was lies. A legion of ghostly snakes... what sort of power is that?"

"Just magic," Argrave explained, adjusting his arm to better support Elenore. "I have a blessing from a god. Erlenbis," Argrave told her readily. "Got it in a trade. Knowledge for power. Power for power, some might say. For five minutes... I can tap into a god's magic power. After, I repay a debt of magic."

"I see..." muttered Elenore in awe. "It is... as I recall, Erlebnis is an ancient god of knowledge. That is certainly an interesting arrangement. And considering your origin, it makes sense why he might wish to do such a thing..." she paused. "Should you be telling me this?"

"It's best you know. You're part of my inner circle, now. The people I trust most," Argrave said while looking ahead.

Durran scoffed. "Good deal you got. I had to lose a few fingers for him to accept me."

"I..." Elenore trailed off, then sighed. "I am glad this happened."

"Me too," Argrave agreed.

"Let us discuss Vasquer," Elenore changed the subject. "I have been speaking to her, and I believe she may be able to aid us in removing the bindings... it will take time, much time, but she may be freed. I had hoped to—"

Shouts echoed across the vast stone chamber housing Vasquer, and Elenore's fingers dug into his arm in alarm. He heard someone swear, "It's important! It's important!" and though people tried to stop someone in the distance, he broke past them.

Ruleo rushed out into the big stone chamber, pursued by a few people. Spotting Elenore, he sprinted over. Galamon stepped ahead of Argrave.

"He's bleeding," the elven vampire noted, his stoic nature returned. "Badly."

"Who is it?" Elenore questioned.

"Ruleo," Argrave said, voice tight.

"Gods be damned... he was meant to be keeping an eye on things in the palace." Elenore released her grip on Argrave. "You may have time enough to return to the catacombs... I'll try and—"

“Elenore!” Ruleo shouted. “The king!”

Hearing his words, Argrave was not so eager to slink away. Argrave still wore the solemn white Humorless Mask, but his height and hair alone were enough to guess who he might be. Argrave pulled his duster’s hood a little lower and decided to remain. He used Galamon to hide himself somewhat and decided to listen.

“You were meant to be watching the palace,” Elenore said coldly, stepping away from Argrave.

Ruleo came to a stop, his breathing heavy. “Gods be damned... why else would I be here? Barely got away alive.”

Elenore crossed her arms, adapting her callous persona of the Bat. “Speak. What occurred?”

“The mole you had us looking for. Levin’s talking to the king... and he brought that little orange-haired maid you had me rescue.”

“Therese?” Elenore said in surprise. “That’s impossible. She was... she was sent thousands of miles away. She had guards, even, and many of my people near her.”

“I saw her with my own eyes, damn it all,” Ruleo cursed, then leaned against the wall, cackling. “Your men were caught in a net. Levin initiated a purge, wiped them all out. I barely got out alive.”

Elenore’s men finally caught up with Levin, yet the princess stopped them from apprehending him.

“You’re certain it was Therese? Absolutely certain?”

“Positive. She looked... worse than before. Not that you’d care,” Ruleo slumped against the wall, gaze finally wandering. “Looks like Levin is telling the whole story. Seemed to leave out that *you* were the Bat, but he’s told Felipe that the Bat is here... and told him about that big damn snake, too.”

“That...!” Elenore bit her lip. “He’s going to destroy himself. I have evidence that’ll make Felipe execute him, take away everything that he values. What the hell is that fool...!” she started, then paused.

“What’s going to happen?”

“This is just a second-hand report...” Ruleo began hesitantly, clutching at his wounded leg and healing it with magic. “But Felipe knows about Vasquer, so it makes sense. Sounds like the king is coming personally with the bulk of the royal guard.”

“Therese couldn’t know about Vasquer...” Elenore paused. “No. Pointless thoughts,” she stepped away, head clenched in thought. “That meagre assault in Rancor, that pointless attempt to expose me with a royal messenger... distraction. Distraction and misdirection, stalling for time...”

Ruleo let out a sigh of relief as the bleeding stopped. His gaze wandered... and fell upon Argrave. His white eyes changed quickly, and he slowly stood up.

“Well,” said Ruleo. “Hello there.”

Ruleo stalked up to their party. Though Argrave had some plans for how he might handle confronting Ruleo, he felt it was best to see how things would play out. Given the situation, it was difficult to predict.

“Nice eyes, masked man.” Ruleo turned his head to Elenore. “Seen them before plenty of times in Order of the Rose ruins. Some of my little necromantic friends I made have them, too.” He shook his head. “Rumors started spreading that Induen’s corpse got eaten by ants and couldn’t be displayed... these rumors spread fast, too. Inorganically. Wonder why that might be.” Ruleo rolled his shoulders. “Where might Induen’s body have gone?”

“Ruleo, you—” Elenore stepped forth.

“No, don’t bother,” Ruleo held up his hands and walked away. “I see snow elves, too. Big mystery, ooh,” he shook his hands. “Who the hell that is, who you’re working with—none of it matters anymore. I’m getting ten thousand miles away from this place. But I guess it makes sense. How else could Argrave have done so much without someone bigger backing him—someone like you?” He shot his thumb towards Argrave. “I don’t care if that’s Induen revived or some Argrave meat-puppet. I fought the damned royal guard in the palace—I’m a top-priority wanted criminal now. Whole thing’s falling apart.”

Ruleo walked backwards as he talked, arms spread out. “So forget you, forget this. You didn’t kill me for spying on you, and so I came back here to tell you Felipe is coming. As far as I’m concerned, that settles things; we won’t have anything to do with each other in the future. I’m leaving. Given that you have time, I suggest you do the same. This information empire of yours—its capital is about to be razed. Twenty minutes, maybe less. All in all...”

Ruleo pointed both his index fingers at Elenore. “It’s over for you.”