

## Jackal 251

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 251: Order in Chaos

Ruleo pointed both his index fingers at Elenore. "It's over for you."

With that, Ruleo didn't hesitate a second in running away. The men that had come to restrain him simply let him pass, obviously more concerned with the news that the king was coming than trying to restrain someone from leaving.

Argrave's mind felt like it restarted after Ruleo left, coming back to focus on the task at hand. Given what the man had just leaked, all those present would be rattled. Elenore's troops were her lifeline, and having them lose faith, having them choose between the king of their country and her operation? He wasn't sure of their answer.

Elenore stepped forward boldly into the space Ruleo left behind. "That fool would be better off with us. The king coming here—it's unexpected, but well within the realm of what we can handle. Have you forgotten who I am? Have you forgotten this man, who stormed those catacombs of vampires not minutes ago?" she moved to Argrave. "Gather everyone. I must set some things into place, and then we'll leave together."

The effect of Elenore's confident words was like a spell that warded away their doubts, and her men set off to gather people. Even Argrave felt soothed somewhat, but when he looked to Anneliese, the uncertainty on her face told him it was mere bravado to keep all in line. Elenore held her arm out, gesturing for Argrave to escort her. Argrave took her arm.

"Take me to Vasquer," she told him.

Without another word, Argrave took off towards the giant golden snake in the back of the giant room.

"Are you oka—"

"Save it," Elenore interrupted. "Do you know of any other exits to this place?"

"The vampires would have used it," Argrave told her at once. "As far as I know, front door is the only door."

"Felipe is coming here personally... and I know him, I know how he thinks," she said, a grim calmness to her. "Therese wouldn't know of Vasquer... so there's another traitor in our midst. No, no... forget that. Felipe is the pressing matter."

Elenore didn't look daunted by the prospect as she continued, "We have to leave here as soon as we can. Felipe seeks possession of Vasquer. He wouldn't dare harm her—a symbol of legitimacy as valued as the founder's companion coming to harm under his watch would mar his reign indelibly. He would never take such a risk. Though it's best we ask her thoughts on the matter, I believe she would agree—we cannot stay here, yet Vasquer will remain safe if we leave her."

"Agreed," Argrave nodded, following thus far.

"In a small group, we could leave now... but escaping the capital would be impossible without my people. My men aren't loyal by cause—they're loyal by benefit alone. They won't die for me, won't screen our escape. On top of all that, a lot of people here are very valuable links to distant places. Lastly, let's not mention the blow this would have on my reputation. It'd cripple my capabilities. I'd be of much less help to you in the future." Elenore outlined to him. "Levin... I was not expecting this. He's captured Therese."

Her footsteps faltered, and Argrave stopped. "What?" he asked.

Elenore appeared briefly distressed, yet she resumed walking not a moment later. "Ruleo said she looked worse than before. Presumably, despite torture, she's not surrendered truly valuable information... otherwise, I would have no opportunity. She's given me time," she noted, voice faintly tremulous.

"Can we delay the king, evacuate?" Argrave questioned, moving steadily towards Vasquer.

"If he knows of Elenore's capability, he would immediately know it's a diversion," Anneliese chimed in on the opposite side of Argrave. "Given the Bat's reputation, he'll know what's happening."

Elenore nodded. "Yes... he wouldn't delay his arrival. Owning Vasquer would be too valuable for him to dare delay. But nonetheless, now is not the time to be frugal. I'll send a few talented people out immediately to work at causing distractions around the city. It will divide the guard, make our escape easier. Even Felipe would not let his city burn to the ground before his eyes—his paranoia might make him think this is all just some diversion to ruin Dirracha."

"No. You can send messages quicker with my Starsparrow," Anneliese suggested. "It will be nigh undetectable."

Elenore nodded, brightening somewhat. "That's right. I can... yes, that's the best way. All I need is to deliver one message to a trusted agent—Merren. From there, he can get word to all of the others. A mass of arson, a series of minor attacks in the royal palace, calling in what few favors I have in the royal guard... we have to sow disunity, ensure they come here divided and uneasy."

"With the royal knights leading a siege against this place... I mean, it's as though we're taking the place of the vampires we just wiped. The knight-commander, Jezuit, is an A-rank mage and master warrior well-equipped with old relics. We don't stand a chance," Argrave counseled.

"These favors aren't mere trifles, Argrave," Elenore said coldly. "The sway I have in the capital is enough to cause serious damage."

Argrave nodded. "I believe that. But even if only ten royal knights holed up in the stairs, can we win? They're some of the best-equipped and best-trained fighting forces in Berendar. It'd be impossible to assail, impossible to escape. We're in the heart of the kingdom's power. They can leisurely starve us out, if they want."

"...I know this," Elenore said after a moment of silence. They stopped before the gargantuan golden snake, still bound as ever. Her golden eyes followed them. "Things are as I said. The king wants to possess Vasquer. There is a reason everything happens so quickly, so recklessly. The king's greed, his

desire for Vasquer—*that* will be our best bet of manipulating things in our favor. Once he knows this is no fool's quest, he will stop at nothing to come inside and secure this place."

Elenore slowly slid out of Argrave's grasp, coming to stand on her own. Argrave rubbed his hands together and asked, "Vasquer is the crux of your plan?"

"Probably," Elenore nodded. "Do you know why those in central Vasquer remain loyal to Felipe? In war, he always led the charge, fought side-by-side with his vanguard. Trust me, I know him. We *can* bait him in. As for Vasquer..." Elenore turned to the snake. "She... I still need to talk to her, work things out. But before I do that, I need to know one thing. Levin—does something like this have precedent? Precedent in this game of yours?"

Argrave's gaze narrowed as he thought. "Levin is... a bit power-hungry, but he's a coward. He stays by Felipe's side because he doesn't think that his father is capable of being usurped, of being defeated. He's an opportunist. He'll take risks, but only if he can mitigate any harm that might come of them. Simply put, no. I don't understand why he's doing something like this."

"Nor do I. My people have evidence of underhanded things he's done—Magnus' murder, embezzlement, abuses of power... he hired men to provoke Induen's royal guard into attacking the people here at Dirracha, effectively starting a battle between the Margrave and the royal family, and by extension this whole war. That last one has no proof, but a woman under my employ testifies as much..." Elenore shook his head. "The first order of business is to get that all of that evidence out there. But given what he's just done, I have to assume he's planned for as much. Not to mention... he has someone planted among my men, getting word out. The traitor still needs to be dealt with."

Argrave frowned sharply at the revelation Levin was behind Magnus' murder. Elenore either didn't catch or didn't care about his expression, for she turned to Vasquer and reached out. "Quickly. No time for thoughts, feelings, distractions. It would be best if you talked to her with me," Elenore urged.

In truth, the prospect of speaking to Vasquer again brought Argrave pause. Nonetheless, he pulled free his glove and reached out, hand resting against the metallic-feeling scales of the gigantic golden snake.

Once again, the nearly violating presence seeped into Argrave's mind. The snake was once again quite accommodating of his discomfort... yet Elenore must have sent some knowledge of the situation over, for an inquiry came about their present situation.

Argrave simply plainly laid out the last conversation he'd had in its entirety, offering it to Vasquer. Understanding and concern returned. Argrave felt strangely nostalgic. It was like having a phone call with his mother where he'd told her some of his problems, and he'd receive a genuine offer of help. At once, understanding fell upon him—understanding of why Elenore valued this big snake so much.

That made him hesitate to leave her to Felipe's clutches.

Yet before the thought could take root, something came—human thoughts, this time, and human feelings. Argrave accepted them. At once, Elenore's plan of action came rushing into his mind, soon after supplanted by Vasquer's promise of cooperation.

Argrave stood there for a moment, grinding his teeth. Then, he slowly took his hand off, and turned back to his companions. “It seems I’ll need your help. The binding around Vasquer’s jaw—it needs to be removed. And we’ll be needing a sharp blade.”

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 252: Kingfish Lured**

Felipe stood at the mouth of his Dragon Palace, looking over his city. A multitude of golden-armored knights gathered around him, like gilding to his own black armor. His long, black hair flowed down his back like a cloak, a patch of gray atop his head. His beard showed yet more gray hair... yet his stony eyes were alert, sharp, unburdened by the ravages of age.

Myriad voices bubbled around him. People pushed past his knights, offering letters or speaking reports... some diplomat had been exposed for accepting bribes, some noble secretly harbored rebellious ambitions, the replacement steward was working for House Parbon... and back within the palace, Felipe heard distant screaming.

“Jezuit,” Felipe said loudly.

“Your Majesty,” a knight at his side answered, bowing his head in deference. His golden helm bore a dragon crest just above its visor—a recognizable symbol of authority that marked him as the knight commander.

Felipe reached to his side and drew his blade. “Choose your best men—fifty, as many spellcasters as you can. Form around me. Push aside any who approach; diplomats, nobility, it doesn’t matter. The rest... send them to quell the chaos.”

“Of course, your majesty,” the knight responded at once. “Yet if I may offer counsel, we must screen—”

“The name of the Bat inspires near as much fear as mine. All of this... death throes. It is a sign Levin has not disappointed. I have to be there, personally—I cannot leave this task to another to muck it up. And Jezuit...” Felipe turned his gaze down, finally, looking upon the knight-commander. “Do not forget I served as knight-commander beneath my father before you took the position. My orders are absolute, and not to be questioned unduly.”

The knight-commander pounded his fist against his breastplate and lowered his head. “Your Majesty. At once,” he said, voice betraying no offense.

Jezuit went off, barking orders. The royal knights, though tightly packed, rearranged themselves as efficiently as a well-oiled machine. Only one remained near Felipe’s side—a small man, bearing a helmet that was far too large for his head. He held it up to the king.

Felipe took the helm and put it over his head. His helm was made in the image of a cobra. Though its base was a functional great helm, black metal concealed the hard steel beneath it, and a cobra’s face seemed to supplant his own. Its mouth seemed designed in imitation of a demon’s, though, for it possessed far too many teeth and an aspect of terror beyond that of a mere snake.

Before a minute could pass, a guard of the best of the royal knights surrounded Felipe, and Jezuit bowed to inform the king. Just then... a great fire roared to life in the furthest point of the city walls. Felipe adjusted his helmet to block its light.

"The Bat squirms beneath my boot. March!" Felipe shouted, voice echoing.

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"If I'd known we'd use these, I might've watered them less," commented Argrave, watching as people quickly ran, carrying drenched bundles of plants. These had been used not an hour ago to suppress their party from advancing into the catacombs. Time had dried them somewhat, fortunately.

"It'll require more fire, but it's completely manageable," Elenore said calmly. "Barring Vasquer, these herbs are the best thing we've got to get out of this. I know the royal guard's enchantments well—I had them studied before. Their enchantments certainly don't account for poison like this. But then again... neither can my men resist them. It's a double-edged sword. All we have is the benefit of holding that sword."

Argrave nodded, feeling nervous. He wasn't sure if everybody could make it out of this situation unharmed... and he wasn't simply speaking of Elenore's men. Galamon took on much risk.

"He's entered the central square," Anneliese reported, monitoring Felipe.

"Central square..." Elenore grasped her chin. "Five more minutes, perhaps." Elenore turned her head to Argrave, expression dire. "Your pets. Your companion. There'll be no issue placing them in such...?"

"Took me eight hours to catch these Brumesingers," Argrave said, reaching into his pocket where he knew one was. He grabbed its neck, holding it up. Its fur was all but black by this point, matching well with his own appearance. "And that was knowing *exactly* what I fought against. Our foes will fight warriors of mist pointlessly, expending themselves. These guys have gorged on souls for months—time to put all that accumulation to good use. As for Galamon... he's survived the worst of everything. He'll be able to do his part."

"We're trying to lure them in and create an opportunity for escape, not hold them off. Holding them off is the worst outcome," Elenore said pointedly.

"Should've just left in a small group," Durran said quietly. He knelt on the floor, glaive leaning against his shoulder as he stared at the distant set of steep stairs. "Winged it from there."

"Of all people, the man who lectured me about using my abilities for good suggests we simply leave?" Elenore said angrily.

Durran looked back. "You're no good to anyone dead."

"Durran. If leaving quietly was the best plan, I'd have taken it. We have no wyvern on hand, in case you forget, and there isn't one to steal. Elenore's men are our only avenue of escape. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut," Argrave commanded him in a low voice. "Now is the last time for complaints like that."

The tribal looked away, then rose to his feet. Argrave could tell he felt a bit embarrassed. Then, his eyes jumped off to the side.

Galamon stood there, a pile of what appeared to be gold in his hands. "Got them. This enough?"

“Probably too much. Vasquer insisted, though,” Argrave nodded, stepping forth to examine the scales and feathers from Vasquer’s body. “You’re certain seeing these will make Felipe go along with things?”

Elenore crossed her arms and nodded. “I’ve spent the majority of my adult life doing my business right under the king’s nose. I understand all it takes to make him step forward or make him stay quiet. He values Vasquer. He thinks everyone is incompetent besides himself. The moment he’s certain Vasquer is present... he’ll come personally, secure her.”

Argrave tapped one golden scale, then looked to Vasquer, giving the big snake a nod of respect. “Good enough for me. We’ll take our spot,” he said, leaving Elenore behind with a wave.

“So—we’re on traitor-stopping duty?” Durran turned back.

“Protection,” Elenore nodded. “Whoever Levin has planted might make their move, and I’d rather not be undefended.”

Durran thumbed at Anneliese. “She can see through anyone’s thoughts, let me tell you. You’re in good hands.”

Elenore took a deep breath and exhaled. “We’ll see.”

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“It’s clear, your Majesty,” Jezuit reported to Felipe.

Glancing around the city of Dirracha, the king saw people running and screaming. Any that came near the royal guards pleading for help were cast to the ground just as Felipe had instructed. His gaze briefly lingered on the smoke rising from the Dragon Palace atop the mountain this city surrounded, yet he turned his head and ducked into the building.

Though once a bar of some sort, a gentleman’s club of good enough repute to enter even the king’s ear, the place had been trashed. In the back, royal knights stepped down into a set of stairs concealed beyond a liquor vault. The king took steady and slow steps deeper within, his caution not fading.

“Your Majesty. There’s a small force, thoroughly entrenched deeper within,” Jezuit explained. “They hauled away these,” Jezuit clapped his hands, and one of his knights stepped forward, kneeling and offering up something.

Felipe took off one of his gauntlets, running his hand across the scale. His eyes paused when he noticed something—black blood on the bottom of the scale. He caught a drop with his finger, then pulled back his helmet to taste it. His eyes wandered, catching sight of golden feathers.

At once, Felipe’s gray eyes hardened. “They have Vasquer, I have no doubt. Report! What was happening within?”

“Your Majesty,” one knight stepped forward, kneeling. “All of the men hauled these scales to a room. It seemed to have some sort of escape in it. I witnessed many more people deeper within with scales of a similar make as this.”

Jezuit briefly turned his head to the guard in confusion but did not contest the point. Felipe’s breathing quickened.

Those words seemed to make up his mind. Felipe stepped forth to the knight that had given his report. "You—lead ten men to this room. Seal it off, proceed down this escape to catch any who might've gone. Jezuit—you and I shall lead an assault with the rest of these men."

"Your Majesty, this report is the testimony of one knight. This entire situation reeks of entrapment. We should proceed careful—" Jezuit began.

Felipe grabbed his knight-commander's gorget. "I've killed Magisters of the Order personally. I've fought against the gods of the wetlands. I marched at the front of our vanguard into the northern kingdoms, bringing each and all under heel. I am to be feared, not afraid. I am not going to stand idly by while they defile my forefather's heritage. Already, they tear her apart," Felipe gestured to the scale.

"You are older now," Jezuit maintained firmly.

King Felipe released his knight-commander. "I can fight as well as I always have. I bear all of what I wore to fight in the wetlands—I will not rest on my laurels while they desperately scrape Vasquer of whatever value she has in their desperate escape."

The king marched forth, putting his gauntlet back on as he walked. Jezuit looked bitter even though his face was hidden by his helmet, but he quickly moved to walk ahead of the king. The matter was decided—they would proceed. The knight-commander barked an order, and the guard swarmed around Felipe, ready to head deeper in.

The king maintained a constant pace down the stairs. On the opposite end, their foes fired enchanted arrows that glowed with magical light as they travelled through the air. The guards were diligent and constant in their protection, yet even as fire and lightning blared near the king, he was unflinching. An arrow struck his shoulder yet bounced harmlessly off, an explosion of flame rendered impotent before whatever magic protected him.

They reached a room that branched off. Several people remained within, one of them an incredibly large man bearing dark gray plate armor.

"I shall catch the escapers, your Majesty!" the knight who'd reported of this escape point earlier promised then ran off, bringing a fair number of the knights along with him.

"Halt!" Jezuit shouted, yet Felipe grabbed his shoulder.

"It is my command, Jezuit. Proceed," the king directed.

The group of royal knights escorting their king pressed forth incredibly quickly. Shield-bearers at the front had grown accustomed to the manner in which their foes attacked, and used their enchanted guards to great effect. Each room was checked for enemies. As they came close enough to slaughter those archers they fought, a milky white mist started to form around their party, dense enough to block sight.

The frontline began to face dark-skinned elven warriors of a kind Felipe had never seen before. They were quite skilled, yet without enchanted weaponry, they fell quickly. Even still, there was such a great bulk of them that progress began to stall. As soon as one fell, they retreated for another to take their place.

Felipe held his hand out. “Clear!” he shouted, and the royal knights looked back. In seconds, they ducked aside. And seconds after, a great wave of white proceeded forth, an icy mist coupled with biting fangs. It tore through all foes ahead, dispersing the mist and leaving a wide-open stairway.

“A magic of some sort,” Felipe declared. “Proceed.”

One final set of stairs awaited deeper within. Though Felipe had his men scan each room they passed by, none were large enough to accommodate a snake of any kind, nor did any lead deeper. Instead, they finally made it to one large, too-steep set of stairs. Felipe could plainly see the enemy retreating. Those conjured elven warriors had screened their escape.

With Jezuit leading, they quickly proceeded down the steep stairs. Once they descended below a certain point... a vast room opened up before Felipe. It must’ve been larger than even the Dragon Palace, though it was simply and crudely carved. Illuminated by white magic lights, it had a sterile atmosphere.

Yet it was impossible to miss the gargantuan golden snake bound in the back of the room, its great bulk coiled up. This room was made for it, Felipe could tell at once. It consumed far more than half of it.

“Send one man back, Jezuit. All royal knights should come, no matter how devastating the outside remains,” Felipe declared.

Yet back where they had come from, a thick beige smoke danced against the floors, the walls, and the ceiling.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 253: Poisoned Bait**

Vasquer watched Felipe the second she spotted him on the distant steep stairway leading to her prison of centuries. Though Elenore had questioned how she had managed to remain sane here, bound and tortured by vampires over centuries to extract value from her blood and scales, she was not truly imprisoned.

So long as her mind was alive, she could wander where she pleased. Such was the ability of her kin, the Gilderwatchers.

And she had. The past centuries, she had wandered the streets of Dirracha, watching as her descendants built the small settlement that had been the home of their Warrior’s Order into a grand city. Though founding this kingdom had never been her intent, she could not deny some measure of pride. To build, create—there could be no greater act. Perhaps it was merely self-comforting bargaining in her grief at betrayal.

Yet the past thirty years... though the city remained beautiful, the people grew miserable. Taxed to destitution, forced to work by those that had protected them in years past... all of it was the domain of this man before her, this man walking down the stairs. Compared to the vampires, she could not say who would be the worse captor.

Argrave’s pets had given Elenore’s people ample time to get to their place. Already, the beige smoke fell down the stairs, much denser than air. Galamon, the elven vampire, had remained in a room near the top of the stairs, setting the herbs aflame so that reinforcements could not enter... and those within could not leave easily.

Vasquer's role in this was simple. She was to be that which lured Felipe into this chamber. It was simple enough it left room for something else. Vasquer had to know the man who could be lowered to the point that he had—she had to know what sort of man could watch as his daughter was maimed so. She had to know who could debase all of his sons to the point of irreparability.

King Felipe III, who bore the name of her partner, set foot at the bottom of the stairs. She could see his gray eyes behind the cobra helmet he wore. That cobra was a mockery of what Vasquer actually was, she felt. His royal knights scanned the place for threats, yet the king was unceasing in his advance.

Ever closer he walked. Vasquer herself craned her neck forward, having been freed of one of her bindings. Felipe stalled as she stretched... yet ever so slowly, the two inches nearer. The king removed his gauntlet and placed it against Vasquer's nose.

The Gilderwatchers were never numerous, but they shared a common trait. Their talks, their debates... all was directly transmitted from mind-to-mind. This ability extended only to those sharing the blood of the Gilderwatcher. She had not done this to Argrave or Elenore... but if she wanted to know all within, she could obtain what she pleased.

The simple branch of consciousness she extended to Argrave or Elenore became a gleaming golden jaw as she wished it to be and it latched onto the king's thoughts. She tore away all his defenses, pulled at his mind as though it was simply meat instead of something precious. It would not hurt him unless it was prolonged, yet it would give her a glimpse of his true nature.

Vasquer witnessed the core of Felipe III. His thoughts towards his people, his family, his children... the quintessence of that had been rotted away. His ambition had been twisted into a grotesque avarice. His love had been wrought into a possessive claw that would sooner shred something to pieces than lose it. His diligence fueled both of those like the sun upon plants. And the sole sustenance for this all?

Life itself had long ago lost all meaning to Felipe. An apathetic nihilism dictated his actions—a demon of self-sabotage that hurt himself, hurt his children, and hurt the very world. He did what he pleased, caring little for death of any kind. Indeed, Felipe wanted to die. His contradicting greed for life barred him from simply withering away... and instead, it made the world wither with him.

Felipe reeled away, holding a hand to his helmet in shock. His breathing was heavy. Vasquer stared down at him, and his royal knights drew in front of him to bar the giant snake from approaching further. None of that mattered anymore, she felt. She had seen what she needed to. There was no salvaging her descendant, no pulling him free of the brink.

So, Vasquer opened her mouth.

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Argrave, crouching within the giant's snake mouth alongside two others, kept a link to her mind going at all times to see what she saw. So, when light crept past her jaw and illuminated all before him... he knew exactly where to aim this [Bloodfeud Bow] he'd been preparing. He directed Vasquer to reposition her head in the perfect spot.

The royal knights shouted in alarm as soon as they saw Argrave within, yet it was too late to act. Argrave released the arrow that he'd been preparing. Jezuit, the knight-commander, cast a warding spell, and a

white mana ripple split the air. Mana ripples formed when A-rank or higher spells were cast. The ward coalesced from the ripple and took shape before them, and the knight-commander placed himself just before the king in stalwart defense.

Yet [Bloodfeud Bow] was a spell that could defy ranks, and Argrave had put plenty of his black blood into it.

The dark maroon bolt sped out of Vasquer's mouth, striking the resplendent silver A-rank ward. It pierced straight through the magic, entirely obliterated Jezuit's arm and shoulder, and struck the king in the stomach. Felipe shouted in alarm, clutching the bolt with his gauntleted hand as he slid back. His armor was the stuff of legends, and the bolt's ferocious speed had been weakened from piercing the ward and Jezuit. The bolt finally broke in the king's hands, splattering into black liquid.

Felipe fell to one knee, then coughed up blood—he'd been struck in the stomach, and though the blow had not broken flesh, the impact was tremendous. Argrave stepped out of Vasquer's mouth as the royal knights scrambled to protect their king. Having cast [Bloodfeud Bow] twice today, as soon as his feet met the stone, he felt his knees buckle.

Yet there was a reason Argrave was not alone. Two of Elenore's best men remained with him—Anneliese had vetted them, and they were surely not traitors. They set bundles of herbs aflame and tossed them at the royal knights, who still desperately surrounded their king and waited for further attack. The beige, poisonous smoke started to rise up quickly, and they seized Argrave.

A great cloud of the poisonous smoke surged out of the catacombs, directed by Elenore's mages. Though much of it spread out across the vast chamber instead of falling upon the royal knights... it had been meant for two purposes. One—to force the knights on the defense. Two—to screen their escape.

The initial element of surprise gave them a great advantage immediately. With their knight-commander missing an arm, and their king ostensibly in grave danger, the royal knights initiated the same tactic that Argrave had seen with Induen—shielding all of them beneath wards. It was as though a great, golden shell emerged to protect the king.

Elenore's people threw more flaming bundles of herbs at the wards, and though they bounced off ineffectually, they succeeded in one thing—polluting this chamber with yet more of the poisonous smoke.

Argrave, verging on blacking out, did his best to walk along with Elenore's men as they carried him. Ahead, Anneliese headed the remainder's charge out of the catacombs and to the stairs. The surprise had given them significant advantage. Durran was just behind her, carrying Elenore. The surprise of that sight was enough to push past the dim haze pressing against Argrave's mind.

Anneliese held her hand out and cast a B-rank wind spell, [Roaring Wind]. The great curtain of beige smoke that had descended over the steep stairs bounded upwards once hit with the winds. It was like the Red Sea had been parted, and all charged upwards as fast as they could, carrying valuables looted from the vault in the catacombs.

When Argrave finally arrived at the foot of the stairs, he dared a glance back. The king had risen to his feet, one hand held to his stomach. Argrave had a strange sensation that they locked eyes. He dismissed the thought a moment later, feeling it was the effect of his delusions from blood loss.

As Argrave and Elenore's escort stepped up the first flight of stairs, the curtain of poison smoke lifted by Anneliese fell over them. The men took a deep breath, yet the climbing remained slow-going. One inhalation of the smoke made one wince with pain and cough.

"Go ahead," Argrave informed them. "Send Galamon back for me."

"Sir?" the man asked in surprise.

"Don't waste your breath. Valuable in the smoke," Argrave laughed. "Go. Get him."

Though the men expressed hesitance, they hurriedly sat Argrave upon a stone step once they'd made up their minds. Exhausted, Argrave half-crawled forward, listening carefully to what was happening behind him. Even still, the royal knights grappled with the poison screen set around their formation. The stairs were steep enough even climbing one step took all of his energy.

Argrave's Brumesingers ran down the stairs, finally able to rejoin with him. The poison didn't affect them, either, but the smoke was dense enough they could breathe no air. He had not cast a spell... and yet their mist emanated from their fur, surrounding him. At once, southron elven warriors conjured of mist helped him along in a clumsy, bestial way. The foxes did not know how best to help him walk.

Feeling tumultuous winds stir behind, Argrave turned saw some royal knights attempt to cast aside the smoke on the stairs with magic. It was dense, though, and grew denser every second. Time was once again on their side, yet the royal knights pursued quickly.

Ahead, heavy clanging sounded—someone ran down the stairs in plate armor. The second Argrave processed who it might be, Galamon already knelt by Argrave.

"Fool," he cursed him, placing his arm beneath Argrave and lifting him up easily. "Let's go."

The ascent, though not smooth, was very rapid. Much of Galamon's armor was slick with blood, yet the vampire kept a firm grip on him. Argrave barely glimpsed bodies... royal knights, Elenore's men. Some struggled with the poison smoke, coughing and hacking, yet Galamon passed them by.

They arrived at the destroyed gentleman's club, passing through the hidden door behind the liquor vault. Elenore, Anneliese, and Durran awaited, while Elenore's men had mostly collapsed, coughing up smoke on the floor and taking long drinks of water.

"Anneliese scouts a good route to an escape I know, and my men facilitate our escape," Elenore informed Argrave. "You... by the gods, you're pale."

"I'm fine," Argrave said, feeling the phrase had less impact when he was held in someone's arms.

"Most of the royal knights... are returning to the palace. Some commotion," Anneliese said, her Starsparrow returning to her shoulder. "There's a route completely clear of knights. I'll lead us."

Elenore took a deep breath and exhaled. "A lucky break. We move."

Durran stepped in front of her and prepared to carry her once more, but Elenore held her arms out.

"Stop. I can run," Elenore refused.

"You're slow. Your legs are bleeding from those prosthetics," he disagreed, then picked her up despite her protests.

After a while, Elenore let out a resigned huff. "A merchant caravan is waiting for us. More of my men wait there. We must hurry."

#####

"...so the king was injured, Prince Levin, but not killed," a man reported to Levin, out of breath. "Elenore and her entourage escaped, short a few dozen. More than enough to escape the city. They should be en route presently, my prince."

"A shame. I set everything up for things to be easy for them," Levin cupped his chin. "These days, it seems if you throw Argrave against something, he defies logic and kills it... but very well. Looks like a protracted war is the only way." Levin reached forward and patted the man's shoulder. "Good work. Not many trifle with the Bat and get away."

The man collapsed onto his back, breathing heavily. "Thank you, my prince."

Levin nodded and stepped away, only for a golden-armored knight to enter the room. "The royal vault has been breached, my prince."

Levin smiled. "Wonderful. If Felipe had died, we'd be staying... but he hasn't. So, give my men their directive. We'll empty the vault, and then depart." Levin walked over to a balcony, watching the barely restrained chaos still raging in Dirracha. "It seems my father is to be the only Vasquer remaining here."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 254: Rats in Grain**

A man pulled free a wooden hatch, tossing it to the side. He offered his hand to help up someone down below, but a big, gauntleted hand grabbed onto the wood. Galamon pulled himself up, then reached down and grabbed Argrave, hauling him second. Thirdly, Durran offered up Elenore, and he lifted her gently and set her aside. She winced when her prosthetic feet met the ground, and blood dripped down them slowly.

"Gods. Never seen the princess bloodied," noted a woman standing by the door. She wore a wide-brimmed and plumed tellerbarret that partially hid long red hair, and cast a nice shadow over her pretty, scarred face. She bore lightweight chainmail, though much of it was concealed by ostentatious, puffy clothing. Argrave's gaze lingered on her, vision dancing from his haze of blood loss.

"This is Melanie," Elenore said, leaning against a wall. "She's a native of Relize. She'll be leading our caravan there, establishing contact with trustworthy people."

"I know," Argrave straightened, feeling like every part of him was sore. Melanie was yet another protagonist from 'Heroes of Berendar,' and he wasn't eager to deal with this. "Clothes give it away."

Galamon helped Durran and Anneliese up next, then knelt, peering down below. The elven vampire's armor was bloodied and scratched, but any wounds he might've taken in his task of lighting the fires and fending back the royal knights had healed. The man who'd taken off the hatch put it back on, then wiped his hands away.

Argrave looked to be sure that Anneliese was watching, then questioned Melanie, “You’re working solely for Elenore?”

Melanie frowned, yet the scars near her eyes made her seem oddly amused nonetheless. “Don’t answer to you.”

“You do. Answer him,” Elenore said harshly, kicking off where she leaned against.

“No one else funding me, sweetie. The trust you’re showing is utterly flooring,” Melanie said in irritation.

Anneliese gave no indication the woman was lying. Argrave nodded and said, “Let’s be off.”

“Ought to have someone look at that bleeding,” Durran stopped Elenore.

The princess looked ready to refuse, but eventually she nodded. “Once we’re settled in the caravan.”

#####

The caravan they entered was quite a nice one. It was entirely enchanted wood, made for transporting large quantities of grain. The caravan they travelled with had many other carts, each and all identical to the one they resided. It would be a good veil for concealing their movements. Relize constantly had food transported to it—its population was too large to be sustained by local agriculture alone. They would raise no flags travelling this way. Melanie handled all operations outside.

Argrave sat beside Elenore and Anneliese, sandwiched between the two of them on a cushioned bench. He leaned with his back to the wall, utterly exhausted. He slowly ate biscuits that Anneliese gave to him. Galamon and Durran occupied the side opposite them, though without a bench.

Durran held Elenore’s leg and unwound a small iron rod. As he did, a metal clamp around Elenore’s leg slowly loosened. It reminded Argrave of a manual vice. Her leg had been cut by her prosthetics at various points.

“Probably doesn’t need to be so tight,” Durran told her.

“If it’s not tight, it can shift—unimaginably painful if my leg shifts off balance, and I crash to the floor,” she said through clenched teeth. As Durran wordlessly tended to her feet, she laid her head back against a bag of grain.

Argrave chewed, growing content with the sound of the caravan travelling and Durran tending to Elenore. He was unimaginably thankful things had gone as well as they did, considering the circumstances. He had been very worried of parting with someone here.

“The enchanted items you gave me for appraisal...” Elenore said in a sigh. “It’ll take some time for me to get them, I’m afraid. I don’t think they’ll be lost. My men—they’re smart, they know how to hide things. They’ve been hiding from the Order for—”

Argrave leaned up. “Just... think later,” he told her simply, patting her shoulder and offering a smile. With that, he leaned his head back.

Silence reigned for a time—another minute.

"We'll need to keep an eye on what Levin is doing, at least for a few days," Elenore cut back in. "I suspect he was the large cause of the commotion in the royal palace that caused our lucky break. If this is true, he may be—"

"Why don't you put something soft beneath this metal, then?" Durran interrupted. "Look at this. These clamps leave bruises, cut open your skin. And this material itself—it's heavy. And by the gods, why is it gilded? Get some light, sturdy wood. Disgraceful."

Elenore grew silent at Durran's lecturing, growing quiet for another minute.

"The chaos itself is an opportunity. I can think of half a dozen ways to turn a huge profit based on what just occurred. I can turn ten rose gold coins into one hundred based on what happened in Dirracha. It is a disaster, but we should—"

"Elenore," Argrave lifted his head up. "Just say it honestly."

The princess slowly turned her head towards Argrave. The bottom of her lip was trembling. Her face seized up, and she leaned forward onto Argrave. He was puzzled for a few seconds, but her back started to heave. He realized what it was—she was crying.

"Therese, Vasquer... I can't... I can't just..." she babbled, the words muffled beneath his duster. "Why did she do that? Why didn't she just give me up? I... all I've brought her is pain, yet she wouldn't just sell me out. And now they're with *him*, they're both with *HIM*. I can't. I can't just... Why do I get to go, when they... they're both better than me, both suffered more than I have... why couldn't..."

Argrave put his hand to her back, holding her gently. He did nothing but soothe and wait, letting her speak. He listened intently, offering whispered words of comfort where he thought they fit. She deserved this much, he thought. After a time, Elenore went quiet. Argrave briefly questioned if she was asleep, but her breathing was too erratic for that.

"I want to stay," she finally said, voice fried. "A few days... do what I can, try to help them. Try to make sure I can save Therese, protect Vasquer... but it's stupid. I can't. We waste time, we risk exposure, we risk losing more."

"Put that nonsense behind you," Argrave told her. "So we stop for a few days to get apprised of things. So what?"

She finally pulled away. "Staying in the city is a surefire way to be found," Elenore disagreed at once.

"Never said anything about the city. Plenty of secure and remote locations." Argrave adjusted himself to turn his body. "Doing the right thing, doing the most pragmatic thing—more often than not, they're not mutually exclusive. This person... Therese, the one that got captured. You care about her, right?"

Argrave asked, holding his hand out. When Elenore nodded, he snapped his fingers. "Then let's make the attempt."

"It's ridiculous," Elenore said firmly. "She's in the heart of the palace. She'll probably be executed now that her usefulness is at an end, or maybe disposed of quietly by Levin." Elenore shook her head. "And Vasquer... I know Felipe won't harm her. I know it. Why am I caught up in this?"

Argrave put his hand on her own, and she looked over. "So you learn that. You do what you can—all that you can. It might be that what you learn sticks with you... but I can guarantee doing nothing will haunt you for the rest of your life."

"...what would you know..." Elenore leaned her head back.

"You forget already?" Argrave leaned in. "I know a lot more about you than probably anyone."

Elenore freed her hand from his grip and crossed her arms defensively. She stayed quiet for a long while, and Argrave started to settle back into his place. Anneliese gave him a smile and handed him another biscuit.

"...I'm sorry," Elenore eventually whispered. "For getting emotional. I can't do that. It's not right. It doesn't have its place. I'm meant to be a boon in your fight, not a child."

"It's not wrong. It's a fact of life. Durran cries himself to sleep every night, muttering about Orion," Argrave kicked the tribal lightly across from him. The tribal looked at him with a resigned, bitter acceptance, not even bothering to deny the lie.

Elenore let out a slow, choked laugh, her throat obviously blocked up. "I hate crying."

"Me too," Argrave agreed.

"It..." Elenore began, then cut off. "When my... when that bastard gouged out my eyes... it was messy. The tears... how they're made... I don't know. Something got damaged. People talk about phantom limbs... I don't know," Elenore trailed off again.

"It's painful," Durran finished. "Literally hurts."

Elenore laughed, then wiped away snot from her nose. "Yeah. Guess Argrave must have told you."

"Nah. Maybe he told Anneliese... but I could tell." Durran looked off to the side. "You try too hard not to cry, you don't address why it's happening in the first place." Durran said, then glanced around to realize everyone was looking at him. Embarrassed, he continued, "Why do I bother saying anything? This touchy nonsense... not good with it. I don't know." Durran scratched the back of his neck, then said optimistically, "But maybe it's good. If my sisters cried more, maybe I wouldn't have had to kill my uncle."

"What?" Elenore questioned incredulously.

Durran threw up his hands. "Forget this. I'm sleeping."

The former tribal rolled over and sprawled across the floor, burying his face in an empty bag used to transport grain. He covered himself with a blanket meant for horses, then rested quietly.

Elenore looked to Argrave, clearly wanting an explanation.

"Well... he..." Argrave began.

"You say a damned word, Argrave," Durran lifted his hand up, voice muffled beneath his makeshift pillow. "I know where you sleep, damn you. I can get to you. Watch yourself. My seven fingers still have a deadly grip. Crush your throat like straw."

Argrave laughed, then leaned back. "It's no big deal. One kinslayer, two kinslayers... it won't make the journey any less safe, I promise."

Elenore's tense body finally settled into the cushioned bench they sat upon. In time, the sound of the caravan's wheels and the horses pulling it forward were the only sounds prevailing.

"Thank you," Elenore said deliberately. "All of you."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 255: Loss**

Levin walked a bridge from the Dragon Palace, heading to a lone tower with a cone roof. Two royal guards stood in front of it. They were large men, just short of Levin's height, and their golden helmets swiveled as they followed the prince's approach.

The prince paused just before the door. "She's awake?" he questioned.

"Yes, prince," the rightward knight nodded.

Levin nodded curtly and shot his cuffs. He fixed his collar, swallowed, then pushed open the door. In the distance, the sound of chains swaying rattled out. The room was dark, the windows mostly blocked by curtains. Levin stepped within hesitantly, then shut the thick door he'd pushed open.

Levin cast a spell, and a ball of light rose up into the air. A woman ahead flinched and gasped, and tried to crawl away.

"Mother. It's fine. It's me," Levin said, stepping closer very slowly with his hands spread out to show he meant no harm.

Light from his spell illuminated the woman. She was pale, dreadfully thin, and bound in a straitjacket. She had blonde hair, but it was unwashed, matted, and greasy. Her bright blue eyes shone back against the light like sapphires. Felipe had married Valeria because of those eyes, so the tale went—they reminded him of his first wife's.

"Where's my husband?" the woman asked. "He's the king. Once you're found... cut your losses. Let me go, I can let you live. I can give you a pardon. My husband listens to me. Once you're found..."

Levin paused, studying her face. Though she had been bound in a jacket to protect her from harming herself, it hadn't stopped it completely. Her lips had been bitten into tattered shreds. Her fingers couldn't grow back—she'd eaten those. But her lips could be healed.

Feeling encouraged by her clarity, Levin knelt. "You're here for your own good, mother. Let me treat your face."

The woman flinched away as Levin extended his hand... yet when healing magic started to close the cuts on her lip, she gradually accepted things.

"My baby..." Valeria said.

"That's right. I'm here," Levin nodded, smiling excitedly.

"Where is Orion? Where is he? Where's my baby?" she demanded harshly. "I want to see him."

Levin's smile morphed subtly, and he looked to the ground, eyes dead. He bit his lips hard enough to draw blood, then shook his head. "I'm going to be leaving, mother. For good."

Valeria glared at him, bloodshot eyes darting around in a frenzy.

Levin lifted his head up. "I've been working together with a coalition of northern nobles unhappy with my father. We're going to split from Vasquer... form the Kingdom of Atrus. I'm going to be crowned its first king." Levin clasped his hands together. "Really... never thought to call myself that."

If the woman he called mother heard and understood him, she hardly showed it.

"But I don't think this will last. Maybe I'll be proven wrong... but really, it's just an excuse not to get involved in the war. These northern nobles, they want to stay out of the fighting. I offered that opportunity. And then, when the fighting dies down... I'll negotiate a spot in the new Vasquer from a position of strength. Whether Orion's running things, or Argrave, or Elenore... doesn't matter." Levin shook his head, then sat.

"I don't want to be king. Never expected it. Never sought it," Levin continued. "But... more and more, I see my father slipping away from what he usually does. He's losing it. And Argrave... to see his progress... if even he can succeed as he has, I realize now that it's time for me to do something."

"My husband will stop you," Valeria said, pushing away from Levin with her feet. The chains that bound her rung. "Wait. This rebellion of yours... another footnote in our history."

Levin turned his head back to his mother. "I can get you out of here, mother. I want to help you. Your son wants to help you. If I'm your son... just say it. I'll help."

Valeria stopped trying to crawl away. "I saw the lilies dance upon the grave of a dead world. I saw them. I saw the coming terrors. He will end you all. The black one is coming for you. The ground will split for his wrath. Time itself will end. We must be united. Stop!" she screamed manically.

Levin rose to his feet and spoke over her screams, declaring, "Felipe isn't going to be doing anything. He's going to wait in this fortress of his, more and more allies forsaking him day by day. I'm going to ruin him. All that he's had me do over the years—murders, abductions, hiding his sexual escapades, spreading the plague... I kept records of it. Everyone's going to get their hands on it: incontrovertible proof. His allies will abandon him. His espionage network will wither," Levin tapped his chest. "And after his vault is emptied, after Relize joins Atrus... he'll have no money. So... it's over."

Queen Valeria started to sob hysterically. Levin clenched his teeth together tightly, looking down at her. Then, with a quiet rage, he turned on his heel and left. He pushed open the great door to the tower, and slammed it shut behind him.

"Come," he told the royal knights as he passed by. "We're done."

#####

The cart that Elenore had commandeered for their journey to Relize stopped at a quaint little village a fair distance away from Dirracha. The excuse used was that the cart had a destroyed wheel, and it would take some time for repairmen to arrive as the wheels were enchanted. Well, that alibi was made reality when Melanie destroyed the wheel... but that was the pretext.

In the coming days, Elenore eagerly made use of Anneliese and her Starsparrow to transport messages long distances. With her help, she could operate effectively for hundreds of miles near instantaneously. The princess saw the full use of such a thing, and constantly spoke of sending word to Elaine to acquire some of these spells, integrate them into her personnel. Argrave was excited of the potential of druidic magic integration as well.

A full assessment of the damage done by the king's untimely visit was made after the first day. The damage to Elenore's network was significant. In essence, Felipe's attack told the world at large two things—the Bat was not a friend to the king, and the Bat had been concealing the companion of the first king, the great snake Vasquer.

The assault had effects beyond the body count numbering near fifty. People that were closely entwined with Vasquer and the royal family would be less likely to do business with the Bat, now—she was an open enemy of the kingdom. Yet even so... the public would likely be equally focused on another shocking thing.

Levin released a record of all the king's wrongdoings. Argrave noticed immediately that most of these wrongdoings Levin himself had perpetrated... yet it was the nature of things. The prince departed from Vasquer, claiming he could not bear to support his father anymore after what had come to light. This move completely batted aside the mutually assured destruction Elenore had hoped for. Levin got away having pillaged the royal vault, and he brought a vast retinue of royal knights to the north. They numbered near one hundred.

Rumors swirled that Levin intended to put himself forth as a claimant to Vasquer, or that he sought to break free of Vasquer and form an independent realm, or that he would merely retire to a simple estate in the north. Barring that the last one was far-fetched given his knightly escort, Argrave didn't know which held any truth. Elenore couldn't parse through them any better.

As for Vasquer—the snake, not the kingdom or the dynasty—their prediction proved to be accurate. It was impossible to avoid leaking to the public that Vasquer had been found. Felipe had the giant snake tended to by mages and paraded this fact to the public enthusiastically. Even still, the purge in the palace had been thorough, and Elenore could not get any genuine details as to what the monarch intended to do with the snake.

Yet the princess had another reason for staying. Therese. Elenore told Argrave the girl had been a maid that had been a bit naïve, yet steadfastly loyal and willing to get her hands dirty with some simple tasks. Elenore had trusted no one more.

Now, the princess stood before a simple wooden coffin, head turned downwards.

"You're going to... open it?" Durran questioned, standing off to the side.

"Pointless. I can perceive that within with these items," Elenore gestured towards her jewelry. "Therese is dead."

"Right," Durran nodded. "Forget I..." he trailed off, realizing it would be best to stop talking.

Argrave gently rubbed her back as Elenore stood before the coffin. Argrave didn't know what else to do. In a family with many cousins, uncles, and other such distant relatives, he'd been to many funerals

where other people were sad while he knew nothing. It was best to stay quiet, offer nothing more than warmth. So he thought, at least.

"She was tortured," Elenore said hollowly. "Long while. Long enough it nearly killed her on its own. Then... once Levin presented his story, everything he got out of her... he killed her quickly." Elenore shook her head. "All I could get."

"You have my condolences," Galamon offered her, head bowed.

Elenore nodded. "I killed her. I ruined her. Took something white, made it black. Covered her in blood. And until the end..." Elenore knelt down, placing one hand atop the coffin for support. "I should be in there."

"You're trivializing what she did, then," Durran informed her coldly. "She made her own choices."

Elenore lifted her head up, her face flushed. "I trivialize nothing. Honest people get ruined by scum like me—that's the way of the world. I'm..." Elenore swallowed, then rose. "She's dead because of me. I told her to trust me. She did. And now..." Her chin tremored. "How am I any different than my father?"

"Don't say things like that," Argrave said with a quiet strength. "You never harmed her. You didn't abduct her. Levin did. Felipe did."

"But I did. She had her youth, she had her innocence, and I tore her away from all that, used her, tossed her aside," Elenore said, voice growing in speed and intensity by the second until she suddenly stopped. "I need... alone," she said an incomplete sentence, and then stepped away.

Argrave watched as she walked away, feeling his gut wrench. He bit his lip and then looked back to the coffin.

"Nice job, Argrave," Durran said.

Argrave looked towards the tribal. "What did I do?"

Durran held his hand in the direction Elenore had walked away. "Really necessary to force this to happen? What good does it do? Does it build character? She's got plenty of that, you little bastard."

Argrave stood there, mouth agape. He didn't have a response ready. Durran stared back at him for a long while, then shook his head and turned away.

Argrave felt someone walk up beside him. "Please... treat his words as wind," Anneliese said quietly. "He does not mean it. He is merely frustrated."

Argrave looked to her. "I don't know. Maybe he's right."

Anneliese said nothing. Even the elf, empath as she was, seemed just as lost as Argrave in moments like these.