

Jackal 261

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 261: Vying for Primacy

Orion laid his gaze upon towering gray walls. He was no stranger to such sights—be they in Mateth or in Dirracha, he had seen walls standing near hundreds of feet tall, enclosing all that within and protecting it in the same turn. But this was not Vasquer, and yet these gray walls stood like giants in this endless black desert, nestled at the bottom of a crater. He had always been proud of his people's feats. He did not expect to see their equal in this unforgiving, if beautiful, desert.

The prince stepped closer. Orion had gone south, south, and south again, running into village and town and city in equal turns. All rejected him, yet at all stops he received yet more tales of this land of Sethia—a place that was free of the burden of the leadership of the Vessels of Fellhorn. All was as Durran described, even the great curtain walls before him.

When he neared, he spotted a caravan of a strange people lingering outside the gate. The gate guards, though nearby, did not seem to bristle at these people's presence. Their skin was as black as night, their ears were half the side of their head, their height was greater than that of man, and their guardsmen had a familiar looking weapon in hand. They wore strange and luxurious silken clothing.

Orion walked to them with slow, heavy steps, an innocent curiosity driving him forward. As he neared, their heads turned towards him, watching, waiting. They prepared themselves for anything, yet as he neared, one broke off.

"Argrave?" one asked, half in disbelief.

Orion paused, standing before the southron elves of the Burnt Desert.

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"Your brother was a savior to us all," said Corentin. He was a one-legged, one-eyed veteran, and he kindly handed the prince a cup billowing steam.

Orion accepted the cup from the southron elf, turning towards the fire. They encamped within a small, secluded alcove on the edge of the city Sethia.

"Why do we camp away from the city?" Orion questioned. "Are your people barred from entering?"

"No," Corentin answered, walking with a limp on account of his missing leg. He used his glaive like a walking stick as he moved around the various others sitting around the fire. "No, we can enter. But all that most know of Argrave is that he was black-haired and gray-eyed. You might be mistaken for him."

"Is that a bad thing?" Orion looked down at the cup, taking a drink. It was a tea of some sort—a strong, fruity flavor that left a strange tingling on his tongue.

Corentin paused his walk. He ground the bottom of his glaive against the sand, then tossed it aside, awkwardly moving to sit. He splayed his iron peg leg out before him, sighing as he sat.

"Argrave saved the city. But a lot of people were too blind to see it. Misled by someone named Titus," Corentin shook his head. "But... even still, it all turned out alright in the end."

“Argrave killed the Lords of this land—that’s what I know,” Orion said, half-questioning.

“Aye. He killed the Lord of Silver, a hand of a god,” Corentin said, somewhat proudly. “The Lord of Copper was slain by my people, and the Lord of Gold was slain by the Lord of Copper.”

Orion frowned—a lot of similar-sounding names came at him at once. “And these people—they were tyrants? They were cruel to their own?”

Corentin nodded. “Unimaginably so. They could Drain people—that is, absorb their very essence to strengthen themselves. They bore Blessings from their god that made them control water absolutely. Beyond that, they kept slaves, breeding them for desirable appearances.” A nearby southron elf handed the old warrior a cup of his own tea, and he drank from it. “But all that’s done now. The slaves to Copper and Silver rejoined the humans at Sethia. We accepted the elven slaves of the Lord of Gold into our tribe... but that’s not been easy.”

Orion nodded and downed the drink that he’d been given. He sat there for a moment, thinking. Slavery was something that was wrong—this he had been taught by the gods. And even by his own reasoning, he would not like to be forced to do something for another; consequently, he should not force another in that manner. Yet...

“Why did Argrave get involved here?” Orion questioned.

“So far as I know, he needed something that belonged to the Lord of Silver,” Corentin said musingly. “He simply needed to create some chaos to obtain it.”

Orion’s grip tightened around the cup. “So this... was a by-product?”

Corentin frowned, burnt eye seeming monstrous in the shadow of the flame. “No. Argrave could have chosen to have us all killed, remained safe by siding with the Lord of Copper. But he infiltrated that man’s tower, subverted him, and liberated this city. Now... you see it prosper. There were three giant towers of precious metal there months ago. They’re gone, now. They’ve been melted, minted into currency. Titus builds up this city day-by-day, preparing for the coming reckoning.”

Orion nodded, somewhat contented by this answer. “But why... why might Argrave be unwelcome, if he truly did all of this?”

“That would be Titus’ fault,” Corentin noted. “It... he framed Argrave and Durran. It was a complicated situation,” the southron elf shook his head. “I cannot bring myself to hate the man, though. Titus treats us elves fairly, promotes our interests in turn with his own. He’s done right by us. Both of our peoples prosper. And his city accepts refugees, builds itself up, promotes expansion...” Corentin sighed. “Much as I hate it, I must overlook what he did.”

“But why? Why did Titus frame Argrave?”

Corentin lowered his cup and set it down. “I could tell you what I saw. I was there when it happened. But... there’s another I know, one who’s been in contact with us. He knew Titus quite well, from what I understand. The man wears the mask of a boar. Perhaps you’d best talk to him.”

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Though Argrave felt some urgency as soon as he heard the news that a delegate from Levin's burgeoning kingdom of Atrus had entered Relize, after a brief discussion with Elenore and Anneliese he decided it would be best for them to remain within the Dandalan estate. After all, even despite the presence of potentially hostile foes, their goal did not change—winning over Leopold.

The head of the family went off to the second story to convene with his ridiculously large family, escorted by the diligent Ansgar. Elenore, meanwhile, sent off Melanie to gather information. Undoubtedly her agents were paying attention, and even if they weren't, the arrival of such a delegate could not avoid attention. The Dandalans were not opposed to allowing Melanie's reentry—it was a good sign. Still, Argrave felt sorry for the servants who would have to move aside those two giant marble doors each time.

"I'm thinking this is not good," Argrave told Elenore.

They had been given a private place to wait inside the mansion. It was a comfortable *longue* room with little in the way of decoration, but much in the way of comfort. Argrave sunk back into one of two couches placed opposite each other, one foot tapping against the ground anxiously.

"I think you're wrong," Elenore shook her head.

Argrave leaned in quickly. "We're on Levin's side? I missed the memo," he spread his arms out. "I think a kingdom has more to offer than we do, balkanized state or no. If Levin is here to bring Relize under Atrus..."

"This was an inevitable confrontation, if a poorly timed stage," Elenore admitted. "But... if Levin does genuinely intend to remain neutral and renegotiate peace with the victor... we might find that out now. And we might iron out simple terms of alliance. It's best to seek out that opportunity."

Argrave sunk back into the couch as she spoke. Truth be told, he didn't like Levin. Whether in the game or in his present reality, he was someone to be despised. Even still... much the same could be said of Elenore. She had done terrible things. The difference, he felt, was that one could be redeemed. And one had never been needlessly cruel... only pragmatically so.

Levin was closer to Induen in that way. And someone like Induen... Argrave had made his thoughts on the matter rather clear.

"I agree with Elenore on this," Anneliese said quietly.

Argrave lifted his head up and looked to her. The elven woman had a bitter but resigned look to her.

Pushing his tongue against his cheek, Argrave said slowly, "Alright. If I'm in the minority..." he left his accession unspoken. "Still, I'm not sure how you intend to get words to these delegates. Even if you do, Levin might not even be present."

"Provided Leopold agrees..." Elenore trailed off.

"I think he will," Anneliese contributed. "Just judging from the state of him when we parted."

"If that's true," Elenore nodded, "I think we might use Leopold's connections to speak to this party. These delegates will surely visit patrician families—Leopold might have ties we can use to our

advantage. Or, if we're lucky, the family they seek out will already have some of my people in some positions. It's not likely. Patrician families have proven difficult for me to get a handle of in the past."

The door opened, and all turned their head. Melanie entered confidently, glancing around before shutting the door.

"I've got a bead on the delegate," Melanie announced. "They rode by horses, otherwise we might've gotten advance notice... they're currently meeting with the Yiasten family."

"Gods... I can't integrate druidic magic fast enough..." Elenore lamented. "Yiasten... as I recall, this is but one branch of the family. Another holds the title of count in the distant north. In Atrus, as I recall. That would mean the delegate likely has Count Edgar Yiasten... he's a shrewd diplomat, as I hear."

The door burst open, and Melanie narrowly dodged it with a quick step forward. Ansgar and Leopold stood there. His sixty-year-old son helped him stand—it made quite an awkward scene, seeing as how both looked near the same age.

"The delegates visit Yiasten," Leopold said with a fire that belied his age. Half out of breath, he fumed, "Those pencil-pricks... turning up their damned nose at all the other patricians... and now, they have yet another thing to brag about at Grand Councils. Well... well, let's see if they can brag."

Argrave rose to his feet and opened his mouth to ask a question.

"Don't ask a stupid question. Yes, I'm on your side. I'll not see Atrus promote Yiasten to lord over this city, as I'm sure will happen if I do nothing. My children agree, because they're smart." Leopold broke off into a cough and waved away Ansgar when he tried to help him. "But damn it... this won't be easy. Yiasten... gods be damned, Yiasten..."

Argrave straightened. "You can get comfortable, Leopold. Working together, I can say we'll prove to you we're competent."

"Is that why you looked all anxious and were muttering between each other when I burst in?" Leopold coughed a little once more. "Ridiculous... stairs. Why is the council on... second floor," he said, catching his breath. "Boy... or should I call you king already? There is a huge difference between putting a notion to the Grand Council for voting... and having an active opponent. We'll be fighting for leadership."

"And if we can make Yiasten's primary proponent hinder him?" Anneliese said. "Have a seat, Leopold."

"Thank you, but there's something I must do first," Leopold shook his head. "The Grand Council will convene for this matter. But we... we have two advantages. None know of your presence here," Leopold pointed to Argrave with his arthritic fingers. "And that leads to our second advantage. We're going to host the Grand Council. I can pull some strings... and hosting the event, that's the most important thing." Leopold took a deep breath. "The host controls the flow of things, after all."

"Doesn't change the fact that Atrus has more to offer," Elenore said. "Don't be so certain we have an opponent, Leopold. Who knows what Levin wants? He could wish to ensure Relize's neutrality, win them to his side, or simply stir up the waters..." Elenore leaned back in the couch. "Regardless, everything is an opportunity if examined in the right light."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 262: Logistics of a Battle

“Not much has changed,” Argrave said as he read down the list. Anneliese rested her head on his shoulder, reading with him. With their alliance secured, Leopold accommodatingly allowed them to move their agents and things into the mansion. Though many of the people had come, many remained outside for the sake of caution. “All of these families were pretty prominent. It’s no surprise they’re on the Grand Council.”

“You think you’ll be able to get them to support us?” Elenore asked Argrave.

Argrave put the paper down and rose to his feet, looking out the window of Leopold’s mansion. He could see the river that split the city, the waters still alive with boats even this late at night. “Certainly. I know most of them well enough, and these days I think of myself as quite the ideologue.” Argrave scratched at his chin. “I’m more concerned about who might be on the delegate’s side.” Argrave looked to Elenore. “You really have nothing? Who’s missing in Atrus?”

“My agents in Atrus were largely preoccupied with another matter,” Elenore shook her head wistfully. “I don’t know who was sent.”

“And what is that other matter?” Argrave pressed.

“Well...” she paused, turning around. “Levin purged a good majority of my agents in the palace, if you’ll recall. Don’t worry about it, though—all will be fine. Put it out of your mind,” she brushed it off then quickly added, “As for the matter of that marriage Leopold requested, I think I can work something out.”

Argrave frowned as she changed the subject to that. He hadn’t been especially pleased that she’d so readily volunteered to handle the marriage.

“Who?” he pressed, stepping forward.

“A debt of mine. No one you’ve associated with—a southern family swearing fealty to Duke Sumner. Count Suchaz’s daughter.” Elenore shook her head. “He owes me too much to reasonably pay back. I’ll wipe some of his debt for this.”

“You were the one so off-put by his age, now you’ll consign some young woman to this one hundred-and-fourteen-year-old man?” Argrave said forcefully.

“You protest,” Elenore noted, turning back around.

Just then a door opened, and Galamon and Durran entered. Durran gazed around wondrously, while Galamon moved to sit on the couch in the room they’d been given.

“Quite a place, wouldn’t you—” Durran said, then trailed off when he caught the confrontation between Argrave and Elenore obviously brewing. “I’m going to go sit,” he dismissed tiredly, stepping past them.

“Would you like to marry Leopold?” Argrave asked her.

“Of course not,” Elenore shook her head. “We talked about this, no? In the face of *Gerechtigkeit*, it is more compassionate to be dispassionate. This is what the man wants—we give it to him. It’s for the good of the realm. The good of the world.”

"I hate that you're right," Argrave shook his head, hands moving about frustratedly. "It's just... can't we choose someone who thinks the same thing? Someone who isn't just being sold off by their parents to settle a debt?"

Elenore put one hand on her waist, the bronze jewelry on her finger clanging as she thought. "Argrave, I don't think—"

"I think I know someone," Anneliese cut in.

Argrave turned his head towards her. "Who? I can't think of anyone we've met," he shook his head.

"You have never met them. She was an old friend of mine back in Veiden," Anneliese shook her head. "She is... a bit of an eccentric. She was friends with me, after all. I think she's seventy-two this year. She had strange thoughts about marriage and life. I imagine an arrangement with Leopold might actually entice her, provided he refrains from limiting her freedom."

Argrave frowned. "Does that... I mean, will Leopold really..."

"You heard him speak of us," Anneliese said pointedly. "He seems to bear Veidimen no ill will. Indeed, he expressed interest. At the very least, it is worth broaching."

Argrave stared, a little stunned, then laughed. "Yeah... I mean, yeah," he turned his head back to Elenore, who seemed to be having similar thoughts as Argrave was.

"Then it's settled," Elenore concluded. "For now, we focus on this upcoming Grand Council meeting."

"Less time for imbuing practice," Argrave said in resigned dismay, then picked back up the paper he'd discarded. "Guess we focus on currying favor with the one percent."

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Leopold's powerbase within Relize was not merely a theoretical thing. The man moved efficiently to do exactly as he had promised Argrave.

Generally, the Grand Council met at a building known as the Assembly Chamber of Commerce and Governance. Before a single day had passed, a mysterious accident took place within the Assembly Chamber—there was an unforeseen incident regarding the sewage system, and much of the place would reek of things most foul for a long, long while. Following this tragedy, by letter and by delegate, Leopold volunteered to host the Grand Council in his home.

The patricians of the Grand Council were not blind—they could smell something foul afoot beyond merely the sewage in the Assembly Chamber. Elenore and Leopold collaborated to spread a rumor this was done after the slight of Pedreddin raids on Dandalan ships. Leopold wanted to raise his family's prestige and ensure a fitting punishment for the Pedreddin family. Before long, that rumor reached all in the city.

And so, in time, Leopold's suggestion was accepted. They would hold the Grand Council in his home, on the second floor generally reserved for personal meetings with his family. This was a great victory—controlling the grounds that they met would enable Argrave to speak to prospective council members easier and would similarly allow them to suppress Yiasten.

Yet regarding their rivals, and the delegate from Atrus... it was impossible to tell what Yiasten did and did not know. Their family had entered a state of relative lock down—the delegates did not leave, their servants betrayed nothing, and no news of their intents spread beyond their estate. It cut off Elenore's plans to make early contact. Nonetheless, the stage for the first battle had been set splendidly.

With the groundwork done, all that remained was the actual politics. Between Leopold and Elenore, Argrave had two keys to the beating heart of Relize. He took full advantage of that. He knew much about many of the patricians within Relize, but he wasn't so foolish enough to think that he could get by coasting on his now months-rusty knowledge.

"These two cannot be sat near each other," Leopold tapped the document firmly. "It's best to remember everyone's last names, ensure they never meet—something about them... it's in the blood, their feud. My family will do what it can to keep them separate. Typically, one can only have one family member at a council meeting... but many of my children will be attending as servants. They're good at this game," Leopold assured.

"Alright. I can do that," Argrave nodded, already committing the names to memory.

Leopold nodded, straightening his back. "Yes... from all I've seen, you'll be quite good at this. But... and know that I mean no offense, Argrave... is it necessary to bring your fiancée? I have no issue with your elven bride. Most of the patricians are rather uncaring much the same: discrimination is bad for business, after all. We have large minorities within Relize itself, and they are given a vote to decide the District Council every bit the same as any other citizen. Even still... these things are best brought to light slowly. Perhaps Anneliese ought to remain aside."

Argrave shook his head at once. "Anneliese is invaluable in places like this. She has a knack for understanding people, and she gives counsel that cannot be rivalled. Besides—I'm told the south misconstrued our engagement as me having ties to Veiden. Business-wise, wouldn't that be promising for you patricians? A whole new business partner?"

"I can attest to Anneliese's acumen... for what it's worth," Elenore contributed.

Leopold stroked his beard. "I suppose I could pitch it like that... and even then, you have that reform you mentioned to me. Your trump card," he shook his head. "But we trade by sea, not by the ocean. A great mass of land divides the North Sea from the ocean. If it were practical... it would already be happening."

"That's a shame," Argrave lamented. "I suppose this means you won't be interested in this prospective bride? A prospective trade route with an untapped market?"

Leopold raised a brow. "What do you speak of?"

"Well... let's talk about Veiden for a bit, Leopold. I've been travelling with two Veidimen. I have some ties, you see."

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Ansgar fixed Leopold's attire diligently. They looked like two elderly brothers, and Argrave stared at the merchant, tapping one finger against his temple. Everything was going well—though the merchant had not outright agreed to taking a Veidimen as a bride and said he would obviously need to meet her first...

Anneliese said the idea enticed him greatly. He was a merchant, though, and hid that fact well enough Argrave almost disbelieved her.

"If you keep tapping, your finger might break," Leopold said, obviously annoyed.

Argrave stopped. "It helps me think."

"These Grand Council meetings last twelve hours on the least busy days. Today... I've enough food for two days. It's half a party, half a political meeting," Leopold told him. "I don't want you to give yourself the runs on account of anxiety."

Argrave shrugged. "I suppose you'd have me just stop being anxious, like magic. Well... don't worry. Not sure I can get the runs anymore."

Leopold laughed just as Elenore entered. "The delegates are with Yiasten. They're bringing them here," she told them.

"Suppose that's proof of things, as though we didn't have enough already," Leopold said, pushing away Ansgar's hands and fixing things himself. He slapped his face lightly and shook his body, and his whole demeanor seemed to change. Altogether, he seemed half a commander.

"As planned... Elenore will remain here and help organize things. It does us no good to have her seen," Leopold said, slicking his gray hair back with some gel and combing with his other hand. "I will keep things contained in the council room. Ansgar will be my main point of contact with you, keeping you apprised of situations within the meeting. You and Anneliese will be introduced to key figures slowly, and then brought out into the main party when we all agree is the best time."

"Seems I'm not the only one that's anxious. How many times have you told us that?" Argrave questioned.

"Well... I can't imagine my anxiety can compare to yours, even with that trump card of yours. If I fail, I remain a wealthy patrician... nothing really lost other than face. But you... I'm not sure what would be next for you," Leopold looked back. "I have guests to greet."

Leopold stepped out, leaving only Ansgar left behind.

"Your dad sure is great at raising the mood," Argrave noted.

Ansgar looked to Argrave. "Putting his face on the line alone shows how much faith he has in you. He is a merchant—he is predisposed to taking risks. But note that he is a successful merchant. The risks that he takes—they often pay off. And so, it would be best if you are less nervous."

Argrave nodded. "A good point." He stepped around, then picked up the black tellerbarret on a chair. He put it over his head and fixed it until it was just right in the mirror. "We look pretty good, Anneliese."

Anneliese stepped into the mirror's frame. "Is that so?"

"You know it is," he shot back, then turned. "Alright. Time for a protracted battle."

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Chapter 263: Skirmishes

“And how would backing you benefit Relize?” an old man with a clean shave asked Argrave, sitting across from him on the couch. His name was Victor. Ansgar poured them both a cup of wine. “The king has ever had little bearing on our city. We members of the council dictate all.”

“That’s true. Most kings think it’s beneath them to consort with the merchant class. But as this city is testament... money makes the world move,” Argrave explained, sitting just beside Anneliese. He leaned forth and picked up the goblet Ansgar had poured wine into, then raised it to toast Victor. “And I can promise... Relize will benefit monetarily like never before,” he declared, then clinked his glass together with the man opposite him.

The scene changed—the shadows were cast a little differently from the windows, and the man sitting adjacent Argrave had changed.

“How might my house of Fetrullen benefit if you were to become king?” this new man asked—broad of shoulder and thick of brow, with clothes so bright pink it was hard on the eyes. Fabian, this one was called.

Argrave watched as Ansgar filled his goblet full of wine once again, and commended the man, “A good question. But a land as vast as Vasquer... it needs proper management. Merchant families like yours of Fetrullen—your education rivals, if not exceeds, that of the great noble houses of this land. A new king needs capable, reliable members in his council...” Argrave picked up the filled goblet once again, raising it to the pink-dressed man. “Well-educated and ambitious people like those found in Fetrullen? I think you will be a welcome addition to my council, bringing this kingdom’s management to a higher level.”

Their two goblets clinked together once more. Time passed as Argrave finished drink after drink, answering concerns and making offers to many members of the Grand Council.

“What makes you think you can win this war? Relize is a strong force, make no mistake, yet even still...” a new patrician asked of Argrave, the young man sitting rather uptight.

Argrave knew him well—Drudeth of House Rotswell. He gave the player pirate-hunting quests and was quite the renowned seaman himself. Argrave hoped to recruit him as the head of their naval forces.

“What makes you think we can’t?” Argrave shot back, holding his goblet up for Ansgar to fill it.

Anneliese, sitting just beside Argrave, pinched his side—Drudeth didn’t like his comment. He’d have to change his approach.

“I know how large of an undertaking it is to tackle Vasquer, Drudeth. In truth, I’ve been moving frantically the past few months to deal with this,” Argrave said seriously, handing his cup off to Anneliese and leaning in close. “I’ve forged strong ties with the south. Coupled with the forces we have in Relize, we’ll be trapping the north in with a vice grip. I want this to be fast and decisive—an encirclement that quickly tears out the roots of Vasquer power and restores stability in the realm for all.”

Argrave held one hand out. “I’ve heard of your abilities at sea. You broke the pirate fleet at the Myresh archipelago. The Mideast coast of Vasquer remains firmly in my father’s grip—I believe you’re the best candidate to blockade them and prevent further supplies from reaching in the event of sieges. I’m

working hard to make this war work... but I won't deny I need someone like you. So, Drudeth... can I count on you? We have to restore this land back to peace and prosperity."

After a few seconds, Drudeth reached forward decisively and shook Argrave's hand. Argrave stood and walked the man to the door, speaking firmly and decisively... and not ten minutes after Drudeth had gone, another patrician took his place. Argrave led him to the seat.

"More wine," the big, hearty man demanded, after a time. Ansgar stepped up and filled his cup. Despite being a head shorter than Argrave, this patrician must've been twice his weight. He was like a bear—a big, hairy bear. He drank wine like a bear might honey, too.

"More for me, too," Argrave directed. Ansgar gave him an uncertain look, but Argrave gave him a certain nod.

Being challenged, the bear of a man grew briefly competitive... but Argrave's tongue and mind moved as fast as ever while his dimmed. Before long, the man was declaring Argrave his brother. Ansgar prudently did not reintroduce him to the party, but rather led him to a room where he might sleep.

"None for me," the next patrician refused Ansgar's offer of wine. Kretthan was an old, shrewd-eyed man who defied traditional Relize standards of dress, wearing instead almost monastic robes. Argrave noticed his eyes lingered on Anneliese... and not out of admiration.

"That's fine," Argrave said, flashing a bright smile. "I imagine Leopold has already brought you up to speed, somewhat?"

"We have nothing to discuss," Kretthan decided, looking back at Argrave. "I entertained this offer merely to avoid straining my relationship with Leopold."

"You're not concerned about the future of the realm?" Argrave tilted his head.

"Spare me sanctimonious ramblings, kinslayer. One who would end their kin has strayed from the grace of the gods. Taking a foul inhuman to wife, on top of this? You will never be king."

Argrave leaned back in the couch. "There has to be something I can do," Argrave said with a pleading sarcasm. "Oooh—I know. I'm told your nephew is rather fond of a curious drink of late. It's rather common, I'm told—everyone alive has some. If I send him a bottle, do you think that might change your mind?"

Kretthan's face hardened, and Argrave leaned in.

"Straying from the grace of gods? I appreciate your close ties to family... but you can do too much for your family, you know. Sometimes, they drink your blood like leeches until you die," Argrave said, with a pointed low voice and a crooked smile.

Kretthan's breathing quickened, and he looked to Ansgar. "You're blackmailing me?"

"Very astute," Argrave nodded. "I'll pay your family a visit soon, but for now... I think you should keep in mind what we talked about. Since you don't want to talk, you're free to leave."

Kretthan stared back indignantly. Argrave briefly questioned if the man would try and strike him as his hands clenched into fists. Then, the patrician rose to his feet and stormed out. As the door shut, Argrave rubbed his temple.

“Those are always the rough ones,” Argrave noted.

“You’re doing very well, in my humble opinion,” Ansgar commended Argrave. “I believe it won’t be much longer before father intends to introduce you. I can still introduce a lighter wine, Argrave.”

Argrave raised his hand. “Don’t bother. There are heavyweights, and then there’s me. Worst part is the constant trips to the bathroom. Still... best to get our company a little tipsy, a little loose.”

And then, without a beat to rest, Ansgar went off to receive his father’s next directive. Argrave supposed it was much like a king receiving petitioners.

Yet then, just before receiving another, Ansgar leaned in and whispered, “Father intends to bring you out after this. He says to remind you to be ready to receive challenges.”

The words weren’t respite—all it meant was that Argrave would be standing and walking while he talked instead of sitting. Even still, Argrave nodded.

“How do you intend to approach the war?” the last one asked—a woman. Nicolesa was the sole female patrician on the Grand Council, and one of three in Relize. “Relize is not in a particularly strategic location.”

Argrave leaned in, rubbing his hands together as he began, “Well, I had intended to—”

“If I may?” Anneliese cut in.

Argrave smiled. “Go ahead,” he directed her, catching on right away—Anneliese felt it best to demonstrate to this woman that her voice would be valued regardless of gender.

“To begin, we are going to utilize a well-oiled industry in Relize. This city—all of it was built by industrious earth mages. Indeed, the architects in Relize are renowned across Vasquer,” Anneliese summarized succinctly. “There is a key location in the Mideast—a river valley known as the Indanus Divide.”

Anneliese used her fingers to emulate what she was talking about, though Argrave thought it was of dubious effect. “The divide is blocked off on the northern side by a great mountain. This mountain... it prevents passing from north to south and hinders the relatively isolated Indanus from prospering by trade. All the same, it has the potential to be an excellent natural fortification rivalling the Lionsun Castle. We intend to use the architects of Relize to sculpt this mountain into both a fortress and bridge across the river. This would create a strategic location to both supply and garrison our troops in a position utterly disastrous for Vasquer. It is a knife at their throat.”

Anneliese leaned back and smiled, and Argrave added, “Furthermore, this would open a new trade route between north and south. Relize would have another land route from which to prosper from.”

Nicolesa took a deep breath, obviously catching on to what this meant for Relize. Seeing the culmination of his efforts, Argrave felt rather proud—he felt he offered an objectively amazing deal to the patricians

at Relize. They would prosper if they helped him. That was as much of a truth as it was a negotiating point.

“So...” Argrave leaned in. “What do you think?”

“I’ll save my thoughts for the council,” Nicolesa said.

“I’ll save my thoughts for the council,” Victor had said.

“I’ll save my thoughts for the council,” so many of the patricians had said.

Argrave and Anneliese engaged with all comers until their throats hurt from talking, and even then kept at it for a couple hours afterwards. There was no shortage of council members. Despite everything, it was important to build the groundwork with people—if they showed proper respect and built rapport before he was introduced, he would face less opposition and consequently have more opportunities to sell himself rather than defend himself.

And now...

“Leopold thinks now is the best time to introduce you to the council,” Ansgar told Argrave. “He would like you to put on something new. Please, come. My attending staff will help this be fast for both the lord and the lady.”

“What about Elenore?” Argrave asked as he rose to his feet.

“Elenore is doing fine. I am told she managed to get in contact with the delegation,” Ansgar said.

“What? I’m hearing of this only now?” he stepped up to Ansgar.

“I felt it best not to distract,” Ansgar excused at once, stroking his beard. “Worry not. She reports that things have gone very well. Edgar Yiasten, Illyn Rodreign, and Mattheu Portant are the primary members of the delegation.”

Argrave nodded, recalling their characters. “Right... right. It went well, huh? Of course it did. She’s a natural,” Argrave shook his head.

“It would be best to change quickly, sir,” Ansgar advised.

“You’re right. Anne...” Argrave looked back. “Great work. Only a little bit longer.”

“I’m fine,” Anneliese assured. “Go now. Let’s be prompt.”

Like this, the two of them were spirited away by myriad servants. Argrave’s tired mind lingered on curiosity—what exactly had happened in the meeting with the delegates? Elenore’s report had been brief. Was it simply poor communication on the end of the Dandalan family, or had she neglected details beyond merely who was present? The uncertainty fanned the flames of his nervousness.

Argrave quickly waved the thoughts away. He had spent the entire day making sure certain elements of the council would be positively predisposed towards his proposal... now it was time to find out if he had a future in politics. Hopefully, the energies of all the cult leaders past would infuse him with charismatic energy... and he’d have a beautiful revolution on his hand.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 264: Reform

The double doors to the council chamber opened to a grand room that beckoned Argrave in with a deafening silence. There must have been three hundred people in Leopold's council room. It was certainly a place built to accommodate banquets and councils. The Dandalan patrician stood just beside the door, gesturing for him to enter in the reigning quietude.

Looking around, Argrave felt he was in some sort of Roman senate. Four marble pillars held up the ceiling twenty feet above. There was a great mahogany ring table in the center of the room, split at four sections as if by a cross to allow people to move past. Inside this ring, there was a large round table bearing a parchment map of Vasquer, masterfully painted and tied to the table. If viewed from above, the arrangement probably looked like a target.

"This man is the reason I believe Relize should have a leader at present," Leopold declared loudly. His voice had a markedly different intonation to it than it had in normal conversation—this was his political tone, Argrave supposed. "Gentlemen of the Grand Council, I introduce to you Argrave... the man who will be king of Vasquer."

Argrave scanned the room as people stared and talked. The expressions were many—revelatory, shocked, or simply the smugness that came with knowing this was coming. But there was judgement. Judgement was all they had, for now. And Argrave, standing arm-in-arm with Anneliese, stood proud in the black and gold garb of Relize, his fiancée beside him in white and amber like contrast to his own figure.

"Leopold," Argrave dipped his head slightly, feeling a bit small without the tellerbarret he'd been wearing. A bare head would add dramatic effect later. "Leaders of Relize. I am glad of the opportunity to speak with you here today."

Leopold nodded at Argrave and then turned back to the council. "By now, you've gleaned why I sought to host this council after the unfortunate accident in the Assembly. I will not apologize for what I've done, but I must beg forgiveness for concealing my intent. But given what Trumat Yiasten has brought here—or rather, whom—I believe I am wholly justified in doing so."

The patrician that Leopold called up raised his head up and shifted, obviously uncomfortable at being called out.

"I mean no offense towards the delegates of Atrus. You are welcome here," Leopold said accommodatingly.

Count Edgar Yiasten, a white-haired older man Argrave recognized, held his hand up. "Thank you, Leopold. But allow me to clarify... Atrus did not send us here to gain Relize's allegiance to our kingdom. We merely sought... to verify your position. We hope our presence here won't impede things in your leadership," he said diplomatically.

So... Elenore persuaded them to stay neutral, or that was their intent from the beginning. They aren't backing Trumat. Wish I knew more, Argrave lamented in his head.

“Wonderful,” Leopold nodded and clasped his hands together. “We have been discussing minor disputes in Relize—tolls charged improperly, rivals raided, petty thefts, embezzlements... but now, it is time to speak of the elephant in the room. We need leadership for the war. If we do not have it, this city will tear itself apart by feuding factions, each backing different sides in the war. This cannot happen,” Leopold declared firmly.

Silence took over the council room. Then, Trumat Yiasten stepped forward, asking somewhat haughtily, “Are you done, Leopold? If you are, then I will simply declare this—I agree with you in that Relize needs a leader. Disunity in war could devastate the city, its population, and many burgeoning industries. Yet we of Relize stick to our own devices. We need, just as Atrus has established, a figurehead to keep us far from the war. Playing kingmaker is folly. We do not need a leader who has already sworn fealty to a claimant.”

“I agree,” an aged patrician contributed. “We have no place in war. We are traders. Outside of Relize, our status is that of a common man. And the common man does not mingle with the elite.”

“And how long must things remain the same?” Drudeth of House Rotswell contributed, making Argrave hide a smile. “You must be blind to think Leopold would act without an intent to benefit. He was made a patrician in his lifetime, yet already his family stands shoulder-to-shoulder with us of the Grand Council. We meet within his home. I trust Leopold. And I hear the south is strongly predisposed to Argrave already—would it not be best to support the inevitable victor?”

Trumat shook his head and said, “Leopold acts to benefit himself, not Relize. I’m sure—”

“I have worked out arrangements with Argrave, yes. What did I request of you?” Leopold interrupted and looked to Argrave.

Argrave held up his left arm as he talked, the other linked with Anneliese’s. “Leopold requested I lift trade restrictions, tolls, and tariffs imposed by Induen and Felipe. I agreed. Leopold requested I grant the Grand Council of Relize governance of certain ports in the North Sea. I agreed. And lastly, he requested a marriage for himself—someone of my choosing. I agreed.”

Some of the patricians laughed at hearing Leopold’s request for a marriage—the man had a reputation, it would seem.

Argrave held his hand up and declared, “It’s not my place to meddle in your politics. This city is self-governing, and I would not change that. But all of you have suffered beneath the yolk of my father and his former heir. I, alone, have the capability and the desire to change that. No others vying for the throne can offer that.”

“No one has paid these tariffs since the war started,” one patrician pointed out.

“And after?” Nicolesa jumped in and pointed out. “Like it or not, we are beholden to the might of Vasquer. If we choose prudently, we can benefit. If we remain neutral, things remain as they are... or grow worse, depending on who the throne falls to. Their military has always protected us. It can devastate Relize just as easily.”

“Things are different now,” an old man spoke quietly, and though others spoke at the same time, they fell silent for the man in a show of respect. Argrave recognized him—Potien of House Contini, one of the

more respected patricians. “Relize has grown and prospered. Our city is larger in population than the greatest of those in Vasquer, and each of us patricians have retinues that rival those of mainland nobles. We are a pivotal part of Vasquer. Any that take the throne must respect us—indeed, two would-be-kings or their delegates have sought us out of their own volition.

“If we remain as we are... the lives of our own will be spared. Our ships will head not to war, but to trade. And at the end of it all, we rejoin the fold, welcomed. And we will be welcomed because we are needed,” Potien finished, voice a thin whisper.

The respect the man’s word had was clear. Everyone seemed to digest his words like they had great meaning, even the ones Argrave thought firmly in his camp.

“And... meaning no offense, Argrave,” Potien continued. “So long as the south has not openly declared their support, their ‘positive predisposition’ towards you means nothing.” The patrician shook his head. “In addition... the one at your side. There has never before been an elven queen in Vasquer history. This speaks ill of your chances.”

Argrave looked to Anneliese, and she nodded. Argrave released his grip and she stepped away, heading off to a door.

“Your concerns are justified. It’s easy to remain comfortable, keep the status quo alive. And yet... since the war began, none of you can deny the fact that it has hurt Relize,” Argrave spread his arms out, walking around. When none protested, he continued, “Regardless of the lack of tariff collectors, or taxes, or tolls... the war has given rise to a great loss of business. It’s not safe to travel—no doubt your goods have been seized, either by bandits or feudal lords seeking to commandeer supplies for the coming difficulties.”

Argrave saw bitter looks pass through the faces of some—no doubt he’d brought up some bad memories.

“Relize has grown powerful. I will not blunt my words—I am here because this city has a great impact on the direction of the war. The south will come to support me, yet Relize is a force every bit as potent as the Margrave’s army. That is why I have come here,” Argrave put his hand to his chest. “When I met with Leopold, he expressed disdain for having to get involved in this at all. And I agree with him.”

Argrave stepped past the segmented ring table, moving around as he declared, “The fact is, my father, the king of Vasquer, broke his vows as a king to protect the people. For years, he has trampled on the people using his son as a cudgel.” Argrave pointed to a man who’d spoken earlier. “You claimed the common man does not mingle with the elite. And you, Potien—you rightfully pointed out that many of the patricians present here today rival mainland nobles in terms of military might. This has arisen because of changing times.”

“I believe in the king’s vows—to protect the people, to govern them justly, and to strive for prosperity in the realm. The fact remains, though... these vows were broken. And not for the first time.” Argrave pounded his chest. “I say that this cannot happen ever again. And consequently, I have a reform in mind.”

Doors opened, and Anneliese returned bearing two things—a black mantle with the symbol of Vasquer on it, and the ornate crown of the first king of Vasquer.

"I have recovered the crown of the first king of Vasquer, alongside the regalia that he wore throughout his reign. And yet... I will hold no coronation, not yet. Something needs to happen, first." Argrave held out his hand and received the objects from Anneliese. He set them upon the table and looked around.

"A king needs wise council. Not just from his noble base, nor from the gods... but from all the people of his realm. Despite your influence in this city, and despite your contributions to the crown and the people, the common man does not mingle with the elite. This must change." Argrave planted one finger atop the crown.

"I intend to establish a Parliament of Vasquer," Argrave declared loudly. "In it, men of influence will have a say in governance. Seats in this parliament will be open to all, regardless of the nobility of their blood or the divinity of their station. And above all... this parliament will retain the right to confirm a new king's succession."

There are a lot of amazing administrators here. You think I'm not going to make use of you? You're going to turn Vasquer into an economic powerhouse, and you're going to like it, Argrave thought of the real purpose behind this decision. He genuinely felt this parliament could do a great deal in developing Vasquer.

Argrave lifted his finger off the crown. "To prove my commitment to this reform, I have a request. I intend to have a coronation. I hope it to be a public affair, with many of the people I intend to protect and govern in attendance. And I hope that all of you members of the Grand Council will be the ones to place this crown upon my brow and promulgate my desire to all willing to hear. To that end... I leave this ancient relic here, until you decide to place it upon my brow." Argrave stepped away from the crown. "Please, make the right decision for the realm and the people."

It seemed none dared to speak in the silence that followed. Leopold took light steps up to Argrave. "Do we all agree to reconvene in a week to decide this matter?"

Slowly, a vote was taken. With Argrave's closing speech and Leopold's suggestion, all seemed willing to step aside and get a hold of things. The council promised to send someone to retrieve the crown for safekeeping, and Argrave agreed. Before long, the councilors cleared out, and a tired Leopold stepped up to Argrave.

"You did well. As much as I wish I could force them to make a decision now, such is not how the Grand Council works. It is a slow-moving behemoth of an organization, which suitably demonstrates why a leader is necessary in times of war," the old patrician said tiredly. "Now... the real politicking begins. Gods, but it will be busy..."

Argrave raised a brow. "Busier than today? I've got brain pain."

"Busier for me. I have to show the more financially interested patricians why exactly it was I married my children off to common merchants." Leopold straightened his back. "I'll put the squeeze on them, offer opportunities to them, bribe them... and you'll go door-to-door, selling your monarchy like a common good. I'm sure everyone is desperate to pick your brain about this parliament." Leopold eyed him. "You're serious about being coronated by the Grand Council?"

"I am," Argrave nodded.

Leopold stroked his beard. "Then perhaps I should call you more than a mere claimant."

Argrave frowned. "What does that mean?"

"That's for me to know," Leopold declared. "Go on, sleep. Ansgar told me how much you drank—don't know how you're holding together, frankly... that was my good wine, cost me a lot..."

Argrave laughed. "I'm perfectly sober. I'm built different, you see." He dipped his head to the older man. "As for going door-to-door, selling things... I have a different idea. I think I'm going to make it impossible for them not to choose me. Everyone loves a hero, after all."

It was Leopold's turn to frown. "Don't ruin things with that big head of yours. People that speak like that end up in a gutter, in my experience."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 265: Return to Form

"Levin is going to be coronated soon," Elenore informed Argrave. They were alone in a lounge, save Ansgar—Anneliese had not yet awoken. "Two weeks' time, perhaps less. Your coronations may end up being at similar times, as things end up. I sincerely hope one ends better than the other."

Argrave took a drink—it was quite potent. He swallowed it and winced, then looked to Ansgar.

"A tea suited for dispelling the morning sickness from alcohol," the aged man explained. He had become the intermediary between Leopold and their party, despite the fact both resided within his mansion. "Leopold thought you might need it."

Argrave shook his head. "I appreciate it, but no."

"Shall I get something else?" Ansgar asked.

"Thank you, but no need to trouble yourself," Argrave waved his offer away.

Ansgar put his hands before him. "You ought to get used to accepting help of this sort."

Argrave looked to him, realizing he had a point. "Then... something minty, and sweet. Leave this for Anneliese—she'll need it." Argrave directed his attention back to Elenore as Ansgar left. "Speaking of... Anneliese told me you two drank together. It was rather hard to understand that from her slurred haze, and she was impossible to rouse this morning, so I thought I might ask you."

Elenore watched the door shut behind Ansgar and said, "Yes. She had never gotten drunk before and expressed interest. I may have urged her onwards to gain some... candid details. She may have a rough time today."

"Candid details?" Argrave repeated. "And what did you learn?"

"I learned sometimes it is better to remain ignorant," Elenore said at once.

Argrave grinned, feeling rather pleased they were getting along. After a moment of silence, he leaned in, scratching his nose as he asked, "That's good. But what exactly did you learn from those delegates? Things were too busy for us to talk last night, it seems."

Elenore's face grew serious as she recounted, "Levin wanted Relize on Atrus' side... or merely opposing Vasquer. He was prepared to offer them some great deals, but upon hearing of our intent, the delegates decided to completely renege on their intent to back House Yiasten."

Argrave leaned back into the couch. "Good fortune for once. Things are going well. Now is usually the time that things turn to hell." Argrave scratched the top of his lip. "I'll be careful with my publicity stunt, I guess. What will you be doing?"

"I have to go away for a time. Until I can have some of my key operatives learn druidic magic, I'm limited in my influence based on distance. Things in Atrus need to be stabilized—given how things went with the delegates, that's possible. So, I'll be travelling closer," Elenore explained evenly.

"Going away?" Argrave leaned in, putting one hand on his knee. "Kind of... uncomfortable with that, honestly. But if you say it's necessary, I trust you. Just be safe. If you want, I can have Anneliese screen the people you're with for traitors. I'm sure she'll agree."

Elenore shook her head. "Like I said, I need to leave today. Doubtless she'll have a rough morning. That won't be necessary—she's done it once before, after all."

The door opened, and a greatly disheveled Anneliese stood there, still in last night's attire. Argrave rose, unseated, until he saw her rubbing her eyes and clutching her head, shying away from the early morning light.

"I ought to be off," Elenore rose to her feet. "The caravan comes to take me early. Argrave, Anneliese—good luck."

"Be safe," Argrave reiterated, then stepped to Anneliese. "Look at you. Are you alright? Wouldn't fault you for resting."

"Be quiet," she hushed him at once, and Argrave laughed, waving to Elenore as she walked out. "My head is throbbing. I feel sick."

Argrave put his hand on her shoulders and guided her. "Here. Drink this—it's supposed to help with that. Failing that, I suppose healing magic could remedy your pain," he suggested.

"Did that," she said, obeying him.

"Really, you of all people look like this? I'm surprised."

"Elenore gave me a bottle," Anneliese said. "Never been drunk before... curious what it was like." She drank the tea, then grimaced. "Eugh. Terrible."

"Down it all in one go," Argrave said, his voice distant. "You drank with Elenore? However did that come about?"

"To celebrate, I think. Talk." Anneliese shook her head, then downed it all as Argrave suggested.

Argrave thought back to Elenore—she didn't seem particularly affected. "Seems like I've already been beaten. She likes you more than me," Argrave lamented. "Not that I blame her. You're like—"

"Stop talking for once," Anneliese quieted him.

Argrave did his best not to laugh loudly.

#####

The streets of Relize were alive with people. Ever since the announcement, word had spread of Argrave's presence in the city like wildfire, and sentiments that had quieted since the outbreak of the war redoubled. With the news out, Argrave could walk without fear of being discovered... yet 'freely' was not quite the right word. He had an escort—Galamon, Durran, and many of Leopold's personal guard. Argrave bid Anneliese rest, and she agreed to that.

Leopold made the city even busier. He was calling in all of his family and business ties to show what, exactly, would be the price of refusal. Some of the patricians couldn't care less about politics, preferring to leave that matter to others... yet Leopold showed them that the two were nearly perfectly entwined, ensuring that all would be forced to vote. Coercion in part... yet negotiation by name.

It was a little similar to what Argrave was about to do. Kretthan, a prominent patrician, had a rather dark secret. His nephew had been afflicted with vampirism—a botched attempt at infiltrating a patrician family by the local vampiric coven. Though Kretthan announced his death, in truth, he harbored and sustained the young man.

It felt like Argrave had been dealing with too many vampires of late. He supposed it was inevitable, given Galamon's presence—his promise to cure the man spurred him towards the things. Only this time, they wouldn't be coming for his throat. He'd be coming for theirs... at least, in a metaphorical sense. Not all were bloodthirsty fiends. And some people were more than happy to play the enemy for the right price.

It made him feel a bit dirty, frankly... but he was doing a good thing, even if he was going about it in an immoral way. At the very least, that was what he told himself as Durran stepped ahead, knocking on the great oaken doors marking the entrance the Kretthan's estate.

#####

"So, Argrave... left?" Orion asked the man who went by the name of Boarmask.

The both of them sat by an oasis in the town of the southron elves. The helmet that gave the man his name leaned against his foot as he sat cross-legged, gentle winds rustling his short blonde hair.

"He did. They all did," Boarmask confirmed. "And even despite Titus using his people's ancestry as a cudgel, the southron elves do not care. The people don't care. After all..." Boarmask laughed. "Someone else's fate doesn't affect them. And Titus does the 'right thing,' at least now. I suspect even if damning evidence was posted right before their face, nothing would truly happen. A few grievors might seek vengeance for the deaths that Titus caused, his deliberate slaughter..." he shook his head. "Won't work. He's well-protected, well-loved, and paranoid. An unbreakable defense."

Orion looked to Boarmask. "I could end him."

The man's blue eyes met Orion's, and the two held their stare for a minute.

"Durran's outburst... his exile, his departure with Argrave..." Boarmask shook his head. "I understand it. Who are we to decide what people want? Who are we to decide what people should do? Who are we to chart their fate?"

Orion thought at that a moment. "...the gods ordain all. That's why Argrave did this."

Boarmask laughed. "Argrave didn't do this for the gods." He looked to the prince. "The gods don't ordain a damn thing. This isn't a matter of faith. Fellhorn... these Vessels have blessings the same as you do. They claim that theirs is the right way."

"Yet it isn't," Orion posited. "I know you are a faithful of Vasquer."

"I don't pray to Vasquer alone. I adopt whatever gods I feel are good for this world, no matter their pantheon. If you were born here, would you worship Vasquer's pantheon?" Boarmask suggested.

Orion stood and kneeled before the oasis, peering into the water. "...but the gods..."

"You said their voice has left you," Boarmask reminded him.

Orion sat, eyes still fixed on the pool ahead. "Then... no. I would never learn, and so could not worship."

Boarmask nodded, saying nothing more. He left Orion alone with his thoughts. After a time, he watched him. "Why did you come here, Orion?"

"To learn. To think. To grow on my own," the prince described at once.

"Ever since Argrave left... I've been feeling much the same way," the man said, leaning back onto his hands.

Orion jerked his head back. "I need a moment of enlightenment."

"Doesn't exist," Boarmask rebuked. "Or... maybe it does. People say it does. But for me... plenty of others... we just go through life, trying to puzzle things out. We aren't gods. We aren't demons. We are men. However we got here, whatever we are... we can make our own decisions, come to our own conclusions. Things aren't clear. You can choose your gods, offer your worship, or refrain altogether. It's..." Boarmask shook his head. "I don't know. I can't tell you anything."

"I shouldn't choose. I am stupid. Slow-witted, my father always called me. Slow-witted people should listen to their parents," Orion said.

"Why?" Boarmask pressed.

"Because they know better," Orion replied at once.

"Why?" Boarmask repeated.

"Because I am s—"

"You're not stupid," Boarmask shook his head. "It... your father is one of the worst humans I have ever heard tell of. He is a blight on the land far worse than the plague you and Argrave stopped."

Orion's hands clenched into fists in rage, yet after a few seconds, as though some voice had reminded him to calm, he relaxed. "Why is that?"

"Do you enjoy suffering?" Boarmask asked.

"No," Orion answered at once.

“Your father has made hundreds of thousands suffer. Lightly for some, unimaginably for many.” Boarmask looked up to the sky. “What places you above them? Why should they suffer when you should not?” The man looked at Orion. “It’s all in your mind. It’s all what you think.” His gaze was certain for a few seconds, but then he broke off laughing. “But who am I to preach? I am only a hypocrite and a failure.”

Silence reigned between them, and Orion fell into deep thought, studying his own reflection in the oasis.

Boarmask stood up. “Well... it’s late. The last thing I expected was to speak to you all the way out in here in the middle of nowhere... but at this point, I’ve accepted all the weird nonsense occurring around me. Spring comes, then summer—it is to be blisteringly hot. I depart this place a failure, returning to where I failed once before: Vasquer. Even if I fail again, I must try and make things right.”

The man bent down and retrieved his helmet, putting it back over his head. He left no parting words, merely walked away. Orion stood up quickly and called, “Hold.”

Boarmask looked back.

“How do you intend to make things right?” Orion questioned.

No expression was betrayed beneath the iron boar mask, yet the man shifted on his feet uncertainly. In time, he simply said, “...there is a reason that the Margrave, a man of honor, rebelled against your father.”

Orion closed his eyes. “I will return. And I will judge for myself.”