

The ring of keys in Kretthan's hands jingled as he fit them into their slot. The cell door opened, and the aged patrician stepped beyond. The cell looked seldom-used. He walked to a spot just beside the bucket in the room for privy use and pushed at the wall. One brick sunk in, but nothing happened. He dug his fingers against the stone beside it and pulled. The wall turned, knocking aside the bucket and leaving two entrances.

"Durran, please wait here," Argrave commanded with a smile.

Kretthan eyed them begrudgingly, and then walked into the chamber. Argrave and Galamon followed. The humbly dressed patrician marched forward silently, and the path sloped downwards. They walked on and on, deeper into the cells.

The patrician grabbed a rod from a wall at a certain point. Galamon eyed him as though he meant to strike Argrave, and yet the patrician turned a knob on the rod and it came alive with light—a magic lamp, Argrave recognized. Now illuminated, another cell awaited them. There was a person in this one.

"Must've been difficult to keep him fed," Argrave noted as he watched.

The man lifted his head, his iron fetters jingling. He bore a slight resemblance to the shrewd-eyed Kretthan. There was a lot of blood in that cell. Some of it had caked on the vampire's face, but the areas around his mouth had been licked clean. Despite being plain brown, his eyes had an uncanny resemblance to Galamon's in certain unpleasant moments of vampiric frenzy.

"...what do you mean to do?" the patrician asked angrily. "It's done. My secret is found, and now confirmed. You will have my support at the council. All I ask... he's my nephew. His mother, my sister, she... she died. I cannot. I will not," he said emotionally, unable to even voice the idea of killing him.

Argrave rubbed at his chin. "Someone did this to him, you realize. Someone made him a vampire," he pointed out. "Your nephew... I'd like to make use of him. These vampires in Relize—they overextended. Your vote at the council is nice, but what I need... is a little bit of help in catching that overextension."

Kretthan eyed him warily.

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Argrave looked around. He was in another decadent mansion. Maybe it was just imagination on account of knowing the family well, but this place seemed quite grim. There was much more gray and black everywhere. It seemed he travelled from fancy place to fancy place without end of late.

Kretthan, his nephew, Galamon, and Durran accompanied Argrave. The nephew, whose name was Wulfgan, was kept firmly at heel by both of his companions. Durran was a little lax, but Galamon kept his hand on the back of the vampire's neck at all times. Wulfgan was fully sated, though, and looked like a terrified young man more than a dangerous vampire at present.

“That we have not been cast out is miracle enough,” Kretthan said. “The accusation you’ve made against House Wratson will not be forgiven, even if they do not sit on the Grand Council,” the patrician said quietly. “They are one of the founding houses of Relize. Their word bears immeasurable weight.”

“They’re listening to us, I hope you know,” Argrave informed him. “Galamon, where are they?”

“One in the ceiling, just above that painting there,” the elven vampire said gruffly as ever. “One’s been waiting in front of the door for a time. Ceiling one has started moving now,” he gave live commentary.

As though to block his commentary, the doors swung open. A tall pale blonde man stood there, his expression stern and his green eyes cold. He looked quite neat. It was hard to guess his age just by appearance alone—or at least, his age when he was turned into a vampire.

“I see we’ve decided to skip the song and dance, get right into the heat of things,” Argrave said pleasantly. “Welcome, Melan Wratson. I’m pleased that things could be kept amiable.”

The vampire studied him. His green eyes were sharp yet warm, like a freshly bloodied knife. There was a strange presence to him and a deception to his appearance that was deeply unnerving. This was a man who had been cultivated and tempered over centuries. Being both an S-rank mage and a powerful vampire, he could be considered one of the most powerful men in Berendar. His bearing alone reflected that.

“You frightened my great-great grandson. I had no choice but to come,” Melan said. He had a rather concise voice, speaking words quickly and authoritatively.

With no greeting returned, the vampire stepped quickly and sat across from Argrave and his party. Though alone and far smaller than Argrave was, Melan seemed to exude poise. It rather reminded Argrave of Castro. A fitting comparison, too—they were likely the same age.

“Why did you come to my home?” Melan prompted. “With so few guards... you claim to know me.”

Argrave smiled, an answer prepared. Before he could give it, Kretthan insisted, “Who is this? What is going on?”

Feeling this was a good opportunity, Argrave shifted on the couch. “Melan here is one of the former patricians of House Wratson. He was a C-rank mage, a long, long time ago... but he turned himself into a vampire. I don’t know the details, sadly,” Argrave shrugged wistfully. “Now, he continues to watch over his house, keep it strong, rule it from the shadows. Sometimes he makes more vampires from among his family—usually talented people. Like this, they’ve been steadily expanding their influence. Time was, Melan was content with life eternal. Of late... the morose side of your family has gotten a bit greedy.” Argrave turned his head to Wulfgan. “Case in point.”

Melan studied Wulfgan. Argrave knew the vampire was ignorant of this newborn vampire’s existence—most of this overextension wasn’t his doing. But a big family is difficult to control, and doubly so when they’re talented, often ambitious vampires.

“Why did I come to your home?” Argrave leaned forward. “Didn’t have to. Could’ve left this riskless—gotten proof, sent word to any number of S-rank mages that are actively hunting vampires. An army of willing participants could’ve swarmed into everything you own, annihilated all of your still-dead family.”

"Yet you're here," Melan said.

Argrave nodded. "Most of your family... I've seen a lot of vampires. Some use people like livestock. You... keep it in the family. The feeding, that is." Argrave leaned back. "Still, the fact is, your fat needs to be trimmed, or you won't fit into what you're wearing currently."

Melan became a lunging blur in Argrave's eyes. Galamon moved in the same instance, planting one hand against Argrave and pushing him backwards. The couch skid back, weighed down by Argrave and Kretthan both. The two vampires met. Melan was monstrously strong—far more so than a normal vampire. Even still... Galamon handled him like nothing, bashing him against the floor with both of his arms in a simple slam.

Once the vampire was subdued, Galamon drew and prodded the tip of his Ebonice axe against the vampire's stomach. If it pierced his flesh, Melan would have great difficulty casting spells below A-rank. And A-rank spells... well, they were quite eye-catching. The last thing a vampire coven in a big city wanted was attention. Despite all that, the vampire didn't know many truly devastating spells. The moment he became a vampire, he withdrew from the Order out of paranoia, and had only become S-rank after spending vast quantities of wealth.

Argrave rubbed his chest where Galamon had pushed him briefly, expecting pain but feeling none. After experiencing that assault, he was somewhat glad Anneliese was resting at the Dandalan estate. Argrave rose. Kretthan stood up and ran for the door, but Durran stopped him from exiting. The nephew Wulfgan crawled to one corner of the room, eyeing everyone warily.

"Thought that might happen," Argrave said steadily. "Little show of intimidation, is it? I get it. You want to minimize losses. After all, this is quite the big happening—anything you can do to get a better position, unnerve me... you'll take it." Argrave stepped a bit closer where Melan had been planted into the ground by his companion. "Let me inform you, though—it'll take some of your best spells to hurt me. And even if you do, this information is already in the hands of some trusted and well-connected friends of mine. Sorry... but this is no negotiation. It's a shakedown. Extortion."

Melan stared up at Argrave. Despite his outburst, and despite the axe almost piercing his stomach, his face was calm.

"Trim the fat? You ask me to kill my family?" the vampire said with eerie calmness.

They're dead already, Argrave thought somewhat sarcastically.

"Most of them aren't your family, don't play that card on me," he instead said, dismissive of the vampire's comment. "This overambitious distant kin of yours—do with them what you will. What I want is those *beyond* the family, those like Wulfgan. Your family is turning people into vampires that have no relation to your family. You have an interest in seeing them dead as much as I do."

"I should jeopardize the existence of my family by starting a crusade against vampirism in the place I live?" Melan rebuked.

"I think your family is much more jeopardized by people like Wulfgan than any 'crusade' we might initiate," Argrave looked to Kretthan's nephew calmly. "And it isn't as though you're tied to this place. Once we're done, you can go where you please."

Kretthan recovered from his fear somewhat and said, “You want to kill my—”

“I said those *like* Wulfgan,” Argrave interrupted Kretthan. “I’ll keep my promise, fret not.”

He caught a brief glance from Galamon—the elven vampire hated his own kind, and surely must’ve disliked all Argrave was saying. Even still, it was necessary for his cure just as much as Argrave’s cause. He couldn’t feasibly kill all of the Wratson family in a reasonable amount of time—in terms of military strength, they were the strongest family in Relize by far. He would need that.

Melan eyed Galamon. The elf kept a close watch on the subdued man’s hands, ready for spells of any kind. Then, Melan’s gaze switched to Argrave.

“What do you suggest?” he finally asked.

“You’re going to help me gather these wayward vampires up. I’ll do the killing myself. And once Leopold is elected as the leader of Relize, you’ll need to protect a contingent of mages heading into enemy territory,” Argrave explained. “On top of that... you’ve a certain bowl that I require. Black as my hair, runes on its surface?”

“...you want that,” Melan said, voice low. “What need have you of it?”

“Are extortion victims always so inquisitive?” Argrave raised a brow.

Melan’s green eyes moved to Galamon. “And if I hold you hostage? Where does that fit in your plan? You know I’m an S-rank mage...”

“With things as they are... I say, try,” Argrave invited.

Melan raised his hand and cast a spell, and Galamon jammed the axe into the vampire’s abdomen. The spell matrix fizzled then shattered, and Melan roared, struggling with Galamon without much effect. Royal-forged armor, an ancient crown with powerful enchantments on his head... the elf was truly a force to be reckoned with.

Argrave stepped a cautious distance away. “Can we go back to a friendly extortion? Things don’t have to be like this,” he said, almost pitying the man by this point.

Melan laid back against the ground, letting out a sigh as he gazed at the axe embedded in his stomach. “You came well prepared,” he admitted calmly. “I have never seen this axe’s like.”

“You’ve seen a little of my preparations, yes,” Argrave nodded, lying freely. “But how might you answer, I wonder?”

The vampire looked at him, his eyes calculating. “I thought myself above extortion,” he said quietly. “Well... it seems I was wrong.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 267: Big City Life

With so much occupying all of their time, the week in Relize moved faster than time seemed able to.

Despite being disemboweled by Galamon, Melan seemed to bear no ill will in further discussion. The two of them quickly came to a consensus—that is to say, Argrave’s extortion was wholly successful.

Once he'd confirmed the root of the problem—his nephew's grandson's cousin, or some such distant relative—the patrician that controlled his family in the shadows quickly acquiesced to Argrave's request.

By the very next day, this problem child's body was found in the street drained of all its blood. No one recognized the man, but then that wasn't the point of it. Even without Elenore present to do some behind-the-scenes work, by the end of the day, talk of vampires preying on people reached every corner of Relize. Some spun it as an ill omen, seeing it as Argrave's doing. Argrave couldn't deny he was hurt by the notion but had some strange sort of satisfaction in knowing what he would be doing soon.

For a few days, the rumors built. Argrave had much to occupy his time—besides studying imbuing, he spoke to patricians at Leopold's direction... all the unsavory aspects of politicking. The patricians needed to know that Leopold's leadership would ensure their future. Argrave was a cornerstone of Leopold's campaign, and so needed to sway on his behalf.

Yet on the fourth day of the city's vampiric scare, Melan's family had assembled things. Argrave couldn't deny he wished Elenore was still present—having her confirmation would be quite nice—but Argrave had come far enough without her. And so, Argrave met with Melan once more, a three-day-sober Anneliese with him this time. Her empathic confirmation that Melan did not intend to betray was good enough.

Their purge was more ceremony than battle. Melan's overambitious descendent had taken control of nonessential and seedy parts of the city of Relize—smuggling and theft operations, for instance. These places were the only ones vampires could operate undetected. The merchant families of Relize counted all their possessions down to single copper coins, and that included people—criminal enterprises were the only homes for them.

Rivalries and outright war between patrician families or even simply common merchants were common. They raided each other, disrupting business and earning plunder. Captives were another good to be sold, another profit to be made... and these offshoots of the Wratson vampire family had been more than happy to buy them. Vampires had a poor reputation around Berendar for a reason. Argrave felt no qualms in ending all of them.

With Dandalan retainers taking a central role, they initiated their purge early in the morning. These vampires, though strong and experienced fighters, lacked equipment, preparation, and half-decent magic users. Melan provided ample magic users, while Leopold provided arms. With these two working in tandem, their disparate and spread-out bases were easy to dispatch.

Argrave himself commanded one assault, gathering them all up with his companions and ten of Dandalan's guards. Knowing death was near certain, they fought like cornered animals... but knowing they were hard to kill, Argrave did not pull any punches. The vampires were easy to restrain with missing legs and arms.

Once they were gathered—near fifty bloodsuckers—Dandalan retainers brought them to the square just before the Assembly Chamber of Commerce and Governance. Some of the vampires burned beneath the daylight—their regenerative abilities drew away the veil of life that hid their vampirism, just as it might for Galamon if he were to lose an arm or a leg without drinking blood enough to tame the beast after.

Argrave did not wait for people to gather to give some grand speech—that might hint this was premeditated. A small crowd started to form as Argrave's people restrained the vampires against large, hastily brought stakes. He heard questions asked, people demanding answers from them.

Argrave said only, "I heard rumors spreading about me. I thought it best to correct the record by deed rather than word. Here are your vampires—they won't trouble you any longer."

Perhaps fifty people heard, but Argrave knew that was enough. Rumor had spread fast enough about these vampire's presence, and their demise would spread just as quickly. By the time they departed, the things were already turning to ash.

Later that same day, back within the Wratson family home, Argrave dined with the vampiric patriarch.

"You could have drawn a lot more eyes to that," Melan had noted to Argrave later, the two of them drinking from cups with very different liquids in each. "For all that effort... it's a rather humble showing."

Argrave smiled. "It'll be inorganic if I have to force people to acknowledge what I've done by screaming it from the rooftops."

The blonde vampire nodded. "A fair point."

Argrave stared at the man expectantly, waiting. The vampire stared back, then slowly retrieved something.

"You thought I'd forgotten?" he said, handing Argrave a black bowl with strange red runes on it.

Argrave received it, casting a glance back at Galamon. "The thought never even entered my head," he assured. "I look forward to further dealings, Melan. Provided your family can be civilized... I'm not an enemy to vampires, necessarily."

Melan nodded, moving his cup about. His gaze went to Galamon. "I see that."

Argrave didn't linger long in conversation.

With Argrave's connections with the Wratsons and the Dandalans largely secured, Argrave felt he could relax somewhat. These two had unquantifiable sway in the city. But despite feeling he could relax, he didn't. Instead, he became little more than a glorified schmoozer for the few days until the next council meeting.

He and Anneliese attended party after party by invitation of concerned patricians. It was a challenging thing to keep in mind the attitudes and persuasions of each of the patrician families in all of Relize—there were thousands of names to keep track of, and each of them with their own story and desires. All that said, it was an intensely fulfilling thing. Part of it was doing so with Anneliese, yet the larger part was simply because he enjoyed it.

It wasn't the luxury of things, Argrave knew. He liked the architecture of their estates well enough, but small portions of too rich food and what amounted to foul-tasting grape juice called wine had little appeal to him. Instead, Argrave found himself engrossed in the people. The majority of them were horrible people, and he would never truly think them his friends... but learning how they worked, what they wanted, and how he might win them to his side was a deeply satisfying thing.

This realization bothered Argrave and stuck in his mind. On a particularly fruitful night wherein they made a wonderful impression on a patrician family, Argrave asked Anneliese what she thought of it.

"Some people enjoy the company of others," Anneliese suggested, leaning out over a stone balcony and staring down into the rushing river below.

Argrave stared at her neatly braided white hair, blatantly admiring her. "That's the thing. I don't. It's not about them. I don't even like most of them. But persuading them, swaying them... *manipulating* them?" Argrave finally said. He felt it was an ugly word. "I do enjoy that."

"You're worried there's something wrong with you," Anneliese looked to him, her brilliant amber eyes as piercing as ever.

"I guess," he admitted.

"Elvenkind, humankind... we are animals. We are the strangest animals to ever walk. Few others act as we do. And... because of that..." she looked around. "We built this city. We built that great wall of ice in Veiden, that lighthouse of black flame on its coast... we built Dirracha, Sethia, the Lionsun Castle..." Anneliese settled her gaze against Argrave. "We are strange animals. And all of this progress was brought about by strange people that had strange tendencies. Whether divinely ordained or mere happenstance, our oddities make us great."

Argrave felt a chill from her words, caught off guard. "Did you have that speech prepared? Damn."

Anneliese laughed. "No, no. It is something I thought about a lot when I was younger. 'Why am I this way?' I asked that question so many times. I was a strange person. Those thoughts... just the summary of years of introspection. I felt that they fit your dilemma."

Argrave gazed at her, feeling a resurging warmth in his body. Being here, now... he could say he was glad things had gone as they had.

The next day, just the night before the council was to reconvene...

"...and here's the last one," Melanie declared, setting a chest down at Argrave's feet.

"Forgot how much this was," Argrave reflected.

The enchanted items from the living fortress near Dirracha, the items pilfered from the Archduke's Palace, and the gear taken from Induen's retinue... it made a great haul suitable for a dragon to nest upon, at least by Argrave's estimation.

"Here. The manifest," Melanie handed another box to him with a key atop it.

"Another enchanted lockbox. Elenore remains secure as ever," Argrave received the box. "Well... gods. This'll take some time to go through. Thank you, Melanie. You're reliable, too."

The scarred mercenary seemed to dismiss the praise easily, saying, "If I wasn't, I'd be paid less."

"Well, you deserve that much. I hope you stick by my sister for a long, long while," Argrave said.

Sincerity seemed to put Melanie ill at ease. She quickly turned around, grabbing her discarded blade.

"You've given me cause to ask for a raise."

I'm hoping for your sake, not hers, Argrave reflected, but kept those words to himself. He wasn't quite sure how to win genuine loyalty from Melanie. She was a protagonist, her choices dictated by the player. It made who she truly was a little pliable, just as Nikoletta, Stain, or Ruleo.

"Ask for it," Argrave implored. "Grow old working under her. And, uh... speaking of..." Argrave furrowed his brows. "When's Elenore going to be back? She's been gone an awfully long while."

Melanie shrugged. "Couldn't say," she said simply, casting a glance at Anneliese. Like she was late, Melanie quickly exited.

"She could say," Anneliese disagreed once the woman was far away. "She lies."

Argrave frowned, turning about. "By Elenore's direction, I would guess..." Argrave sighed. "Can't help but be worried."

"She's tough," Durran assured Argrave. "She'll fix things, return quickly."

"I wonder," said Argrave musingly.

Durran kicked at the chests that had been arrayed before them. "You said we might make use of some of these?"

"Yeah. If we're lucky... all of these will be a considerable upgrade. They can open up new ways of fighting, even. What we don't use, we either sell or outfit some of our troops. Might be we even sell them to our troops," Argrave knelt down. "I'm thinking we'll go through them tomorrow while the council reconvenes."

"Won't be there?" Galamon asked.

"No," Argrave stood back up. "They're meeting in their Assembly—the sewage problem's been fixed. We've been barred along with the delegates from Atrus in order to avoid 'undue foreign influence' on decisions." Argrave looked around. "It's long overdue for us to relax, talk, do something menial. I say we make this a group effort. We'll go through these while we wait for the council results—election results, I guess." Argrave looked at Galamon. "We can talk about this bowl, Galamon... and further, your trajectory."

None protested, and so Argrave nodded happily.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 268: Acquisitions

"Come on, check it out," implored Durran, gesturing towards Argrave.

"No, I won't 'check it out.' Where the hell did you get a hand, anyway?" Argrave said incredulously, looking at his companion's hands. All three of them, that is.

Durran waved the hand, its fingers stiff and floppy. "From the vampires. One of them lost it, and I kept it. Not like they need it anymore—they all burned up beneath the sun."

"You're not going to be performing necromancy here," Argrave said decisively. "Just give it up."

“Come on,” Durran urged, moving to the trunk in the center of the room. “The manifest said this little bracelet stores souls—that it’s full of them. We have everything we need. I really want to try this out,” the former tribal said, golden eyes veritably glowing. “I’ve learned so much from what Garm wrote.”

Argrave caressed his temple, casting a glance at Anneliese. In light of the morbidity, it was difficult to treat this with any degree of amusement. Finally, he commanded, “Galamon, take the hand, please.”

The elven vampire moved to action. Durran backed away, holding his hand close to his chest—the detached one, that is. Rather than grab at the hand, Galamon grabbed Durran’s wrist and the tribal winced in pain. His grip loosened, and the vampire took it.

“Not in the city,” Argrave pointed at Durran as Galamon hid the hand somewhere. “Once we’re not in a city any longer, I’ll consider it.”

Durran shook his head. “If not now, then not ever. It’ll rot,” he said in lamentation.

“There’ll be more hands, and soon,” Argrave assured. “Felipe’s force might be crippled, the north and south arrayed against him... but the central stretch of the kingdom is still firmly in his hands. Our first priority is that fortification in Indanus Divide. And all of this is assuming that Leopold is indeed elected leader,” Argrave said slowly.

Everyone looked around, offering no response. Despite being in Leopold’s mansion the entire day, no news reached them. The Assembly was ironclad, and no information leaked from the Grand Council. It was impossible to tell how things were going. Of course, Anneliese could keep tabs on the meeting with her Starsparrow... but Argrave asked her not to. He couldn’t influence things—the prospect of knowing what was happening made him deeply uneasy, regardless of whether it was positive or negative. All he wanted was the result.

“So... to summarize...” Argrave warded his thoughts away by shaking his head and walked over to the things they’d been examining. “Durran... you are now the best-equipped out of everyone here.”

“Well...” the man rubbed his head in embarrassment. Perhaps Argrave should be mentally referring to him as ‘their necromancer,’ now. “You still have that crazy blessing. Galamon’s got his axe—don’t have one of those. Maybe I can get one, soon.”

As was to be expected of loot lifted from the necromantic Order of the Rose, much of it pertained to necromancy. There was that bracelet, for one. It was capable of binding impermanent souls within for later use. It kept them safe for a long while—centuries, even, given that it was partially filled even now. Souls stored in that manner lost all of their subtler touches, though, and were incapable of recreating creatures like those in the Low Way.

Maybe Argrave’s soul wouldn’t degrade in that manner if it were kept in that bracelet. He didn’t care to test the theory.

Beyond that, the artifacts contained many useful instruments for necromancers. Much of them could be replicated by spell—soul harvesters, flesh sculpting knives, that sort of thing—but the fact remained that Durran had all he needed to create whatever manner of creature that he wished. That bracelet might be useless for creatures like those in the Low Way, but... others weren’t.

Argrave had little doubt Durran could recreate the Guardians of the Low Way if he had the time, inclination, and the raw materials. Considering they were about to go to war, the raw materials were about to be a rather common thing. Even still...

"Necromancy is hated in Berendar," Argrave told him. "Most everywhere you go, you won't be able to make use of it."

"I think I can be the judge of that," Durran refuted. "I've been reading these books. I know what I can make."

Argrave nodded, knowing he was right. In the distant future, necromancy was to be an incredibly useful skill, its potency doubled by some of the gods' blessings. Argrave's Brumesingers were testament to the strength of necromancy—they provided bodies, shields. The higher body counted necromancy offered was invaluable on its own, even excluding its other practical applications.

"Do you know what'll happen when the boundaries between our realm and the gods' realm weakens?" Argrave questioned. "It's called corruptive magic for a reason. All these Order of the Rose fortresses... their creations lay idle. They guard what they were bid to guard. But *Gerechtigkeit* will bend their purpose, subvert their creators. And every abomination will come surging up from the depths of the earth, sowing discord by slaughter." Argrave gestured towards Durran. "The necromantic things you make... you're still alive, so they won't be taken from you right away. But you'll be fighting against that corruption. Knowing that, is this the path you want to take? I'm not trying to dissuade, just... give advice."

Durran stared back at Argrave, seeming uncertain himself. Then, his eyes hardened, and he nodded decisively. "Be a shame to let Garm's legacy die with him."

Argrave looked to Anneliese, raising his brows up as he acknowledged the man had a point. "Alright. Don't say you didn't know," Argrave concluded, deciding to drop the subject and move on. "Besides those things... we got some items for me. Like this nice little bracer that can makes me into a cutter," Argrave reached down and picked up something silver.

Argrave held a silver bracer. It had dark grooves all along its surface with glass that presently only displayed silver. The thing had a magic formation on the inside. It didn't fit far up Argrave's arm because of how thick his wrists had become, but it did fit. He wasn't comfortable putting it on all the way quite yet.

Its appearance was new, yet even still this bracer was quite familiar to him. It slowly drained HP—or now in reality, Argrave's blood—until charged. Once charged, any blood magic would draw upon its supply before harming the player. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' it had been useless. Far better things could go on your wrist, and the equipment slot had never been justified—players would suffer the HP hit from blood magic gladly. Now, though... casting blood magic without repercussions even once? That was a huge thing. No risk of anemia, no discoordination... they were rare, so he hadn't hoped to find it. Then again, that qualified for many items—he guess he'd just gotten lucky.

Argrave set the bracer aside. "That bracer, then this." He raised a pair of ratty gray gloves, slightly worn from centuries of neglect.

These gloves, while not exactly protective, coordinated extremely well with his preferred element—electricity. They were like Galamon's Giantkillers in a sense, but rather than catching whole spells, they collected a small charge from all lightning spells cast. The effect was like a tiny flame before the two blue infernos that were the Giantkillers they'd collected from the mountains in the Burnt Desert, but it could certainly help Argrave out in a hand-to-hand pinch.

Argrave set the gloves atop the bracer. "For Anneliese..." Argrave knelt and picked up some boots. They were man's boots, but they fit her—she was quite tall, after all. Argrave was too big to wear them, and Durran ceded them to her.

These boots were for mobility. They had wind enchantments—strong wind enchantments that were quite durable and used the caster's supply of magic instead of their own. Anneliese had used some magic of that sort in the past, so they probably fit her best in terms of aptitude. Whether moving faster, moving upwards, slowing a descent... these boots could do it all. They were best for thieves that utilized magic like Ruleo, but Anneliese would make stellar use of them, Argrave had no doubt.

Argrave looked at the heavy leathers, feeling glad it was Anneliese who would have them. Anything that kept her a little more able to avoid harm made him happy.

"I look forward to trying them," Anneliese said honestly.

"I don't doubt it," Argrave nodded. "The stuff from Induen's retinue will take a little longer, according to this manifest... our battle with him depleted them, and they need to be recharged now that they've been identified," Argrave picked up the paper. "Even still, once we have them? You all saw how long Induen held out against us. We'll upgrade our defensive capabilities massively."

Argrave prepared to move on to Galamon and his black bowl, taking the thing in his hand.

"Induen held out against *you*," Durran corrected him. "Monster that you are. If we're getting his gear, well... looking forward—"

Durran turned like he'd seen something. Perplexed, Argrave turned too. Just outside of the ward blocking off their conversation, someone stepped through a now-opened door.

Argrave dispelled the ward. "Elenore," he called out. "Sister," he said, reminding himself to use that word. "Welcome back!"

"Good afternoon, Argrave," she greeted. She dressed in black, today.

Argrave gave her a hug—it was starting to feel natural, he found. After, he pulled away and held her thin shoulders. "It's good to see you again," he said, smiling.

"I was gone but a short while," she shook her head dismissively.

"And you returned at a perfect time," Argrave nodded. "The Grand Council is going to decide how much it likes me and my ancient adoptive grandfather Leopold today," he said with some swagger. "I am definitely not nervous, not a whit, not a speck..." he finished with sarcastic anxiety, clasping his hands together. "So, your troubles in Atrus... they're over with?"

Elenore did not smile, saying simply, "The situation in Atrus is being resolved. I am rather confident in its success."

“Excellent! Let’s—”

“Your agents faced no troubles in Atrus, did they?” Anneliese stated out of the blue. “No one was hunting them.”

Elenore remained quiet, lips pursing as she wandered for an answer. Then, she said, “I never claimed they did.”

“No,” Anneliese shook her head. “As I recall, you said Levin was hostile to you in the palace, implying that was the same in Atrus. But if Atrus was truly a negotiating platform as you thought... Levin would not be hostile to you, would he? And he cannot be hostile. Those delegates would not collaborate if he was,” she continued. “Those delegates that we never met.”

Elenore stepped a little further into the room. “We ought to continue this conversation under ward,” she implored them.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. Anneliese’s conviction came out of left field, but he knew she did not mention things like this she was not certain of. This woman dressed in black that he gazed upon... he felt he was back in the past a few weeks, meeting the Bat for the first time. Nevertheless, he conjured his ward to shield the room once again.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 269: Lesser

“The mantle will look splendid on you, prince Levin,” the male tailor complimented, both of them admiring his figure in the mirror.

Indeed, Levin agreed with the assessment. Rather than traditional Vasquer colors, he had elected to don new colors—a rich burgundy, accented by gray and golden buttons. Three days from now, he would form the Kingdom of Atrus, and take the name Levin of Atrus—his new house bore gray and burgundy as its colors. It signified his intention to abandon his claim on Vasquer.

The colors didn’t go quite as well with his physical features as black and gold, but it was more than sufficient. He wore a heavy ceremonial garb, overtop it all a thick royal mantle. Somehow, the tailor had managed to make a gradient on the fabric, from a dark maroon to light on the lower portions. It had cost a fortune... but then, the king’s treasury had ample coin to pay any and all.

“This will do nicely,” Levin adjusted the mantle. He would, ostensibly, only wear this once... perhaps it was a waste. Even still, he did like the way it looked.

A commotion broke out in the hallway, and Levin’s head jerked to the side. The tailor stepped away from Levin, alarmed, and set his scissors down on the nearby table. He stepped to the door, yet before he could open it burst open.

“Bernard! Wait for the soldiers!” a voice called out from deep down the hall, but a fully armored knight burst past. His sword rushed out at the tailor, piercing the unarmored man’s throat easily.

Levin braced himself for combat, staring upon this new assailant. He was a knight of Duke Rizzart, the man whom he’d collaborated with in forming the kingdom of Atrus. Levin was betrothed to his

daughter. Either he'd been betrayed, or there was an infiltrator amongst the Duke's man. He mentioned soldiers, so Levin thought it might be the former.

"I won't wait," the man called back to his friend in the hall, pulling his blade free of the tailor. "He's seeing the tailor, got no weapons... if I get his head, I'll be moving up in the world. So, little rebel... die nice and easy."

The other knight joined up with them. Levin eyed them both, eerily calm despite the situation. He grabbed at his royal mantle, unclasping it from his shoulder. One of the knights rushed, preparing to cast a spell. Levin pulled off the mantle and threw it at him, his other hand casting a flame spell to set it alight.

The fiery cloak wreathed the man, and Levin darted towards the table, grabbing the tailor's scissors. He split them in two, now bearing in hand two improvised knives. The other knight took a cautious stance, ready for Levin, yet the prince ran towards a window. With a spell of wind, he broke the glass. Managing the scissor blade awkwardly, he pinched his fingers together and whistled through them—loud and shrill, it echoed out the window.

"Jump," the knight suggested to Levin. "Do a flip, even. Might be you live, little wayward prince."

With his signal sent, Levin faced his two opponents neatly. He placed one finger in the hole on each scissor handle and spun them about, silently taunting his opponents. One of them seemed capable of casting spells, and Levin watched this man warily.

Hide your hand. Wait for an opportunity, he judged even as the man prepared a spell.

Lightning struck his chest in a moment too fast to process, and the distance was narrowed. Levin returned the spell then cast a simple ward—a quick barrage from the opposing knight broke it. Emboldened, they both pressed forth. Just then, Argrave used the ring on his finger to cast a B-rank ward, splitting them in two.

Levin dropped one scissor blade and caught the wrist of the right-side knight as he swung his sword, then jammed the other blade into the knight's helmet socket. The blade wasn't long enough to penetrate deep, but the man roared in pain, half-blinded. Keeping his grip on the blade, Levin kicked the man away.

Changing targets, Levin tackled the other knight, using his superior size to his advantage. The cold metal of his foe's steel plate made the tackle hurt dreadfully. Landing atop the knight, he pushed past his pain, grabbed the man's helmet to expose his neck. Levin knifed the man in the neck half a dozen a times, only turning when he saw movement in the corner of his eyes—the other knight swung his sword.

Levin flinched away, yet the tip of the sword cut deep into and out of his shoulder. He hissed in pain yet grabbed the blade of the man he'd killed and rose to his feet. His shoulder felt as though it was aflame, yet the prince could give no time to the pain. Steel met steel second by second as they clashed, each parrying and attacking with all the ferocity of men who felt they might die. What few breaks each gave the other were soon filled by magical assaults.

Eventually, the half-blinded man, lacking depth perception, made a fatal miscalculation of the length of his blade, coming just short of slicing Levin's face off. The prince stabbed his sword into the man's knee

where the joint of the armor offered entrance. The man was forced to kneel. Levin seized the opportunity, stabbing the man in the neck with the blade of the tailor's scissors. He pushed on it hard, then pulled it free. The man gurgled, then collapsed to the floor.

Levin stood there for a moment, eyes jumping between the two of them. He gazed down the long hallway, his breathing heavy and his heartbeat erratic. Remembering his place, he healed the wound on his shoulder with his magic and stepped to the window.

The prince's personal guard—not the royal guard, but those he'd picked personally—were locked in combat with some of the castle garrison. And beyond the castle, beyond the town... a steady stream of soldiers made their way to the gate. They did not prepare for siege... but rather walked towards the wide-open entrance. Everything was executed perfectly. If not for these overeager knights, he would not have known the threat came.

#####

"Levin made a few fatal mistakes," Elenore explained dispassionately. "To begin with, he didn't tell Felipe that I was the Bat. I assume he wanted to retain the possibility of an alliance between Atrus and us. His second mistake... was assuming I would not work with Felipe."

Argrave looked at Elenore sitting opposite him. "Fatal," he repeated. "You've killed Levin."

"It may have happened, yes. But that wasn't my target," Elenore explained. "Felipe had royal knights defect to Levin deliberately. The prince didn't trust them, of course—they weren't his people. But he didn't reject them or execute them. He let them 'maintain the peace' in Atrus—a minor task, but it gave them purpose and action in the kingdom and kept them far away from himself. Another of his mistakes," Elenore shook her head.

Durran sat down beside Argrave. "Just tell us what you did," he insisted.

Elenore took a moment to collect her thoughts. Before she could, however, Anneliese said, "That time we stopped in the outskirts of Dirracha—you got in contact with Felipe. That was the day we didn't see you," she claimed.

"Yes," Elenore nodded. "The king may have guessed who I was, but he didn't know. So, Felipe was amenable to working with me," she explained. "I approached as the aggrieved Bat, insisting the incident had been a misunderstanding. And I offered my help against Levin. This was done through agents, naturally."

"But what did you do?" insisted Argrave through clenched teeth. "Why the secrecy?"

"I helped Felipe establish contact with certain traitorous elements within Atrus. He promised pardons to them, a large share of the riches plundered from the royal treasury, and increases in territory. Mostly lies. I doubt he has the capacity to enforce those promises," Elenore stated, crossing her arms. "And I helped his 'defected' royal knights get in position to assassinate certain key figures."

Argrave took a deep breath. "Who?" he pressed.

"Most of them," she said simply. "Most of the leading nobles of Atrus. Any figures that were key to the kingdom's cohesion. People were raised to take their place—Duke Rizzart's brother, for instance, will

assume control of the Dukedom of Upper Siluz. Levin may die—I think it likely he’s captured, honestly—but regardless, there will be no King of Atrus. That realm has shattered. Balkanized... I think you called it,” she finished, sinking back into the couch with a joyless look about her.

Argrave turned his gaze to the silver bracer he’d examined earlier today, thinking of what to say.

“You deliberately spent more time with me to convince Argrave you hid nothing from him,” Anneliese suggested.

“I had to play around your talents, yes,” Elenore nodded. “I felt I had a decent grasp on them. I never lied, not really. And this wasn’t an emotional decision.”

Argrave’s gaze jumped back to her. “Why did you do this? Why didn’t you bring it up? Do you distrust me, distrust us?”

“Because I knew you would not sanction it,” she said at once. “And because I knew it would be the most beneficial resolution to Atrus’ problem. And... I did tell you... that I wouldn’t forget what Levin had done.”

“How does this benefit us?” Argrave demanded of her.

“Do you think all of those nobles in Atrus will simply fall in line with Felipe? Some were offered pardons, sure. These ones are inconsequential to our future—I made sure of that. Even more will join our side once you are coronated, seeking vengeance for the foul crimes perpetrated by Felipe. The king’s hands are dirty, not yours,” Elenore shook her head, bronze jewelry ringing. “It’s on his plate. His royal knights did it. His rule is further undermined.” She tilted her head at him. “As I recall... you had intended to win the allegiance of some northern nobles before Atrus was formed. Levin’s actions disrupted those plans. Now the course is corrected.”

Argrave stared at her for a long, long while. She offered no apology. Indeed, all she said belied an insistence that she was right. Everyone in the room looked uncomfortable with the situation, save perhaps the ever-stoic Galamon.

“So, you decided to kill hundreds of people... because you thought I wouldn’t like that,” Argrave summarized.

Elenore remained silent for a few moments, then nodded. “Yes.”

Argrave nodded. It was a slow, bitter nod that repeated time and time again, like he was shaking his brain to move his thoughts about.

“I recall seeing something... something Vasquer showed me, about your psyche. Your memories,” Argrave began. “And I know enough about you, personally. Induen said that he was comfortable abandoning you if it suited him,” Argrave said, letting the words hang. “I remember that hurt you. And now... despite everything you’ve seen... you push me away. Push us away,” he said quietly.

Elenore didn’t respond.

“I don’t get it,” Argrave said with a sigh. “I feel... sad.”

“You didn’t kill them, Argrave. Felipe did. I did,” she said quietly, almost in comfort.

Argrave looked Elenore in her eyeless sockets. "And that's why," he returned. "You made yourself lesser... for me," he finished, his voice a quiet whisper that still filled the room.

Argrave rose to his feet and dispelled the ward. Blinking quickly, he wiped at his eyes. He stepped towards the door, saying nothing, and left. He stepped down the hallway of Leopold's estate, thinking about nothing at all. He turned a corner, passing by Ansgar. Startled, the man stopped and chased after Argrave.

"Argrave! Argrave," Ansgar said, coming to stand before Argrave. "I was just coming with the news. The council decided to elect Leopold as leader!" the Dandalan said excitedly.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 270: Uncrowned's Council

"What exactly do I call you now?" Argrave questioned Leopold, his tone somewhat lacking its typical vigor. He genuinely did not know. Relize never gained a leader in 'Heroes of Berendar.' This was a new development entirely divorced from what Argrave knew... just as Elenore's actions were.

The two of them sat alone in the Dandalan patriarch's study. Things had simply ended up this way. He was unused to being anywhere without Anneliese, but right now he felt fine with it.

"The leader has no title," Leopold shook his head. "This position has been taken only once before. It has no name because it is fundamentally transitory. The Grand Council would not abide giving legitimacy to the position by assigning it a title—I am merely the leader of Relize." The aged patrician looked to Argrave. "Soon enough, I'll be calling you 'your Majesty.'"

Argrave nodded. "You'll put the crown on my head, most likely."

Leopold leaned into his desk. "Less excited than I thought you'd be." The patrician pulled back a drawer, retrieving a casket. He pried it open with his knife, then retrieved a purple bottle. "Want some wine? This is fine stuff, and I know you have quite a thirst."

Argrave shook his head. "Enjoy it," he said somberly. "So, I suspect you'll be revoking the Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption?"

Leopold nodded. "On the day of your coronation. Bit of... sleight of hand. Hide something monumental behind something even more monumental." The man thumbed at the cork, looking around for something to remove it. "First thing... we have to send the Relize magic architects out to that site you spoke of. They'll examine the mountain and determine if this fortress you intend to construct in Indanus is actually feasible."

Argrave's brain cleared for a moment, reminded of his duty. "That's good. Don't forget to bring Melan along for that—he owes me."

"Not sure how you managed that thing with the vampires..." Leopold shook his head. "I'm especially not sure how you got the Wratsons to help you with that. They're... standoffish. It's a comforting development, nonetheless. I never knew they had an S-rank mage in their service... they're the only in Relize, I think..."

"Mmm," Argrave nodded, not feeling his typical urge to show off or act grandiose. "Leopold. If one of your sons killed someone, what would you do? And not in self-defense, not in passion... but cold-bloodedly."

Leopold had been fiddling with the bottle's cork with his knife, but he stopped and looked at Argrave. "What do you mean, 'if?' Rex did."

"Rex?" Argrave repeated.

Leopold nodded. "Yes, Rex. He was... well, he was a grandson, come to think of it... but I loved him well enough to call him my son. His father died in a raid, you see, so I mostly raised him. He..." the patrician paused. "I don't want to talk about it. This is supposed to be a happy day, you damned fool," he rebuked. "Shortly put, I disinherited him and turned him over to the Council's hands."

"Immediately?" Argrave pressed.

"...no," Leopold admitted. "It took... some time. Had to change my mind... see him for who he really was. See how I failed. Steel myself." He shook his head, then stroked his beard once. "Enough of this. Move on."

Argrave nodded slowly, staring at the windows behind Leopold and into the rushing river.

#####

"I think you should give her a pass," Durran said to Argrave. "Maybe if you've got another natural disaster on your radar, you might show it to her like you showed me that tower falling down. Got me in line, didn't it?"

Argrave was in no mood for jokes, and he stared Durran eye-to-eye, waiting for the man to speak further. Though they sat in the dining hall, alone at dusk, neither touched the food before them.

Durran's face hardened slightly when Argrave didn't even crack a smile. He explained himself seriously, saying, "The people she disposed of... cowards and opportunists. They'd be the first to back out once it came time to fight Gerechtigkei. She's established new leaders in Atrus—ones that she chose, ones that can help us."

"You'd have traitors instead of cowards," Argrave pointed out frankly. "That's certainly reliable."

Durran shook his head. "Most of them weren't aware of what Elenore is doing. Even the delegates that came here... they didn't have any clue of Elenore's plans. She couldn't risk them telling you, after all." The former tribal leaned in closely, moonlight shimmering against his golden tattoos. "And she's right. Felipe orchestrated this, not her. She just... helped him along."

Argrave laughed, but not out of amusement.

"And think of it. Now, the king has spurred the north into opposition against the crown. They're further dividing their forces because more foes actively antagonize the loyalists," Durran explained heatedly. "This was the smart thing to do. We have to win this war."

"All I see is more deaths on the board," Argrave finally spoke his thoughts earnestly. "So, Atrus was staying neutral—good. Fewer people die. More are ready to confront the true threat, Gerechtigheit, unscarred by war and battle."

Durran leaned away a bit. "Instead, you'd have more of *our* people die fighting a stronger opponent?" He lifted his hands up. "If we win easier, Argrave, much less of *our* people perish. *Our* people, with proven loyalty and steady allegiances."

Argrave shook his head.

Frustrated, Durran pounded the table. "Don't give me that 'defiled saint' act," he said insistently. "I talk with Galamon more than you might think. He talks. I know that you killed those druidic scouts. How was that situation different? These people hadn't harmed you, hadn't harmed anyone. But they were pivotal in gaining an advantage in battle, in war. You slaughtered them all."

That gave Argrave pause. Was the situation different? He thought it was, but he had long ago come to terms with the fact that he'd done that. Maybe his own bias was blinding him to the fact that Elenore had good reason to do what she did, no matter what line she'd crossed.

"...if it was the same, why did she think she had to hide what she was doing from me, from all of us?" Argrave asked, not knowing the answer himself.

"That's..." even Durran, devil's advocate that he was being, couldn't answer that. "I don't know, Argrave."

Argrave nodded, coming to much the same conclusion himself.

"The whole time I've been travelling with you... say what you will, but you always act as though you know best," Durran said. "You deceive people—even your allies—to get them to do what you want. You started out deceiving Elenore. You think you have their best interests in heart. Like sister, like brother. You'd be a hypocrite, parting ways with her."

"I..." Argrave began, but then realized he was just trying to defend himself of the accusation of hypocrisy. "Keep talking."

"I wanted... *want*," Durran corrected. "I want things to work out between the two of you. I... well, you know me. You know my twin sisters, what they did," he threw up his hands. "They killed themselves. One in particular... Chinusa. She did some terrible, terrible things to a lot of people before she went. It was... I don't know. Maybe she was making everybody hate her before she dove to the other side. Or maybe she was seeing if there was anybody who'd actually stick with her when all she did was test. Test, strain, and *hurt*."

Argrave looked at him, lost for words.

"Elenore's not really like Chinusa. I don't think... I don't think there's any chance of her... doing what she did," he said, evidently having trouble saying it aloud. "Their personality... way too different. Regardless, Argrave... I've said my piece."

#####

"There is no guilt. No shame. Only conviction," Anneliese told Argrave. "She truly believes in what she did."

"And how does she feel knowing she deceived?" Argrave pressed.

The both of them sat on their bed. Galamon was there, too, standing near the door. As ever, he acted as their guard.

"If it bothered her overmuch, she would not have done it," Galamon was the one to answer.

Argrave turned his head to the usually stoic man. "You have thoughts on this?"

"In war... if you innovate, move the line on the bounds of what you're willing to do..." Galamon looked back, white eyes cold. "The enemy will do it too."

Argrave furrowed his brows. "Margrave Reinhardt didn't spread the plague in northern lands even once he'd learned that's what was happening," he disagreed at once.

"As was demonstrated today... a leader doesn't control their subordinates absolutely," Galamon pointed out. "One of his people likely would have. The news never spread. And we stopped the plague. Something like this changes the culture of the war. Honor is needed for the future. With honor, you ensure what depths you sink to will not one day be returned to you redoubled."

Argrave lost himself to silence. He thought Galamon was right, at least partially. But then, Felipe would sink to any depth, so it was a somewhat pointless argument. And Gerechtigkei... no honor existed there. He was a bottomless pit.

"...I'm sorry about this, Argrave," Anneliese spoke. "I was unalert. I noticed incongruities, but she had explanations on hand for each. I allowed myself to grow lax. Getting drunk... what was I thinking?"

Argrave shook his head. "It's my fault. I didn't convince Elenore that we'd be able to win without doing something this drastic. I didn't earn her trust well enough."

"You absolve her too readily. She chose," Galamon reminded him.

Argrave laid back against the bed. "I'll need to talk to her again... tomorrow."

"What about?" Anneliese pressed.

"I think we should figure that out," Argrave looked to Anneliese.

#####

Argrave knocked on a solid wooden door, then put his hands behind his back. A woman opened it— Argrave recognized her. She often attended to Elenore. She cast a glance back, opened the door wider, and then stepped past Argrave. He walked inside the room.

Elenore sat on her bed. She was leaning down, turning the cranks on her prosthetic feet to tighten the clamps. Having donned much of the bronze jewelry, Argrave knew she saw him... or perceived him, whatever the proper term was.

"You're here," she greeted him normally, like whatever had happened was all but a dream. She finished her task and stood up. "I have some tea. Mint, sweetened, just as you like it," she stepped towards a table. "I'm surprised that Anneliese isn't with you."

Argrave shook his head and shut the door behind him. "I don't need her here. Not for this."

Elenore did not spare a glance back. "You'll have tea, I hope."

"Sure, we can have tea," Argrave agreed amiably. "But I think I should get to the point right away."

Elenore stopped walking, turning back. "Is that right?"

Argrave nodded. "Yes, it is. Simply put... I don't think we can work together moving forward."

Elenore leaned against the table, and Argrave briefly thought he had surprised her so badly she lost her balance. Her face was steady, though, telling him he might be wrong.

"...what do you mean?" she asked him, voice monotone.

"I made a mistake," Argrave said. "My parents always told me not to get into business with family. Guess they were right," he broke off into a chuckle.

"So, you..." Elenore paused a long while. Her face shifted as she digested things. In the end, her face settled and she asked, "What's going to happen?"

"Well... the ball is already in motion. I'll be going through with the war, the coronation... but I can't, in good faith, involve you in things. I won't be consulting you. I won't be asking you for any more favors." Argrave spread his arms out. "I can't put it any other way. We won't be working together."

Elenore exhaled, crossing her arms and lowering her head. "So... I expect you'll want me out of Leopold's mansion, then?"

"No," Argrave corrected her at once. "Far from it. You're as welcome here as I am. I'll come by occasionally, talk, have some tea... so long as I'm welcome. So long as you're willing to stay."

"...I'm not following," Elenore said after a time.

Argrave sighed. "Elenore... sister," he said somewhat forcefully, walking closer. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I like you. I do. I know..." Argrave trailed off, gathering himself. "I know that you wanted to help. I know that you don't feel like you did anything wrong. But I can't condone what you did. I can't work with someone who doesn't have faith in me," he put it plainly.

"You don't trust me," she raised her head up to him, eyeless sockets seeming to fix him in place.

"You would never harm me. You would never harm any of the people I care about. I believe that wholeheartedly. Personally speaking, I think I could... overlook what you've done," he admitted. "Maybe that makes me a pushover. Even still, I believe you when you say what you did was in my best interest," Argrave said confidently.

Argrave took his hands off her shoulders. "But there's a lot more at stake than me and mine. I'm not going to weep over the people you helped Felipe assassinate. I didn't know them. But this is as far as we go. You knew I wouldn't want this result, yet you did it anyway—no, that's not right. You did it

secretly *because* of that.” He sighed once more and shook his head. “Getting angry about it, trying to punish you... that would be a ridiculous waste of time. I don’t want to alienate you. But you have, it seems, a different destination in mind. If we both steer in opposite directions, we’re bound to crash.”

Elenore swallowed, turned her head to the side, then turned back. “But what will you do? I mean... we talked about your plans...” her voice was wavering slightly.

“That’s my concern,” Argrave informed her with a sad smile. “Don’t worry about it, though—all will be fine. Put it out of your mind.”

The words clearly shook Elenore. Both of them knew she had said those exact words to Argrave in the past. “But I came here... I did what I did, to...” she couldn’t finish her sentences.

Argrave took a deep breath. “I know. You gave up a tremendous amount. That’s why I’ll tell you this; if you need anything from me, I can help you. As a matter of fact, the time we travel to Vysenn to engage with the barbarian tribes comes closer every day. I’d like you to come with me so that you might be healed fully. I’m not severing ties,” he assured her, giving her a hug. “I just... overestimated myself.”

When Argrave felt Elenore shake slightly, he felt some twinge of guilt in his heart. But... well, it was best to fight deception with deception, after all. Elenore would never see if he didn’t do something drastic like this—something that made her really reflect. After all, she still thought she did fundamentally nothing wrong.

And once she had reflected? Well... he’d welcome her back. Until then, he was the concerned yet disappointed family member.

Argrave pulled away. “Let’s sit down, have some tea. How have you been feeling these days?”