

In the days to come, the news of Leopold's election to the position of leader of Relize washed across the coastal city. Argrave's thoughts of Elenore and their dilemma were washed away like a sandcastle overtaken by the tide. The tide, in this case, was the great deluge of work that Argrave involved himself in.

Three days after Leopold assumed his office, news spread of his support of Argrave as a claimant. Rumors had been whirling and many people were already privy to this information, but it was another thing to have it directly confirmed. The support of the people was not a rancorous uproar, per se... but it was not a rejection. Argrave was liked well enough, largely due to his actions with the vampires here in this city.

The coronation was set to happen in five days after this announcement. It was to be a public ceremony right before the Grand Council's Assembly. Argrave would make a pledge to the people followed by a pledge to the Grand Council and Leopold. Following that, he had to make hundreds of pledges day by day. After all, he'd promised to make a parliament that represented the interests of the realm, and it needed seats to fill it.

"This Parliament you intend to found is clearly going to be quite the grand institution..." Leopold noted, biting from an apple. "How many seats will there be?"

"Promised a lot. At the very least, it's going to be... hundreds," Argrave shook his head, leaning over a blank draft document. "I would just use the three estates as my model, but we're lacking one of them... and things are quite different here in Berendar in general." Argrave looked up, seeing Leopold's confusion. "Ah, the three estates... I travel a lot, you see. It's a system from elsewhere," he explained.

Anneliese put one hand on Argrave's shoulder, looking at the draft herself. "The most influential people are the wealthy, the nobility, and the magic users of the realm. These match up well enough with your three estates, I should think."

Argrave nodded. "I know. Even still, I don't want this to be some kind of council that promotes self-interest. We need good people on the seats—people that I can trust to focus on the betterment of the realm."

Leopold scoffed. "You'd be better off putting dogs on the seats, then. At the very least I can promise that dogs love people. People that love people other than themselves are few and far between."

Argrave disagreed, straightening his back and gazing at Leopold determinedly. "An assembly's culture is decided by its composition. If we choose enough good people to take the seats—diligent and dedicated people—they could set the atmosphere of the Parliament for years to come. I'll take however long it takes to get the right people. And trust me—they exist."

Leopold grumbled but helped Argrave ably in finding these candidates. Much of their time was spent searching for people to place in prominent positions. In the patrician families, there were only too many people trained in administration and management that were underutilized because of a variety of

reasons. He might've left the task to Elenore. Something of that nature was her specialty. Nevertheless, asking no favors of her was important for self-reflection. Even still, it cemented the importance of this plan of his going well. He desperately needed Elenore.

Nights were occupied with studying imbuing, learning other B-rank spells with Anneliese's tutelage, and helping out a certain vampire.

"You pour your fresh blood into this, then you drink," Argrave explained. "I just need you to do it every night, nothing more. If you do it more often than that, it'll be... difficult to get you to stop."

"It makes me feel bestial," Galamon complained, staring down at the black bowl with runes on its surface. "After I drink of it... I feel stronger, sharper, true... but I feel as though I value life less."

Argrave scratched the back of his neck. "Well, I'm sorry about that, but maybe take comfort in that it's the last piece that we need for this ritual. It's on someone's person, and this individual wanders. They're not some bystander, either—they're a vampire, themselves. Drink your own blood from this bowl, you'll start to gain an intrinsic knowledge of where this piece is. In essence, you're imbuing your blood with some of the magic in this bowl," Argrave shrugged. "That's the only way we're to find this next item, the glass eye."

Galamon sighed, removing his gauntlet and setting it aside. He held his right hand over the bowl and stuck his finger into his wrist, letting blood drain out.

"I'll, uh... I'll come back when you're done," Argrave inched towards the door.

"You're not telling me something," Galamon looked at Argrave. "You're always a little vague, but you're avoiding talking about this ritual itself."

Argrave paused, watching the blood drip from Galamon's wrist. "You're not wrong," he confirmed.

"Just tell me," Galamon said plainly. "You owe me that much."

Argrave scratched at his chin, then stepped forward and sat in a chair. "Well... this ritual. When it's done, you won't be a vampire. But you won't be... exactly like you were," Argrave explained.

"Get to the point," Galamon pressed.

"You'll retain certain... beneficial qualities," Argrave said hesitantly. "Like... regeneration, your senses, your strength..." Argrave held his hands out. "But rest assured—the vampiric 'beast' you talk about, the need to drink blood, the inability to consume food: all of that will be gone. You will be elven again. Not normal, but... elven. Trust me on this."

Galamon closed his eyes and pulled his finger out of his wrist. The wound closed up second by second. He opened his eyes, stared down Argrave, and drank of the black bowl filled with his own blood.

"...we should get back to preparing," the vampire said, betraying none of his thoughts on the matter.

Ignorant of his companion's thoughts, Argrave did just as the vampire suggested. Galamon was pivotal in the most important undercurrent to all of their preparations: the realities of war.

Argrave's suspension of Elenore's services meant that they wouldn't have top-notch abilities to sabotage as Argrave had hoped for, at least not until Argrave decided to stop with this charade. It did leave him a fair bit uncomfortable about his plan. He desperately hoped this time apart would help Elenore reflect... otherwise, he'd just be a huge fool.

Leopold and all of the patricians of the Grand Council began the process of marshalling their forces. Melan Watson, S-rank mage and vampire, escorted the architects contracted by the Grand Council of Relize to the Indanus Divide. They would examine the spot that Argrave had marked to determine whether or not it was truly a viable location for a fortress.

Beyond that... logistics occupied the bulk of their time. Securing food, supplies... fortunately, the patricians had a well-trained and well-equipped retinue, so they did not need to worry about arming their men, only feeding them. Leopold, who had a large hand in the non-patrician merchant class that traded in common items like grain, was more than capable of filling that role. Beyond trading, there were several villages nearby that would eagerly join for protection. Between Relize and these subsidiaries, they occupied most of the Mideast.

The newly-elected leader of Relize issued a mandate requesting a certain number of trained guardsmen from each patrician family. He offered incentives for exceeding this number, as well as the promise of possible advancement in the face of military success. Those who lent high-rank spellcasters to the cause were given something very special—exemption from Council and crown taxes. Argrave lent his name to this mandate to give legitimacy to the promises.

That said, Argrave was very worried about their spellcasters. Melan Watson was the only S-rank mage in the city. Beyond that, not many high-ranking spellcasters occupied the Mideast. There were thousands of powerful spellcasters in the north—a legacy of the former northern queendom that had been conquered—and more in the south, which had both Jast and the Tower of the Gray Owl. Their spellcasters, in contrast, were sorely lacking.

For now, the only thing they received from the patricians was the promise of support, both in soldiers and spellcasters. But the promise was loud and the numbers significant. Leopold did not seem to doubt the numbers, and so Argrave elected not to, either. Things were shaping up to have a vaguely feudal army structure, wherein each patrician or their representative acted as commander of their own troops. Argrave briefly considered waiving this and establishing a military hierarchy of some kind, but he decided against it when he considered the scope of the task and his lack of military knowledge.

Non-essential trading was halted altogether, and the docks became full of ships preparing for a war rather than a simple voyage. Seeing the changes happen day-by-day was like a weight shackled to Argrave that grew in size without an end in sight. He was telling these men to stop trading, stop living their lives... and die for him. That pressure was enough to break a man, Argrave felt. The only thing that abated that overwhelming pressure even a little was knowing that their death was inevitable if they could not stand up to Gerechtigkeith.

Without Elenore's help, engaging the fractured state of Atrus was a fruitless effort for now. Ideally, whoever left would engage in battle against Vasquer all on their own. Perhaps Elenore might take a hand at things—Argrave wouldn't stop her. It was her prerogative. Even still, their plan remained largely unchanged. They'd secure the Indanus Divide, make contact with the south to see if they were

amenable to coordination, secure the north, and strike at Vasquer. In rough, oversimplified terms, they'd seize key strongholds piece-by-piece until they made it to Dirracha itself.

In truth, Argrave was surprised Felipe still drew breath. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' the king always died relatively quickly. Sometimes Induen was responsible. Sometimes the king got himself killed. Sometimes he died from the plague. The player could even have a hand in things directly. Unintentionally, Argrave had managed to extend the king's life the longest he'd ever seen it.

But the king remained in Dirracha. If the capital was seized, that would likely spell the end of Vasquer resistance. The nobility would be willing to fall in line, and the south would surely follow the Margrave if Reinhardt decided to accept Argrave's new position. Even if they didn't, Argrave could reach out to Castro. He'd planted the seeds there—the Tower Master of the Order of the Gray Owl would likely be investigating Gerechtigkeit. His support alone would lend him unprecedented authority.

Ostensibly, they stood at a position of impending success. Even with the setback of Elenore's imposed and ongoing self-reflection, Felipe had so desperately lashed out against Levin because he was in dire straits. Levin's exposure of the king's misdoings likely cemented the righteousness of the Margrave's rebellion and swelled his forces with new supporters. Relize was firmly under Leopold's control.

This position of impending success was generally where things went belly up. Wildcards remained. Orion remained absent, and Argrave did not yet know Levin's fate. Both of these uncertainties might be remedied by keeping Elenore's counsel. He couldn't, though. He had to make sure that she would keep him in the loop. And this method... it was the best that he knew.

Yet Elenore did not reach out. That fact stung at him even when the day of his coronation came.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 272: King of Vasquer**

Argrave did not sleep on the night before his coronation. This, naturally, worried him to no end—he didn't want to be seen before all as a tired-eyed monarch with dark bags beneath his eyes. That worry did nothing to help him sleep, of course.

Very early in the morning, before the suns had even risen above the distant mountains, Ansgar of Dandalan came into Argrave's room. He told him of the plan for today, and Argrave listened diligently despite already knowing how things would play out.

When it was done, Ansgar left, leaving Argrave alone with Anneliese once again. She laid against the bed, still-half-asleep. She had slept well, despite everything.

"Wish I could make a third pledge," Argrave said once he was gone. "I'll make my pledge to the people, make my pledge to the Grand Council... and then my pledge to you," he leaned down until his nose brushed against hers.

"No," she said in a playful, yet tired haze. She bopped him on the nose with her finger. "Bad. Terrible idea. I will be up there with you, per your insistence. That is bad enough."

Argrave's face hardened. "Christ, Anneliese, you're more than half of the reason I'm here today. If you're not—"

"I know. Please, do not take that seriously," she quieted him calmly. "I need no honors, prestige. But if you insist on giving them to me..."

Argrave leaned down and kissed her, then whispered, "I do. I can't be the only one that suffers in this. Going to drag the rest of you into the spotlight with me."

She laughed, then pushed him. "Go on. The preparations for this will take some time."

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The day was quite fair. Some light snowfall came and went during the night, but all it achieved was slightly blanketing the city in white—an ill attempt by whatever gods had called the snow, for the city was already mostly made of marble and needed no blanket of white. Still, by the time Argrave departed for the Assembly Chamber of Governance and Commerce, the snow was already being cleared.

Once there, Argrave was greeted by Leopold and the selection of people that had been designated for the coronation ceremony. They had all prepared an elaborate set of clothes for him. Fortunately, it was not done in the style of Relize—the kings of Vasquer had never historically donned that style, and they felt it might damage his reputation for others if he did.

Four patricians would place the royal mantle over Argrave's shoulder. After, he would kneel, and Leopold would place the crown over his head. That was the short and simple of what was to occur, yet even now the patricians argued amongst themselves about specificity and ceremony—irrelevant posturing, all of it.

Still... their self-serving words grounded Argrave in reality. He was not to be named king because he was great—he was to be named king because of these men before him. And why these men? These patricians crowned him because they had men supporting them. These men served these patricians to further their interest. And like this, the line went ever downward. A hierarchy of self-interest. He could see it all so clearly, splayed out in his mind like some sort of diagram.

Strangely enough, recognizing this set a sense of peace over Argrave, and the budding nervousness dissipated to a large degree.

"So, what is our king-to-be thinking of?" Durran asked him as he sat there, staring out the window at the slowly gathering crowd.

"Wish Elenore could be here," Argrave told him. "I don't think she would be, even if things weren't as they are presently. She doesn't seem the type to like ceremonies. Besides, she'd probably insist on staying behind because being her presence might be bad publicity for me," he scoffed.

"Hmm," Durran nodded. "I do hope this idea of yours works. It's a far cry from sending a tower in the ocean, I'll tell you that much. That certainly stuck with me."

Argrave put his hand on Durran's shoulder. "Keep your voice down," he said in irritation. "She could hear everything, capisce? What if what you said got to her ears?"

"Alright, alright," he pushed Argrave's arm off of him. "Gods, you're a tyrant already."

Galamon stepped up to them as they spoke. "We could hold this coronation at higher grounds. Here... there's tall buildings everywhere. Archers could take position there. I've got Leopold's guards stationed,

watching, and what few magic users we have on hand to watch for threats of that nature... yet even still. A higher vantage point eliminates threats.”

Argrave looked at the elven vampire, questioning if that was mere paranoia or a good point. Finally, he shook his head. “The point of holding it here is to show my commitment to the people... and to Relize. I trust your capabilities, Galamon. You’re why I’m standing here, still fully intact.”

Galamon nodded and stepped up to Argrave. He said nothing more about the matter. Argrave turned his head back to the window, continuing his crowd-watching.

A door opened and Anneliese stepped out. She wore a decadent gown of the smoothest-looking white silk that Argrave had ever seen. Amber inlays trailed along much of it, like the trails of shooting stars. Her long white hair was bound back in a half-crown braid. Parts of her hair had been woven around a simple silver tiara that did not demand much attention, yet nonetheless accentuated the beautiful woman before him.

“Well...” Argrave stepped away from the window. “It seems I have my reward for coming this far.”

Anneliese smiled bashfully, her amber eyes sparkling far brighter than the gemstones on her dress. “The time approaches,” she told him. “I imagine the servants will tend to you as they tended to me. Someone must make those dark circles disappear, no? Come on.”

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A grand crowd had formed on the square just before the Assembly Chamber of Governance and Commerce. It was only a natural thing—all had come to see the man who would be king. Even more came for the promise of festivities and food. Common laborers and middling merchants filled the square, talking amongst themselves. The wealthier sat behind windows, having rented rooms from nearby inns or perhaps more simply owned the buildings outright.

The gathering place wasn’t made to accommodate so many people... but it did. Thousands gathered in the square, and thousands more spilled out onto the alleyways beyond. All wanted to see the Kinslaying Serpent, the Bastard of Vasquer. Perhaps he had horns and a devil’s wings, some suggested. Perhaps he was a saint, walking about with a golden aura. Others claimed he was a but a man, and they’d seen him in the city.

Eventually, the great bell atop the Assembly Chamber rung out. It was loud enough to deafen, and several people winced uncomfortably after hearing it. Yet its purpose was achieved—the great crowd grew silent. The time had come for them all to see the Kinslaying Serpent properly.

A procession emerged from the Grand Council’s meeting area. Heading it were guards, many of them flanked by patricians. They were dressed rather modestly—or at least, at modestly as the garb of Relize could be. The people half-expected to see someone being carried out on a platform.

Instead... they saw a towering man step forward in the center of that formation of guards. He was over seven feet tall and did not need to be carried atop a platform to stand out—he did so naturally, like the gods themselves had deemed he was above lesser men. His well-trimmed black hair glistened like obsidian might. His fanciful garb, entirely black and gold, instilled a sense of regality in his already confident walk.

Slowly, the procession reached the edge where the crowd awaited. The guards and the patricians stepped aside, all coming to kneel before him. More and more people emerged from the Assembly Chamber, prostrating before the man in their display of fealty. Yet the man all knew as the Kinslaying Serpent stepped past them, stopping just in front of the crowd.

“People of Vasquer!” he shouted. His voice was powerful, needing no magic to carry it. “The kings of Vasquer have, since time immemorial, made a pledge. This pledge is to the people—to protect them, to govern them justly, and to strive for the realm’s prosperity. My father has broken that pledge!

“And so, in his place, I, Argrave, must make things right under the eyes of the gods,” Argrave continued. “I pledge to you, proud citizens of the realm. I will protect you. I will govern you justly. And I will strive for the realm’s prosperity!”

Trumpets blared before the crowd could decide whether or not they should cheer for his proclamation. Argrave turned, stepping back towards the kneeling procession. A great many more swelled its numbers—most eye-catching was a tall elven woman garbed in a beautiful white gown.

“And you, the Grand Council of Relize... I pledge to you that your great city shall remain forever yours. I pledge that this loyalty to the ideals of Vasquer shall not be forgotten. And I extend to you the same pledge—to protect, to govern you justly, and to strive for the realm’s prosperity.”

Leopold rose to his feet. “Then we, the representatives of the people, declare you King of Vasquer, master of its rivers and lands, divinely anointed ruler of its plains, hills, and mountains. Borrowing the authority of the gods, I place this crown upon your head—the very crown the first king of Vasquer donned.”

At once, in practiced ceremony, four patricians rose, the royal mantle stretched out between them. Argrave knelt, and the royal mantle was clasped upon his shoulders. Leopold stepped forward, the crown held gingerly in hand. Argrave dipped his head, his eyes closed. The crowd witnessed the cold gold crown touch his ears, settling upon his head.

“Rise, King Argrave of Vasquer!” Leopold shouted, then knelt as well.

Argrave rose to his feet a king, the crown and royal mantle weighing heavy upon his person. The elven woman, still kneeling, offered him a jeweled scepter denoting his authority. He seized it, turned, and rose it up high into the air.

At once, a noise far louder than that of the Assembly Chamber’s bell split the air as the thousands gathered voiced their exuberant support. Yet the man standing there was not shaken—Argrave waited, basking in their voices, his scepter raised high. When he finally turned, the cheers of the crowd had not yet dimmed.

The king walked away as confidently as he had entered, the cheers still following him. Yet once he left, the festivities began. The trumpets blared once again, and entertainment of all kind came out of the woodwork to make this day utterly unforgettable. Just then, servants exited the Assembly Chamber, each and all carrying tables of food or barrels of drink.

It was clear, then, that the king would not allow them to forget this day. Under the heel of Vasquer, saying as much often took a sinister tone... yet perhaps as much would not be the case with this new king.

Perhaps that pledge was more than empty words of ceremony.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 273: Introspection**

Elenore felt aimless both in the days preceding and succeeding Argrave's coronation. Even now she sat in bed well past midnight, a stack of books beside her. She had been reading for days on end, educating herself on matters where she found her knowledge lacking. All the while, the veritable gears of this machine she'd built as the Bat spun ever onwards, advancing her interests. At this point, 'her interests' had become vague.

She took the actions that she did fully expecting some manner of repercussions. The day that she established contact with Felipe as the Bat, it had merely been to keep a potential avenue of communication open. Yet as time went on, the opportunity began to take shape. She knew Argrave, had seen his soul laid bare with Vasquer's assistance. He wouldn't agree with wanton assassination of Atrus' leadership.

Elenore turned her legs, freeing her stumps of the blankets she hid beneath. What had she expected to come of her actions? A stern rebuke, perhaps. A lecture. Paranoia from Argrave or his companions. Less responsibilities. Or maybe... just a quiet acceptance. A shift in perspective.

Elenore laughed at herself. "You are a fool, aren't you?" she said aloud.

She never had been able to predict Argrave, no matter how much information she collected on him. Instead of all she expected, Argrave simply took a quiet step back. The newly-coronated king did not argue about what she did. He didn't even mention it much at all. Though she had come to know he travelled most everywhere with Anneliese, he only visited her alone. True to his words, he did not come to her asking for favors or seeking information. Instead, he made inquiries about her well-being and talked about a variety of mundane, if nonetheless interesting, things.

Elenore thought Argrave had decided to keep Anneliese away from her. She sought the elven woman out, testing this theory. Contrary to her expectations, Anneliese received her amiably and was more than willing to talk. This only further baffled her.

Elenore even briefly questioned if this whole experience was some bizarre method to change the way that she thought about things. Argrave still acted warm, after all—he still demonstrated that he cared about her. Perhaps this was all just some venture to make her self-reflect. She felt amused at the notion yet could see that being the case even still. If it was, it worked.

Elenore opened the drawer on the side of her bed, retrieving the heavy white prosthetics. She fit her stump into one, then slowly turned the handle until the clamps tightened around her flesh. The other followed shortly after. Once they were on, she rose to her feet.



Regardless of whether this was deliberate on Argrave's part, Elenore had ample time to consider things. And in time... the question she asked changed. Rather than what she had been expecting... what had she been hoping for?

Perhaps it was self-destructive. Perhaps she knew subconsciously that this was folly, and drove herself towards it nonetheless. She had tested the limits with Felipe, and he cast her aside. She had tested the limits with Induen, and he claimed he would cast her aside if he wanted to. And now, once again, she tested the limits with another of her kin that she had come to trust to see if the result was the same.

Fear and paranoia—was this truly what drove her? Did she act out her fears of being discarded?

'The lesser is discarded without fail,' she had told Durran once. She truly believed that, then. Argrave's words haunted her, lately.

*You made yourself lesser... for me.*

Elenore thought herself someone driven by pragmatism and rationality. She had toiled long and hard to morph herself into that. Yet this idea of her self-destructive paranoia, once formed, took root in her mind and chipped away at the rationale behind her decision. And even as it took root, other ideas took form.

Levin had been captured. Word reached her on the day of Argrave's coronation. She had attempted to tell Argrave this news, but he would not allow it. Though an unfortunate lapse in judgement by some guards had allowed the would-be King of Atrus to escape for a time, he was caught, bound, and escorted back to Dirracha for judgement. The fate Felipe had in mind for Levin was likely unimaginably cruel.

Was that what Elenore had been hoping for? Base vengeance?

Self-doubt crept its way into the cracks of the unsteady wall she had built. She did loathe Levin. She hated herself for allowing Therese to be so simply caught. She had been looking forward to seeing Therese, perceiving her with the sight Argrave had gifted her once again. Yet Levin made Elenore's first vision of Therese a cold, decaying corpse.

Accepting these primal and intense emotions made it difficult, if not impossible, to view her actions in the same light as she had. A pragmatic decision, setting them on the path to a decisive victory in war... she thought it almost a joke, now. She had long ago stopped viewing Felipe as king, yet she had extended that discourtesy to the one she hoped to replace him.

But Argrave was not Felipe. He was not Induen.

How he dealt with Ruleo was proof enough of that. The man had spied on her, followed Durran through Dirracha as he did Argrave's bidding. Yet he was caught. Elenore was well-prepared to kill him for breaking her trust. Indeed, at the time, she thought it was Argrave's best move. She felt like such a hypocrite, thinking of it now. What Elenore did to Argrave was no different than Ruleo's behavior—no, it was worse.

Elenore had walked a long way through Leopold's mansion as she ran these thoughts through her head, and now stood before a simple mahogany door. She stepped away several times, thinking herself a ridiculous fool time and time again. The jewelry Argrave lent her allowed her to see beyond, and she

knew the resident was awake. Finally, she sighed defeatedly and knocked on the door. Not seconds later, it opened.

A pair of gleaming golden eyes greeted her, shining like candles in the dark. "Bit late. Something wrong?" Durran asked her.

"I wanted to ask you a favor," Elenore said simply.

Durran leaned against the door, his brows furrowing. "At midnight. What kind of favor are we talking about?"

"The opposite of what you might assume," Elenore shook her head. "May I come in?"

Durran said nothing, walking away. Still, he left the door open. Elenore proceeded in, shutting the door behind her.

"Hope it's nothing regarding Argrave or my other allies. I won't hear it, you know," Durran rubbed at his eyes, laying down on his bed.

Elenore looked around. It seemed, like her, this man spent much of his time engrossed in books. She scanned through some of them with her field of perception, seeing the diagrams and the neat writing in the closed books. Spellbooks, research... the crude-looking tribal was much more erudite than she thought. His field of study was a bit more gruesome than hers, granted. Necromancy, it seemed to her.

"Are you snooping?" his eyes focused on her. "Well... whatever. Not like I've anything to hide."

"I remember you mentioned making a proper, lighter prosthetic that wore at the flesh less," she launched into her request, deciding to ignore the unusual circumstances. "Do you have any knowledge on the subject?"

Durran raised his brows, evidently surprised, then laughed. "You're being serious?" he cleared his throat. "Well, sorry I laughed. That isn't funny. I was thinking about something else," he assured, shaking his head in quite the obvious lie. "I mean... yeah, I made some faux limbs for the warriors of my tribe when I was a kid. Pretty common thing where I'm from, loss of limb. I'd carve them out of this lightweight stone."

"Do you think you could make one? A good one," Elenore asked him. "With more sophisticated methods and materials than stone."

"Well... they're mostly temporary things, not at all like the ones you wear. I said they wore at the flesh, and they're heavy... but the ones you're wearing are durable," he conceded. "And... don't know if Argrave mentioned this... but in a couple months, he's looking to deal with your loss of limb altogether. Sight, too."

"Could you?" she repeated.

Durran scratched at his neck. "...you know what? Why not. I can do a little research, change up the material, the way I did things... fun little project. Argrave, Anneliese, and Galamon prepare for war, but little old me is just wasting my days here."

"I do mean a good set," she cautioned, uneasy hearing the carefree way he said 'why not.'

"I don't do half-measures. If I say I'll do it, I'll do it, and do it well," he said confidently.

Elenore took a deep breath and exhaled. "That's good. It'll be nice to be... comfortable, for once."

Durran rose to his feet. "But I don't work for free, princess."

Elenore laughed lightly. "Well, what did you want?"

Durran hesitated to speak, clearly debating whether or not to ask at all. "Felipe didn't gouge out your eyes personally, did he? Someone else did. Who?"

"...Argrave knows," she answered, hesitating a beat.

"Could ask him, yeah. Don't want to. Don't need a name, just a relation," Durran shook his head. "You don't want to answer, forget it. Be some divine coincidence if I genuinely knew them, anyway."

Elenore sighed, stepping deeper into his room. "I'll only say it once. It's a small price for this, I should think. I expect you to do this project right even still."

"Done," he promised, sitting back on his bed.

"The man I eloped with," she said at once, giving no ceremony to her explanation. "My father gave him an ultimatum when we were caught. Gouge out my eyes with his own hands, and he would be spared. He chose to be spared," Elenore shook her head and smiled. "My father cut off my feet personally, though. He said it was to ensure I never ran away again."

Durran stared at her a long while. In the silence, the sounds of the river just outside Leopold's mansion disturbed the night. She could barely see the edges of the water battering the marble, water flowing unending. It reminded her of her place beside the fountain back in the greenhouse.

"You're not so good at telling stories," he tapped his knee with one finger. "I think you have more to say than that."

"No. I don't. You wanted to know what happened: you know. I'm not obligated to share anything beyond that," she said icily.

Durran tilted his head, thinking about what she said. "I guess you're right. But it was an unsatisfying tale, and large bits of it are missing... well, whatever. Should've been more specific in my request, I guess." He fixed his gaze on her. "Since you've asked so kindly, I'll help you."

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 274: The Past Answers**

Orion stepped in front of a large wooden house that was guarded by a great contingent of royal knights. For a few moments, they braced in anticipation of the big man that entered before them. Yet when recognition dawned, one stepped forth.

"Prince Orion?!" the man shouted, infinitely surprised. "You... you've returned?" The man took a deep breath, and duty came to the front of his mind. "The king informed us to send you to him as soon as you were found."

"People say Vasquer is down there," Orion looked at the man.

Orion and Boarmask passed back through the Burnt Desert, travelling quickly. As time proceeded, Orion felt a sense of urgency—he even carried the knight on occasion to make the journey go faster. And once they passed over the mountains dividing Vasquer from the desert of black sand...

Vasquer. Not the kingdom nor the house, but the snake from which so much of both derived their legitimacy. Though Boarmask had said there was no such thing as a moment of enlightenment and Orion had never found one himself... as soon as he heard the news, his urgency to return to his home redoubled. It felt like a light amidst the tunnel of darkness he walked. This must be the answer he sought.

If any could free him of doubt and indecision, it was surely the one who had started this all: Vasquer.

Once Orion stepped back on the kingdom's soil, the whispers returned... yet now, they felt strangely alien to him. Indeed, it was difficult to adapt, difficult to sleep. And he did not listen to them. He had another he might receive answers from, another he might find the truth from. And he pursued that goal relentlessly, readily accepting Boarmask's help to this end. Now, the two of them had been led here by rumors and whispers.

All of that led him here.

"My prince, how did you get here?" another asked, stepping towards Orion. "The king and the guard have been searching for you. Your presence is desperately needed at the palace."

"Is Vasquer in here?" Orion repeated, unheeding.

"Yes," one royal knight finally answered, almost off-handedly.

Another knight looked at him angrily, yet quickly stepped up before Orion. "The king has forbidden all to enter here. Please, my prince, return to the palace."

"The royal family is barred from nowhere," Orion dismissed, stepping past.

"Orion...!" Boarmask protested, yet followed behind nonetheless.

A struggle ensued, yet Orion was too deeply entrenched in anticipation to heed the words shouted at his ears. Soon enough, he barreled past them all, for none were willing or able to harm him. His feet moved so quickly he seemed to fly down the stairs, leaving light footsteps and disturbed air in his wake. The royal knights soon abandoned their efforts to subdue Orion, and he heard some mention that they should go speak to the king about this.

Soon enough, he came to a final, incredibly steep flight of stairs. He took them as quickly as the others... yet once he passed a certain point, a gargantuan figure entered his view. Golden, coiled, and bound... he saw Vasquer in all her glory. Her size and majesty were so awe-inspiring that Orion's breath quickened.

His boots, ratty and worn after travelling through the Burnt Desert and back again, impacted with the stairs time and time again, echoing across the vast stone chamber. His steps were slow, and a great nugget of nervousness writhed in his chest like a mole digging through the dirt.

"Orion!" Boarmask shouted, still following. "Or—" his voice cut off as he, too, witnessed the great serpent of Vasquer.

The prince's feet met the stone chamber housing the great serpent. Rumors dictated she had been trapped and bound by the Bat until very recently. Yet from what Orion saw... she was still bound, still trapped. His feet moved forth almost unwillingly, spurring Orion towards the golden serpent.

Vasquer's golden reptile eyes followed Orion as he walked, and he knew she saw and perceived him. He felt no horror, no fear, despite the sheer scope of this majestic serpent. It felt as though he walked towards a great protector—a figure of myth that he'd read of for years, manifest in flesh and blood. Boarmask still followed yet made no noise beyond the sound of his plate armor boots pounding against the floor in a steady walk.

Orion's pace slowed as he neared Vasquer. In turn, the snake's neck craned, her snout reaching out for his body. He felt drawn to her as iron to a magnet, and his hand raised to meet her. His flesh finally brushed against her scales, and it felt as though he touched gold.

Something strange pushed against his mind. The touch was entirely foreign to him, like a thought not his own persisting in his mind. It was different from the gods' way, different than his own thoughts... yet even still, its method was familiar. It was like his mother's touch—curious about him and who he'd become, yet infinitely compassionate.

Nothing had ever felt so right as surrendering to that touch.

All of Orion's woes exploded out of his mind. It was not like a bursting dam; instead, it was like the dam ceasing to exist in less than a second. His questions, his uncertainties, his self-doubt, his confusion, and his emotional turmoil spilled from his brain, their stagnant waters becoming a flooding river in seconds. He felt a child again, grabbing at his mother's shins and seeking her comfort from whatever had hurt him.

Vasquer received that all as uncompromisingly as a mother ought to.

What came back to him was a sympathy and empathy so sweet and pure that Orion felt small once again. Unlike the words of men, unlike the whispers of gods... he knew this all was real, he felt it in his very being. He did not know when, but he had collapsed to the ground and huddled against the giant snake like a child, curled up into a ball.

*It's okay to be confused, the comfort came, though not in words. The world is a confusing place. No one can know anything for certain. You've had a hard time.*

For the first time Orion could ever recall... he felt understood. It was like anodyne to an affliction that had plagued him his entire life. He did nothing but bask in the glow of this unprecedented relief. Vasquer's scales were cold to the touch, yet the warmest experience he'd ever had. He felt alive, and he felt human. Both were things he did not realize he lacked.

For a time, Orion lost himself in this microcosm of his ancestor's making. Minutes passed. But as was human nature... contentment alone soon lost its appeal. Orion remembered why he had come here, what had spurred this confusion, and the answers he sought. And he asked Vasquer all of them—his doubts about the pantheon, his doubts about Argrave and his family, and above all... his doubts about his father.

Vasquer showed him caution, planted an image of disaster in his head. The information she gave might hurt him. Orion did hesitate. He had thrown himself into danger on behalf of his ideals in the past, but Orion liked pain and suffering no more than any. Vasquer had given him his comfort. Now was the time for truth, painful though it might be.

And so the truth came.

Felipe I... Vasquer, this great serpent before him... they had never come to Berendar to forge a kingdom. They came as protectors, defenders of the world. They sought to establish a bastion against the great evil of Gerechtigkei.

Orion saw the great calamity they had endured. To call it an apocalypse was to undermine its power. It was, more than anything, death, destruction, and loss. It was the cold scrutiny of judgement. It decided whether this world was worth its continued existence.

And Orion saw how their pure defense of the world was undermined by their own kin. Felipe I and Vasquer... their own children betrayed them. The first son craved dominion over men. He turned protectors into enforcers of his will and declared a kingdom. The second son craved dominion over life. He embraced the unnatural magic of vampirism and went to war with the first son over the kingdom.

Yet the third son... he craved a good, fulfilling life. He pitted the first and second sons against each other, causing betrayals in their ranks and continued disunity until they both perished in their foolish, overreaching ventures. He embraced the help of ninety-six spirits who gave him power. In return, he helped them become gods.

And this union... from him, the great illusion of the Kingdom of Vasquer was born. The war against the elves, the origins of the gods... this third son twisted an ambitious conquest into a war of liberation, and a pact of mutual benefit between himself and the spirits into a blessing from gods divinely anointing him as king.

From the beginning until now, Orion had been basing his life on fiction. The ideals he held so close to his heart were nothing but fabrications to disguise a treachery.

Yet Vasquer did not hate this third son of hers, despite rotting away for so long. He did not know she was bound here. And even beyond that... she did not hate her other children. Vasquer, instead, placed the blame on herself. She knew of the darkness within her children's hearts yet could not solve their troubles.

She did not wish to make the same mistake with her modern-day descendants. Vasquer hoped that Orion could be pure and righteous, despite all that he'd done at the behest of deceivers.

Once that hope was conveyed, new information came rushing through their link. Orion embraced the souls of his kin—Elenore and Argrave, and their journey here. The truth of them all was laid bare before him. He experienced Elenore's anguish, her suffering. He experienced Argrave's desperate struggle against Gerechtigkei, where every day was fought to prepare against the judgement of the calamity.

And then... he felt something else conveyed through the link. The rottenness of Felipe's soul. The malice behind everything that he had done. The hatred he bore for himself and others. The pure, unadulterated malevolence behind all his actions.

“Orion!” Boarmask shouted, shaking the prince. “Orion! Please, move, do anything! Royal guards...”

Orion finally opened his eyes and turned to the masked knight.

“Oh, gods,” Boarmask exhaled in relief, half-slumping over the prince. “Finally, you move. Don’t know why in the world I came with you. Royal knights are—”

Orion rose to his feet, seeming to ignore what Boarmask said. Ahead, royal knights entered the chamber.

“I need to speak to my father,” Orion declared levelly.

Boarmask removed his helmet, face full of despair. “You’re sure about that?”

“I’m sure,” Orion nodded.

The knight looked prepared to weep, but he quickly put his helmet back on.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 275: Coddled Children**

Orion stepped through a dark dank corridor, alone. Innumerable empty cells persisted along this pathway, blocked by thick iron bars. The stone, some of it stained by blood, told stories of past atrocities. The puddles of oil and water made unpleasant noises beneath his boots, the sound echoing throughout the cold confines. Even still, his approach was disguised by fierce, howling winds battering against the walls of the Dragon Palace’s cliffside dungeon.

Prince Orion saw two blue magic lights shining past the rusted iron of a distant cell. He could hear uneven, wrathful breathing, and some strange sounds of metal against metal and against fabric. He stepped ever closer, his chest tightening as he did so. Someone large stepped out of the cell, wiping their gauntleted hands down with a wet cloth.

King Felipe paused mid step when he caught sight of Orion. He was in full armor. Jezuit, the knight-commander, had informed Orion the king did not travel anywhere without his armor, now. At all times, he was prepared to war, equipping all of the kingdom’s most powerful relics. Jezuit also informed Orion that the king was here, refusing all visitors.

The king looked surprised to see Orion, but he planted both of his feet down, and his back straightened to assume his regal posture. The blue light of the magic lamps cast a grim shadow over his now extraordinarily gaunt face and graying black beard. In short order, the king resumed wiping his gauntlets down.

“My son,” the king said slowly, the word ‘son’ dripping with disdain. He dropped the cloth, which was wholly red. “Back, after gallivanting through southern territories just like your older brother. I do hope you achieved something with that foolish outage of yours.” He shook his head slowly. “Considering I now know Argrave is in Relize, I doubt that.”

Orion stepped around the king as he talked, coming to the cell that he’d just left. He grabbed the iron bar, peering beyond at Levin. His brother was chained to the wall and looked unharmed. The copious amounts of blood pooling around him indicated the truth of what had happened. Orion glanced around. He saw implements—hooks, barbs, knives, all splayed out across a simple iron bench.

"You tortured him," Orion said quietly, turning around. "Your own son."

Felipe stared at Orion. He stepped into the cell, and Levin recoiled away from him, whimpering like a beaten dog. The king grabbed a long iron rod with a hook at the end. "I disciplined him. It's a father's duty." He stepped towards Orion. "I took no pleasure in it. Even still, a king must—"

Orion stepped towards Felipe, using one arm to push him against the cell bars with until their enchantments sparked in protest. "Stop lying to me. Stop lying to us. How could you?" his voice tremored both of sadness and anger.

Felipe got a better foothold and pushed Orion away. The prince staggered back. "I don't need to justify myself to you. Levin was erring, and—"

"I spoke to Vasquer!" Orion shouted back. "I know *all* of what went through your head. I want to know *how* you could be driven to that." He took steps forward. "Your first wife dies, my mother changes after I'm born... why would you choose to spread misery? Why did you feel the need to drag others with you in pain?"

"You know nothing of what occurs in my head," Felipe spat back viciously. "You believe the foul machinations of some serpent over your father's word? *This* is why I called you slow-witted, Orion." The king stepped forth. "It took you two years to learn how to read, and longer still for basic arithmetic. Even if you could see inside my head, could you understand what goes on in there? What a joke.

"By your age... my father was long dead," Felipe ranted, stepping past Orion. "I tripled our nation's revenue in a year, conquered vast stretches of territory until Vasquer was the sole major power on this continent north of the Burnt Desert. I gave my brothers great palaces, wealth unimaginable! Regene, Monganno, Tirisian, Archdukes all. I handed this to them, asking nothing in return. They were my kin."

"They're all dead," Orion reminded him. "Their lines were extinguished."

"No fault of mine," Felipe turned his head back. "I try to do the same for you... make you Archduke of the Margravate of Parbon, prime Vasquer for expansion into the Burnt Desert. *My children...*" he spat the word. "All of you could rule realms the size of kingdoms past. Yet Induen ruins things, you ruin things, Levin ruins things, Elenore ruins things, and Argrave ruins things. At every turn, none can simply *obey*. I always try to do right by my family." Felipe's face grew tight with rage. "Unfortunately, those gods you pray so fervently to have cursed me with idiotic children whom I must coddle at every turn. No matter what, all of you fail simple guidelines."

Felipe spread his arms out. "*You* push me to this. Elenore and her foolish elopement, Induen practically killing himself..." he grabbed another implement of torture, turning back towards Levin. "This one, trying to fracture the realm and name himself king. Argrave, nipping at my heels like a jackal in a vainglorious attempt to tear down a giant in his pursuit of something not his." Felipe brandished the implement, walking closer to Orion. "And you, now, with this foolish confrontation. You give me no choice."

Orion's face slowly lost sadness and anger both in the prolonged silence as Felipe let his words hang. "...you're gone. You've been gone a long while."

Felipe held the instrument out. It was a jagged pair of scissors. "You can fix this, Orion. Start obeying. Stop thinking. I am your father. You saw how well I treated your uncles. They practically drowned in



wealth. If not for the gods' whims, they'd still be doing so. You can still salvage things. To start..." Felipe looked back to Levin, bound and chained. "You must learn the lesson of a king."

Orion shook his head. "I cannot learn. You teach untenable lessons."

Felipe took a deep breath and sighed. "Then, what? Will you hit me? You've proven time and time again to be incapable of such a—"

Orion thrust his fist at Felipe's face. The king, well-enhanced by his armor and whatever relics he wore, was more than sufficiently prepared to block the blow. He received it on the elbow, and magic sparked as enchantments resisted the force of his attack.

"Guards!" Felipe's voice echoed out across the cells as he backed away from Orion. "*Guards!*"

"My Waxknights will tend to whatever guards you call. Boarmask retrieved them. They're infected with the plague you spread across the southern lands," Orion said calmly, walking forth.

Felipe threw the set of scissors at Orion, yet they were deflected easily with a simple swat. The king rushed, one hand conjuring an axe of pure wind. He swung it overhead wildly at Orion, the axe shearing through the stone of the ceiling in its brutish path.

Orion freely utilized the blessings still within him, raising his hand. The moisture in the air gave him ample fuel to spawn ice, and a block of ice manifested in his outstretched hand. The axe of wind tore through it yet slowed it enough for Orion to grasp it firmly. The wind tore at his flesh, yet he was uncaring. He pulled the king forth, slamming his other fist at Felipe's face.

Even still, Felipe blocked with his forearm, handling the powerful attack gracefully. Orion, thinking quickly, unclenched his fist and grasped Felipe's forearm. His other hand released the axe, coming to grapple with Felipe. Orion got his arm beneath his shoulder and lifted the king up, then turned and tackled him through the bars of an adjacent cell. They were enchanted and did not break easily.

The king struggled vainly against Orion as he ran through one, two, three, four iron bars, wheezing every time his back struck one. Felipe, an A-rank mage, fought like Induen did. He utilized combat spells at long distance and conjured magical weapons at short distance, provided he had no enchanted weapons on hand. Grappling, even with the serious strength offered by the armor and relics he wore, was not his forte.

The king and the prince collapsed to the ground once they'd broken through five different cells.

"How could you do this to us!?" Orion shouted.

The king struggled to protect his unarmored face as Orion rained blows down upon him—headbutts, punches, elbows. He used his blessings to imbue his blows with electricity, fire. He breathed poison out of his mouth. Despite this, Felipe's defense remained unbreakable. After a time, Orion tried to restrain his father's hands to get a solid hit. The change in strategy gave the king time to cast a spell.

A burst of wind tossed Orion back hard enough to slam him against the corner of the ceiling. The king rose to his feet as Orion fell through the air. A mana ripple lit up the dim, dank cell as the king prepared to use an A-rank spell. The moment that Orion's feet met the ground, he lunged at the king as quickly as a cheetah. The spell completed first.

A great curtain of ice erupted out of Felipe's hands, blocking vision of all before the king. The spell moved like a landslide, breaking the iron bars of all nearby cells like twigs and burying all in front beneath crystalline ice. The spell slammed against the stone wall, and though the enchantments shined in protest as they desperately tried to hold back the tide, the wall broke. The ice pushed out into the open sky, like a blue-white crystal sprouting from the palace atop the mountain in Dirrachia.

Ice shattered on the right side, and Felipe quickly turned, using blood magic to conjure a wicked greatsword. Orion stepped out, a large chunk of his right shoulder missing and his right leg so badly mangled as to be unserviceable. Despite all of that, the prince ran, each step making his wound worse.

The greatsword of blood moved through the air with inhuman speed to intercept Orion. The prince's leg nearly bent in half as he put weight on it to pivot... yet the maneuver worked, and the blade barely missed. Orion made as though to punch Felipe's face once again. The king remained a bastion of defense. So, instead, Orion grabbed at the king's arm, got a firm grip, and slammed his knee into the king's gut.

The king's knees bent and he coughed violently. The armor was an old relic, and though it had been reforged, the spot where Argrave's [Bloodfeud Bow] struck remained weak. Orion seized on the opportunity, finally landing a solid elbow against the king's nose. The greatsword spawned of the king's blood fell from his grip yet did not dissipate.

Orion fell to one knee and grabbed the weapon. Something Vasquer had shown him of Argrave's journey came to his head, and as though possessed, he re-enacted Galamon's treatment of Induen. The weapon of blood was deadly sharp and powerful, and it even cut through the relic Felipe armored himself in. In seconds, Orion had deprived the spellcaster of his hands.

His energy gone, Orion collapsed back. He stared at the wound on his leg as it slowly sewed itself back together piece by piece. His blood and flesh returned to him as it always did. Though he'd utilized them by habit in the battle... he felt disgusted by his blessings.

Felipe crawled away already, never lacking for endurance. His route led to deeper within the cells. With his leg nearly healed, Orion rose to his feet. Regaining his strength ever so slowly, he advanced, leaning on the bars. Ahead, the king similarly stood, stumbling away while bleeding profusely. Catching onto where the king headed, he hastened.

Moments before the king could re-enter Levin's cell and possibly take him hostage, Orion caught up. He grabbed the king's long mane of hair and threw him against the bench where the torture implements rested. The bench turned over, and the tools clattered atop Felipe. Orion watched for a moment, waiting for movement, but the king remained face-down against the stone.

Orion stepped to where Levin was bound. He undid the shackles, and the broken prince slumped down, freed yet hollow.

"You'll have to... kill me," Felipe said, coughing. "All you want... all this misery you claim I've sewn... kill me now. Take your place as king. You know it's the only way," Felipe said, almost joyously. "You will kill me, Orion. And you will learn. You will learn what it means to be king."

Orion watched as Felipe tried to stand in vain, his strength draining fast. "If you don't kill me... the war rages. Then, Argrave will have to kill me. Either way... either way, I won't stop until you—"

Prince Orion grabbed his father's neck, silencing him. "You are done. You no longer decide."