

Argrave stared at the silver bracer around his forearm. It fit quite snugly, and it was difficult to tell that it was sapping his blood away if not for the slowly-filling glass meter atop it. He sat atop his bed, preparing for his day. Today would be the first day he wore this bracer, and he was curious to see how it affected him.

“...why are you so unsure?” Argrave asked Anneliese.

Argrave had become a king, now. People would refer to him with the prefix ‘king’ or call him ‘your majesty’ to his face... provided they bought the whole idea, at least. Argrave wasn’t sure he did. He didn’t feel particularly kingly. Galamon and Durran addressed him that way. Durran said it was only so he didn’t make a mistake publicly. Anneliese had been addressing him as such, too, until Argrave managed to persuade her that she would become a queen, so the address was unnecessary.

Not much changed in private, though. Argrave went to sleep beside and awoke with Anneliese. They watched the suns set when they could, although recent times had kept them quite busy. They talked about magic, their plans for the future, their experiences in the past... Argrave was very glad of the normalcy in their private life. It kept him grounded, reminded him that he was but a man. Still, he might need someone to mutter ‘memento mori’ in his ears before long.

“Because you posit A-rank ascension will be as simple as walking for me,” Anneliese held her hands out exasperatedly. “It could take months after we find it.”

“And we’ll find it a month from now. Not seeing the issue,” Argrave said with a cheeky smile.

Anneliese caressed her forehead then sat beside him. “You have become a little bit too unflappable these days, Argrave,” she noted, though her voice betrayed some affection. “You, yourself, have been studying A-rank ascension, reading through the textbooks we pilfered from the Order of the Rose and Garm’s personal writing. Surely you know the difficulty by now?”

Argrave sighed at her reminder. In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ most A-rank ascensions were passive abilities. Magister Hegazar passively projected an illusion, for instance. As Argrave recalled, Magister Vera’s allowed her to substitute elements in spells while retaining their form—electric fire, for instance. Rowe had the classic Veidimen A-rank ascension, imbuing ice into all spells. Garm’s... Argrave wasn’t sure of it fully, but one facet of it allowed the man to cast spells from his eyes. There was the man in the Margrave’s service, too—Helmuth. He had Minor Truesight.

Argrave was trying to implement his undying soul into his A-rank ascension. He wanted to improve upon the Blood Infusion he had in mind. He felt it could be done. A resilient soul, as he possessed, could surely implement into his magic. Thus far, he’d considered substituting the blood in blood magic for a strain upon his soul. The idea was tempting, and even feasible. But it negated the benefits of his black blood in blood magic—in essence, his blood magic would lose some of its punch. He wasn’t so eager to delve full-heartedly into that route.

"You're a genius. I've also been studying imbuing, too," Argrave pointed to her. "You learned that ten times faster than I did. Back at Veiden, you managed to do it in seconds after following my instructions."

"A simple F-rank spell on a page? You compare that to your studies into imbuing?" she asked incredulously. "What have you mastered by now?"

Argrave turned his head, reaching over to the bronze hand mirror.

Traits: [Tall], [Black Blooded], [Intelligent], [Magic Affinity (High)], [Blessing of Supersession (MAX)]

Skills: [Elemental Magic (B)], [Blood Magic (B)], [Healing Magic (C)], [Illusion Magic (C)], [Warding Magic(B)], [Druidic Magic (C)], [Inscription (E)], [Imbuing (C)]

"C-rank imbuing, according to the mirror, mirror on the wall." Argrave turned his head. "Until I can replicate B-rank spells as enchantments, what's the point?"

"See? I have not progressed whatsoever on that field. I dislike it when you compare me to you. You always undermine yourself to make me appear more than I am," Anneliese said.

Argrave set the mirror back on the nightstand. "Alright, alright. I think I have a pretty damned accurate gauge on your skills, though. I think you can realistically become A-rank in the timeframe allotted. After all, we've got notes from ages past. When you and Garm collaborated... you became B-rank in a matter of days."

Anneliese turned her head to where the Brumesingers played, and soon enough Argrave was watching too. Anneliese's Starsparrow sat atop their snouts, and they took turns gently tossing the bird to the air and catching it on their noses. It was such a bizarre thing, but the animals seemed to be genuinely enjoying it. Soon enough, the both of them were smiling.

"I can only try not to disappoint, Argrave," Anneliese eventually said, resigned. "So, this ascension... Life Cycle, you called it," she turned her head. "You can think of none better? None that synchronize with you, perhaps?"

Argrave shook his head. "Considered finding you one that matches with my battle strategy, but... I'd prefer you be capable in your own right. Life Cycle somewhat matches up with me, anyway." Argrave smiled as he thought of it. "Bottom line, though, it focuses on remedying a universal problem for all spellcasters—the supply of magic." Argrave rose to his feet. "We'd best get going. I'm told my personal heraldry would be finished this morning."

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"I picked this one personally from numerous others, Your Majesty. I believe it is the best artistry," Leopold explained.

"Can't exactly see it," Argrave pointed out, staring at the rolled black cloth before him.

"Apologies, Your Majesty," Leopold said, stepping forth. He grabbed the cloth and held it up, securing it on the top of the shelf and rolling it out.

Argrave took a step back to get a better view of what might be sewn into thousands of war banners. His eyes wandered the image, considering it.

“Considering we fight *against* Vasquer, an identical symbol might be confusing, as Your Majesty said. We took your request. A *sable* field, with an *or* sun in the center. Four rays of the sun end in the head of snakes, while the four remaining rays heading diagonally end in points.”

Leopold described precisely what Argrave saw, though with terms of traditional tincture rather than color. The base of the cloth was black, with a golden sun emblazoned on the center. The sun had eight wavy rays—those occupying the cardinal directions ended in snake heads. Those heading diagonally tapered off to a point instead.

“It’s distinct from the snake of Vasquer, while retaining some of its original elements. In battle, it should be easy to distinguish. And the sun... even if it is one instead of the two above, it remains a universal symbol of power and life, Your Majesty,” Leopold noted smoothly. “If this does not match with Your Majesty’s vision, I can retrieve some of the others.”

Argrave shook his head, still feeling ill at ease with his new address. “I do want to see some others just in case... but I like this one quite a bit.” Argrave turned. “Do you like it?”

Anneliese tilted her head as she stared. “It inspires a certain morale. Yes, I do like it. I think it is a curious custom, these banners. And the terminology... *sable* is black, correct? What is white?”

“*Albus*, maybe,” Argrave suggested, knowing that word’s translation only because of a certain wizard.

“*Argent*,” Leopold corrected. “I am unsure where His Majesty got ‘*albus*’ from.”

“Good work, Leopold,” Argrave complimented, unbothered by the correction.

“Thank the craftsman, Your Majesty,” Leopold deflected. “I’ll put together some others for you to look at.”

Leopold stepped away. As he opened the door, his son, Ansgar, very nearly collided with him.

“Careful now, son,” the leader of Relize said, stepping past him.

Ansgar entered, nodding at his father as he passed. “Your Majesty... Elenore would like to have a word with—”

Just as the door was about to shut, Elenore stopped it with her hand, pushing it open.

“Argrave,” Elenore called out. “No, that’s not right, is it? Your Majesty,” she greeted. Argrave stared at her passively. Her breathing was a bit fast, he noted. Had she run here?

“You’re my sister. Call me as you always do, please.” Argrave looked to the Dandalan family man. “Give us a moment, Ansgar,” he directed.

The man bowed, and quickly left. Once the door was shut, Anneliese noted, “You’re quite rattled, Elenore.”

“I’m fi—” she paused, then nodded finally, realizing lying before Anneliese was fruitless. “Yes, that’s true. I have been rattled. I know you don’t care to hear, Argrave, but I must tell you.” She took some steps closer. “Felipe has been captured by Orion.”

"What did you just say?" Argrave's face slowly shifted as he processed what she'd said. "That doesn't even make sense. They're not enemies."

"Rumors are flying everywhere, but... from what I could piece together, Orion visited Vasquer—the snake, that is. From there, he went berserk—attacked Felipe, maiming him badly. I don't know specifics, but it was about Levin. His personal guard remained loyal to him and seized the palace. The city is in chaos—they don't even have the numbers to retain order."

Elenore took another step, but staggered. Anneliese caught her, then helped her to sit. Argrave could see blood coming at the bottom of her leg where the prostheses clamped.

"You didn't need to run here," Argrave kneeled, ready to heal her.

"This is terrible, Argrave. Disastrous," Elenore told him bluntly. "I know... I know why you don't want to work with me. You're right—I am naught but a hypocrite. I didn't trust you, wanted to take matters into my own hands. But I can't leave things ruined like this. Even if you don't want my help, you'll get it."

Argrave stayed kneeling, then healed the wounds caused by her mad dash. Anneliese sent no signal Elenore was lying... but Argrave didn't think he needed one.

"I treated you like you were... like other members of the family, despite knowing you're not," Elenore continued. "Maybe it's no excuse, but I'm not used to being underneath someone. I'm used to going my own way. All that said, I cannot allow you to walk into treacherous futures alone. I have to—"

Argrave held his hand in front of her mouth to quiet her. When she paused, Argrave said, "I'm no saint either, you realize. You're smart. Surely I don't need to spell it out for you."

"...I don't dare say it, for fear of being wrong," Elenore said quietly. "But can I... I mean, can we..."

"Past week has been nerve wracking beyond belief without you," Argrave admitted. "I'd already gotten it into my head that this was to be a permanent thing, you and me working together. But if the left leg can't communicate with the right? It'd be a disaster."

"I... I think I knew that. I certainly made many decisions towards that end. Ruleo, heh..." she shook her head. "And others. Many others. People I couldn't trust, that thought they knew better than I did. What I've done to get where I am..."

"I know. Put that behind you," comforted Argrave. "World's ending, sis. No time for permanent rifts. We can put all of this stuff behind us. I just need you to promise that you'll never again deceive me like this." Argrave grabbed her hands. "I don't want, or need, someone to do my dirty work. I don't want a pet Bat. I want my talented little sister."

"*Older* sister," she corrected.

"You're quite small, at least compared to me," Argrave rebuked, stone-faced.

She shook her head, the faintest of smiles playing about the corners of her mouth. "Then... if you're alright with me..."

"Yes?"

"We need to decide our course of action after Orion's... I don't even know what to call it," Elenore shook her head. "So much will change. And he's still yet to take action beyond capturing Felipe, so far as I know."

"Maybe this is a change for the better?" Argrave suggested hopefully. "What'll happen, you think?"

"Madness," Elenore said. "Madness and opportunism."

Argrave turned his head to Anneliese. She gave a slow, steady nod of agreement. Argrave's face grew grim.

"I'll strike up the band," Argrave rose to his feet.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 277: Price of Pledges

"You've already declared your intent to take the throne, Your Majesty," Leopold reminded Argrave.

"This revelation doesn't change that, so far as I'm concerned. And need I remind you... of the promises you made?"

The six of them stood around Leopold's grand council room—Argrave's companions, Elenore, and Leopold. The room was far too large for them alone, but no one else was around to take their seats. At the very least, not for now.

"My brother's actions did not shock me so badly as to make me forget promises. All I promised Relize will be delivered," Argrave said pointedly. "If Orion is in Dirracha... if he's spoken to Vasquer... that means he probably knows our intent," Argrave spoke to Elenore.

Leopold frowned. "Vasquer? Your Majesty means... the tales of that snake being unearthed are more than simply tales?"

Argrave nodded. "Yes, Vasquer is real. We'd hoped to keep her hidden, but not all went as planned."

"Do you truly believe Vasquer would trust Orion enough to disclose our intent?" Elenore questioned. "She might not have shared everything. Or anything, even."

"Orion, erratic as he is, genuinely wants to do good," Argrave shook his head. "I think I can say with relative confidence Vasquer shared... something. It's the only explanation for why he might do something so drastic. The Orion I know would never harm family. He was blind to Induen's malevolence, and would not rebel against Felipe just the same. He has to have learned."

"If he has, the way he's gone about it is simply madness," Elenore shook her head.

"Does the possibility of cooperation exist?" Argrave posited. "I think, at the very least, it's worth making contact with him."

"I can try and do so," Elenore nodded confidently. "I'm... hesitant, given his nature."

"More important than Orion..." Anneliese cut in. "The king, alone, is one man. The kingdom is the key. As Elenore said, even if Orion declares that Argrave is well and truly king and his intentions match

perfectly with our own... I cannot see this lessening the burden of war. Indeed, it may intensify things. Naming oneself king does not grant one the kingdom, after all."

Durran stepped into the conversation, sitting atop the table. "Our enemy's leadership has crumbled. I should think this is a good thing for us."

"So long as Felipe lives, things get... murky," Elenore said grimly. "Orion's actions will win him no support. They are... bluntly put, reckless and alarming. Orion already has a reputation for unpredictability and has no steadfast allies. I imagine the nobles of central Vasquer will reject any orders he might give and take this as opportunity rather than hazard. In essence, the authority of the monarchy... it's been subverted, and very nearly dissolved. All Orion has is his personal guard—Waxknights, he called them. He has no allies, none that would support him. And so... this is why I claimed things would be madness."

Argrave raised a brow, surprised that name for Orion's knights had been adopted. So far as he remembered, he'd never said that name out loud to Orion specifically. Either he misremembered things... or Orion had seen into his memories. Slowly, he crossed his arms and stepped into the center of the council room.

"We'll wait for Orion's response to Elenore," Argrave declared. "But... Galamon. You and Patriarch Dras conquered all of Veiden in a time past. And all of these conquests... were they by the sword?"

Galamon shifted once he'd be called upon. "No, Your Majesty. As many were by promise and alliance as by sword and spell."

"Precisely so," Argrave nodded. "Consequently... if they're disillusioned by the idea of Orion as a monarch, it's our time to reach out to them. We may be able to win over many heads bloodlessly." Argrave looked at Elenore. "This is somewhat what you intended at Atrus, but at a grander scale, yes?"

"...reasonably so," Elenore nodded, hesitating a beat. "But the nobles of central Vasquer—they have not experienced chaos or a loss of leadership. Many have strong ties with each other. Above all, they're upstarts... and the most loyal to Felipe, personally, as a consequence. If we advance too strongly, they may federate in some manner. Indeed, a federation is probably inevitable."

Argrave nodded, digesting her words. "The bottom line remains, however, that Vasquer must be reunified. Relize is risking nearly everything on this war of ours—they've suspended trade, turned their galleys into vessels of war, marshalled all of their forces, and gathered enough supplies to provision that army," Argrave fixed his gaze upon Leopold. "I cannot betray that faith. They place all on the line. I have to give them a return on their investment."

"I am glad Your Majesty keeps this in mind," Leopold dipped his head, stroking his beard.

"We have long ago committed to this path," Argrave stepped around. "I will not forsake the promises I've made because of this new development. If I can win some to my side without bloodshed, good—I will treat these people as generously as I am able. If Orion is willing to accept these promises, I will treat him well in turn. But I made a pledge, and I must keep it."

"Inspirational," Durran said drolly. "Maybe save that speech when there's more than five people listening. Er, Your Majesty," Durran amended at the end.

Argrave laughed lightly. "Perhaps I should." Argrave stepped up to the head of one of the tables, all five of those present in his eyesight. "So, we tread delicately. We approach things optimistically yet maintain the realistic aspect of things." Argrave adjusted his collar. "I think some delegates to central Vasquer are in order, for starters. I know these nobles well—I'll take a personal hand in that arrangement. Once the fortress at Indanus Divide is established, we move a great bulk of our troops to take position there. Regardless... this civil war must be brought to an end. We still must prepare to do just that."

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"Gods be damned," said Durran as he and Argrave walked down a hallway. "Every day, this feels... more and more real," he noted. "What's your plan for the rest of the day... Your Majesty?"

"Have to scout out this guy that's been giving Leopold's men some trouble. He has a handle on the shipyard better than anyone, so I'm told, but he's being a bit resistant to the changes. Nothing out of the ordinary, I guess. I'm a negotiator with a fancy title. After that... don't know," Argrave stretched. "Probably unwind with Anneliese, study magic. These are the last precious days of peace before we start marching, ostensibly. I am still worried about our lack of spellcasters..."

Durran grabbed Argrave's elbow. "Talk to you a minute?"

Argrave turned. "Sure. What is it?"

"Over here," Durran said, leading Argrave to a quiet window far from the areas of heavy traffic.

"Something wrong?" Argrave raised a brow.

"Thought you should know... huh," Durran trailed off. "I'm seeing a little bit of gray on your eyes, again."

Argrave touched his cheeks almost by instinct. "Really now? That's... wow, yeah, that is good news." Argrave was smiling, but it slowly faded. "Something tells me you had other things on your mind."

Durran looked out the window. "Yeah. I... thought you should know, considering your relation and all... even if it is a bit superficial, given the whole 'Heroes of Berendar' thing, whatever in the world that's about..." Durran turned his head a little further away as though Argrave had suddenly become Medusa and meeting his eyes would turn him to stone. "I... plan on going after your sister."

A rush of surprise took Argrave. He had the presence of mind to avoid patting Durran on the shoulder enthusiastically as a little something entertaining took root in his mind.

"You can't kill her," Argrave said, keeping his face solemn. "She's a very valuable member of this team—you know that. What are you talking about?"

"No...!" Durran looked around to be sure none overheard, then held his hands out. "Of course I'm not talking about that. You think I'm stupid?"

"So... what do you mean, 'go after?'" Argrave pressed.

"I mean..." Durran gestured, the word not coming to him whatsoever. "I mean... she and I... gods, I don't know what the hell I mean."

Argrave's lips were twisting as he tried to keep the smile off his face.

"Like you and Anneliese, I guess. Seeing that... something like that, it would be..." Durran finally looked at Argrave, his brow lowering as he caught sight of Argrave's barely concealed smile.

When the realization dawned that Argrave knew precisely what he was talking about from the beginning, Durran kicked him in the shin. Argrave stepped away to protect himself, finally letting free his laughter as he cried, "Ow, ow! You're wearing armor, that hurts!"

"Pouring my heart out to a mocking mannequin," Durran lamented, stepping away. After a time, he found the humor in the situation and turned around, pointing at Argrave as he declared, "You've got problems, you know that?"

"I've heard it said," Argrave rubbed his shin. "In all seriousness—I appreciate the heads up. Go for it. Just..." Argrave straightened. "Far be it from me to give advice about the potential drawbacks... but don't muck things up."

"Wow. I'd planned on doing just that until you reminded me," Durran said mockingly.

A door opened, and someone stepped out. When the woman caught sight of Durran and Argrave, she meekly bowed and said, "Your Majesty," then moved away speedily.

"Gods," Durran said after she left. "Completely forgot. I just... I just kicked a king."

Argrave smiled bitterly. "Yeah, well... try not to make it a habit, I guess."

Durran moved to the window. "It's... a little surreal, what I've been doing. *We've* been doing," he corrected. "Gulf between us... gets bigger and bigger. Can't act so freely. Always thought I would be the main figure in the story. Now..." Durran shook his head. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Looks like I'll have to make you a duke, since you're so worried about the gulf between us," Argrave said.

Durran laughed at the notion, until his face froze when he realized Argrave wasn't laughing with him. "Well... uh, I've said all I need to. Thanks for your time, King Argrave. Enjoy the rest of your day."

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"Thanks for all your help lately, Galamon," commented Argrave spontaneously. "Though... guess it's not just lately, is it?"

"No, Your Majesty," agreed Galamon.

Argrave smiled at his candor. "And things with you—how have they been? Hopefully you have more to say than just 'I'm fine.'"

Anneliese and Argrave both looked to him, curious for his answer.

"I feel... like I'm back decades ago," admitted Galamon.

Argrave paused, running that through his head. "You mean... back at Dras' conquest?"

"Precisely," Galamon nodded. "You are well-suited to the role you have, now."

Argrave was taken aback by this. It was one thing to hear that from Leopold or any number of the others... but Galamon saying that had a strange weight to it. Ironically, it didn't fill him with confidence. It felt like he met a standard he'd have to desperately try to uphold.

"I feel like a fraud," Argrave confessed. "Feel like it's a matter of time before I fail, and everyone realizes that I wasn't meant to be king."

"You are—" Anneliese began.

"You will fail, Your Majesty," Galamon nodded in agreement, cutting her off. "Minimizing the effects of that... remaining standing despite failure... *that* is the mark of true success. To be successful is easy. To overcome failure decides one's true potential."

Argrave stared at Galamon, feeling the man had said something quite profound.

Galamon cleared his throat, and Argrave briefly questioned if he was embarrassed. "...or so I have been thinking, these past few months. The notion of a cure to my ailment... though I cannot say I feel a fraud, I do question if I deserve such a thing. If that is what Veid truly has in mind for me."

"You do deserve it," Argrave assured him.

"Considering you feel like an imposter even now, Your Majesty, you should know how little those words change my mind."

Argrave scratched at his cheek. "I guess all that's left to do is to walk the path ahead."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 278: Start of an Era

"One king is torn down before he can be crowned..." Duke Sumner, the young, brown of hair, and finely groomed mage of the south walked around a table where a map of Vasquer had been arrayed. He planted a crimson pin in the center of northern Vasquer, then lifted his head up.

All of the grand nobility of the south had gathered today. Margrave Reinhardt, leader of the southern rebellion, stood at the head of the table, flanked by his half-blind son Elias. Closest beside him was the ashen-haired Count Delbraun of Jast, the shrewd Duke Enrico of Mateth with his daughter Nikoletta, and the once-obese Duke Marauch of Elbraille. Each and all were avid supporters of the Margrave. They comprised the majority of the southeast of Vasquer.

Opposing them was another faction in the southern rebellion. These people, largely free of ties to the Margrave, had rallied behind Duke Sumner. They staunchly opposed the notion that Argrave should be their backed claimant. Fittingly, they comprised the southwest.

"One king is crowned by jumped up merchants who would play at being lords..." Sumner continued, retrieving a yellow pin and planting it in a city at the foot of the North Sea—Relize. "And now... one king has been maimed by his own son. Who knows? We may yet have a fourth, should the situation in Dirracha change."

The Margrave took a deep breath and exhaled. "Are you here to joke, Duke Sumner?"

"Only a little," the Duke shook his head, wavy brown hair swaying slightly. "But... more so I came to voice the concerns of some of the people within this party. Revoice, rather. I think it's well past time for us to set this matter aside, to mend the small crack of disunity that's formed." The Duke spread his arms out. "Everyone has assembled. All the armies of the south willing to fight against Vasquer are here. But—unity in purpose is key."

The Margrave nodded, leaning forward as he gazed across the map. His red eyes jumped from person to person. "You cannot be persuaded to back Argrave," Reinhardt concluded. "Despite his deeds."

Silence reigned—none voiced their thoughts openly, but it was clear that was the consensus from those opposite the Margrave's party.

"Elias tells me of the boy," Duke Marauch said, his voice a sonorous thing, not at all like the cloying, almost blubbery tones he'd had when he had been overweight. "I would agree that he's a rather attractive proposal. And I trust Elias," Marauch said.

People seemed to pay his word little heed. A shrewish man spoke, suggesting, "It is not the man himself so much as the company he keeps. Though he's not involved a third party into this war as we feared, but rather merchants in Relize, the bottom line of our worries has not changed."

"...those worries being?" Reinhardt pressed.

"Usurpation," Sumner said succinctly. "I am sure many of us, indeed most of us, have engaged with some of the patricians in Relize or their hands. The Relizeans are a... hmm..." Sumner paused. "They are an uncompromisingly avaricious people. They do not act without a motive to profit. I am sure that this war is viewed more as an investment from their oligarchy rather than a genuine rebellion against malicious authority."

"And why do you assume Argrave would be willing to strip territory from his allies in efforts to repay the patricians at Relize?" Duke Enrico rebutted smoothly, his daughter Nikoletta nodding in agreement. "I have been doing business with the Relizeans in a peaceful and profitable way for much of my life. Though flamboyant and gaudy, they do not overreach—the south is beyond them. If we ally with this force, it is much more sensible for them to seek acquisition of territories in the north and central Vasquer—territories which, I might remind you, are in direct opposition to both our armies."

"Is it sensible to allow Argrave to distribute these forces to... mere merchants?" another on Sumner's side questioned.

"All of our ancestors were *merely* humans with big egos before their land was bestowed upon them by the crown," Delbraun of Jast pointed out. "Why should the victor receive no spoils? If they can conquer, so be it."

Elias' gaze wandered the crowd. "I will say why," he suggested. "All of you have heard of the devastating blows to the north—Atrus' fracture, now Orion's coup. It's no coincidence our ranks have swelled—you see this as an easy victory, and you seek benefits for your own house in the event of victory. Argrave's army poses problems to your advancement. You cannot receive the wealth you seek if Argrave promises it to his merchant supporters."

"Elias," the Margrave protested, though weakly.

“But let me remind you—in its centuries of existence, the kingdom of Vasquer has prevailed against tremendous threats,” Elias continued. “The walls of Dirracha have never fallen, and dozens of fortresses stand between us and the capital. This is to be no easy victory. We must take every advantage we can get. And, above all, we cannot harm the people of the realm by splintering the kingdom. This is not a war of conquest and spoil—it is one of righteous justice.”

As people bristled, the Margrave quickly spoke, “My son is right in that this is to be no easy victory. And Duke Sumner presents a good point in mentioning the disunity this matter has caused. Consequently, I declare this—Argrave will not be our claimant. As suggested, we proceed as champions against injustice and tyranny, seeking to overthrow Vasquer.”

The Margrave stood straight. “What happens after the war... we will consider it only once we have breached the walls of Dirracha once and for all.”

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Two people walked through the door to one of the mystical transporters filling the center of the Tower of the Gray Owl, hauling a large, tall object between the two of them. They looked around, fascinated by the area they entered. Unlike most other areas of the Tower, this place was wide-open, and accommodated only one person.

Tower Master Castro cleared his throat at the two as the large disc they held, wrapped by cloth, wobbled dangerously. The men refocused on their task.

“This way,” the Tower Master instructed them.

The two laborers led the giant cloth-wrapped disc to one corner of the room, bending their knees as they lowered it to the ground. Once done, they gave a polite bow then made for the transporters, eyes still wandering about the gigantic room atop the Tower of the Gray Owl.

Castro stared at the disc, its form hidden by a large white cloth. He took a deep breath and exhaled, as though what he was about to face required him to steel himself. He walked to one corner of the room and retrieved a booklet. He read it as he walked back to the disc, and then raised one hand to unwrap it.

Just then, the baby-blue haired Ingo stepped out from his room, and Castro turned his head.

“Should you be up? Do you feel well?” the Tower Master questioned, holding the booklet open.

“I... you’ve been fretting about this thing for days, Master. I was...” Ingo’s voice faded.

Castro pursed his old lips. “If you feel fine... it is no trouble for you to look upon it.”

Ingo smiled his innocent smile, then walked closer. It was clear from his steps that he was not totally well. “What is it, Master Castro?”

“Proof, or so I’ve been told,” Castro said cynically, reading the booklet one more time. “Went through a lot of effort to retrieve this. Called in many favors. From what I read, it’s...” he shook his head. “Well, enough.”

Castro shook himself briefly, then stepped to the wrapped disc. He grabbed the cloth, slowly unwinding it bit by bit. The white fabric collapsed to the floor, revealing ever more of the image. It was carved

stone, and difficult to make out without the full image before the person. The disc was held in place by two clamps on either side—it looked as though it could be rotated.

As the last bit of cloth fell away, Castro stepped back to where Ingo stood, craning his neck to get a full grasp of it. The stone itself was gray green, almost like patinaed copper though with more of gray than green. The image depicted was disturbing. The centerpiece was an eye, undisturbed. On its fringes, abominations of all kinds wrapped around it, as though the eye was the centerpiece of a vortex.

“Eye of the storm,” Ingo said at once.

Castro turned his head. “A vision?”

“No... well, not one right now. But this... I’ve seen it before,” Ingo explained. “I see what exists, not what will be.”

Castro nodded, and gently touched the boy’s shoulder. He stepped away, heading for a tall piece of glasswork in the back of the room: a bottle. The bottle’s bottom resembled a diamond, while its neck was long and tapered off to a dropper that limited how much liquid could escape. Castro seized the bottle by the neck and walked back to the stone disc.

The tower master tilted the bottle to one side, holding its dropper against his finger. A single drop of deep black liquid the faintest hue of red came out. Castro looked at the droplet briefly, then craned up. He rubbed the liquid right in the center of the eye, then stepped back.

The black liquid seeped into the stone almost unnaturally. Then, the liquid spread throughout the eye, giving it depth. It spawned veins where one might expect to see them on the eye, and in seconds, the image became three-dimensional. The eye started to move, looking about. Castro watched it warily.

The eye met Castro’s gaze... and then, the Tower Master knelt to one knee.

Like the eye had never been, the image faded back to simple gray-green stone. Ingo knelt beside the old man, shouting, “Castro! Castro!” in a desperate panic.

“I’m fine,” Castro assured at once. “I’m fine. All is... all is okay.”

“Are you sure? That eye...!” Ingo looked back up towards the stone, but it appeared to be nothing more than what it had been.

“Damn... Argrave...” Castro exhaled. “I saw what you wanted me to. Why’d I... trust...”

The Tower Master collapsed to the floor, the booklet falling as he held it. Ingo shook the wizened man almost hysterically.

Near the end of the instructions written on the booklet, the final line read, “If you’re a real man, use one droplet of dragon blood. If not, I’d advise portioning it out to ridiculously small amounts.”

Slowly, the Tower Master’s eyes opened, fluttering about like slots on a slot machine before they focused. “Gerechtigkeit,” he whispered softly.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 279: Wonders of Time

Argrave picked up a ring and poured the well of magic bursting within him into the confines of the inscription wrought into the metal. Imbuing enchantments felt like he was handling red hot liquid metal, pouring it into a cast with his will alone. He attempted to speed it up... yet as one might expect, the magic danced dangerously, and Argrave quickly directed things so as to seal them off. Just as he did so, *he* was sealed off from the near limitless supply of power springing from the Blessing of Supersession.

"That should be five minutes, Your Majesty," Galamon said gruffly. "Forty rings, by my count."

"...I messed this one up," Argrave set the ring down in a pile alongside many others. Each of the rings had Argrave's personal symbol on them—the sun, with four snake heads at the edges of four rays.

"Then thirty-nine," Galamon amended.

"Not good enough," Argrave shook his head.

"You've managed to imbue thirty-nine B-rank enchanted items, Your Majesty. Less than a month ago, you had done zero," Ansgar reminded him. As Leopold Dandalan's most trusted son, Ansgar had become a sort of aide to Argrave in the past month. Though sixty-two, he was still quite able on many fronts. Above all, he was trustworthy. "Your efforts are astounding."

Indeed, one month had passed. It had taken Argrave a month of learning to get to the point to do this. Granted, his time had become much more limited ever since taking on his duties as king, but the point remained. One month, thirty-nine rings. It could be said that it was far above normal production rates... but far below what Argrave wanted with this venture of his.

"...hmm," Argrave grunted discontentedly. This enchanting business was his sole reprieve from the mundanity of administering things in Relize. Once the politics were well and settled, he felt useless.

"These cast B-rank warding spells, do they not?" Ansgar eyed the rings. "I would advise that you distribute them first to your newly formed royal guard. Perhaps your knight-commander can handle this matter, Your Majesty," Leopold looked to Galamon.

Galamon had become Argrave's knight-commander of his royal knights. Indeed, Argrave had his own royal knights, now. Though only twelve, each and all were masters. Galamon had chosen the most skilled out of people in the army. From there, Anneliese had evaluated their loyalty. That number ended in twelve. Argrave disliked bringing them everywhere—even now, they waited outside.

"I had intended to distribute them to meritorious performers in the battlefield," Argrave said. "Giving them to my guard... might come off as selfish, no?"

"I believe it would show that being loyal and steadfast brings rewards, Your Majesty," Ansgar disagreed.

Argrave rubbed his chin. "Alright. It's only twelve—the rest will be distributed as I originally intended. Galamon?"

The elven vampire nodded. "I'll see they're handed out."

Argrave rose to his feet, content. "Alright. Now, before we depart to evaluate the fortress... Leopold's waiting."

Ansgar dipped his head. "I believe my father is eager to meet his bride-to-be."

"I can only imagine," Argrave said with a droll nod. "Send for Elenore before we meet. I have things to discuss with her, and she should be there when I talk to Leopold."

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"Avoiding a federation in central Vasquer turned out to be an impossibility," Elenore lamented to Argrave, her voice loud even when she spoke quietly on account of the ward surrounding them, blocking all sound from escaping. "They still remain firmly loyal to Duke Rovostar. In the south they've begun to call Rovostar the king's dog. I underestimated his charisma and capability. They possess a far greater number of spellcasters than we do. That remains... a glaring weakness of ours."

The two of them walked down the halls of Leopold's estate, guarded by six guards on each side. Galamon stood just behind the two of them. Even here, these men remained diligent—if they weren't, their knight-commander quickly corrected their behavior. Galamon took his role seriously. Argrave sustained the ward around them with one hand—he'd learned a spell that allowed the ward to move with him, yet he needed to sustain the spell. Fortunately, it was low-ranking, and his still-growing magic supply accommodated him ably.

"Rovostar is an A-rank mage, isn't he? Felipe did a good job earning their undying loyalty, it would seem, if they should fight for him crippled and imprisoned," Argrave shook his head. "Orion still refuses to... change things on that front?"

"Felipe lives, and Orion won't change that. He keeps the king under house arrest. We can consider ourselves fortunate only in that Orion does not trust Levin, and has arranged similar treatment for him," Elenore sighed. "But still, things have stagnated somewhat. The central federation of nobles briefly attempted to siege down Dirracha. The walls were meant to withstand devastating spells, though, and Orion has proved an able defender. He sallied from the walls alone and direly injure a Magister of the Order that Duke Rovostar managed to entice to join his side."

Argrave was surprised and was about to ask who. Before he could comment, Elenore continued.

"Now that the south under Margrave Reinhardt has started to move, they can't afford to dedicate attention to Dirracha. The force Orion has is too small to do anything beyond maintain their position. On paper, he's on our side. He'll surrender Dirracha to us once we arrive. His only condition is sparing Felipe and Levin."

Argrave stopped as his royal guards surveyed around the corner, then proceeded once they did. "I suppose I can only hope that central Vasquer will receive our delegation well and stop this madness. I cannot understand why they fight so hard for someone so..." Argrave sighed. "No use dwelling. What of the north? What of Atrus? We're direly insufficient in magic prowess, and they might remedy that."

"I believe we've extracted all we could. Many were hesitant to commit troops to our cause in light of unrest in their regions, but we've gotten supplies enough to double our provisions... but as for spellcasters... we remain utterly without support," Elenore shook her head. "Many have turned to low banditry after loss of leadership. Some central nobles outright invade the former lands of Atrus, razing villages and seizing lesser fortifications. The land is... not in a good place. Orion's coup made so many venues of communication fall apart, and the situation spiraled..."

Argrave could hear some guilt on her tone. She viewed that fact as her responsibility.

"We have the fortress in Indanus Divide," Argrave said quickly. "Provided I feel it's up to standard, that frees us to engage with the north without losing a position to attack central Vasquer. We can restore order in the north, bolstering our forces in the process... we have to be able to get magic users, then. After, we fold on central Vasquer, north and south both," Argrave suggested. "I imagine Rovostar will have to listen to reason, then, unless he's a fan of martyrdom. Few people are."

"It has merit," Elenore nodded slowly. "Even if I know you say it only to get my mind off my failure."

Argrave smiled and laughed. "We can work it out later. But before we meet Leopold, I have to ask... how is working with Durran?"

Argrave had been prepared to name Durran something like junior knight-commander—a made-up position to ensure the man could have status and stay near his side justifiably. Instead, the tribal requested to work with Elenore. The man did have some ulterior motives, but it suited Argrave fine. He was quite curious about how things would go.

"I thought he was your watchdog—a trusted eye to keep an eye on me after my big faux pas," Elenore said. Argrave opened his mouth to protest, but Elenore cut him off with a waved hand, saying, "I know he's not, at least now. In fact, I see why you wanted him to come with you. He is rather capable," she said. "Though I would never tell him such. He would be insufferably pleased by that fact."

"Is that right?" Argrave pressed.

"It is," Elenore nodded. "He made these at my request... granted, this was before you'd assigned him to work with me..." Elenore pointed to her feet, where Argrave only now noticed she wore genuine boots over new wooden prostheses. "Wooden, though with an enchanted metal core. He's good with his hands, it would seem. That, or he hired a craftsman to carve it."

"I doubt it," Argrave shook his head. "Well, it seems he likes you well enough. I'm glad of it."

"I've had him teaching personnel about druidic magic, preparing some scouts for the war... and for personal use, I admit," Elenore moved past Argrave's leading observation. "In essence, we have an advantage of superior espionage over our foes if we can integrate druidic magic," Elenore said, voice speeding up as they strayed onto a topic that interested her. "It's nice to have someone capable and trustworthy. I've been weaning responsibilities off Melanie and giving them to Durran."

"Because the labor's free, I imagine," Argrave noted sarcastically. He dispelled the ward around them. "Leopold should be here."

Argrave's royal guards opened the doors for them, and Elenore moved closer to Argrave after the ward around them disappeared, crossing her arms as though to guard herself. Beyond, only Leopold waited. Argrave stepped in.

"Anneliese isn't here yet?" Argrave questioned.

Leopold held up a note. "She sent this, Your Majesty," he said.

Argrave took it, reading it quickly. It spoke of a slight delay. At once, worry festered. He didn't like being away from Anneliese for long at all. If he were near, he could at the very least ensure that they'd face whatever troubles came together. Apart, things were beyond his control.

"It is rather interesting watching Your Majesty when you part from your fiancée for more than a few minutes," Leopold noted. "I'm not sure this sort of... dependency, shall we say, is healthy."

Argrave's worry turned to wrath at the insinuation... but he kept his wits about him, having reined in some of his impulsive tendencies regarding her. It was something he'd been working on, per Anneliese's request. He knew as well as she did it was a vulnerability that people might learn to exploit—as a king, he had to keep such things tightly under wrap.

"Perhaps you might relate to worrying about your fiancée soon enough," Argrave declared, setting down the note and stepping closer.

"Hmph," Leopold grunted. "We have very different perceptions about—"

A knock came at the door. Argrave's royal guard came to attention, and then Galamon moved to open the door.

Anneliese stood there in her gray enchanted duster, an unfamiliar Veidimen by her side. Wearing light white furs, this new arrival was a little taller than Anneliese and kept her light gray hair short. She had bright blue eyes that had an almost predatory aspect to them. Argrave regarded her curiously—this was someone Anneliese called friend. He'd heard stories from Anneliese, but now he met her. Her name was Hirnala.

Anneliese smiled at Argrave when their eyes met and she stepped into the room. The royal guards regarded Hirnala cautiously but acquiesced to her presence as she advanced at Anneliese's side. Argrave embraced Anneliese, and Hirnala stood silently off to the side, hands neatly placed before her.

"Welcome back," Argrave greeted her.

She pulled away, smiling, then turned to her friend. "Hirnala—Argrave, his sister Princess Elenore, and his knight-commander Galamon—"

"Galamon the Great," she interrupted. "He serves Argrave now?"

"I do," Galamon answered.

Hirnala nodded. "He earns good allies. Speaks to his character. He truly does not mind his condi—?"

"Not here," Anneliese interrupted. "And lastly... the man I think you should meet. Leopold," she introduced.

Hirnala stepped up to the old man immediately. He craned his neck up to keep her eye-contact.

"I'm told you hope for a mutually beneficial partnership," she said at once.

"...a marriage," Leopold nodded.

"This is your home?" she looked around.

"It is," Leopold nodded.

"I am told you are a wealthy man," Hirnala continued. "I see that is not untrue, judging merely by this place."

"I can confidently say I am the wealthiest man in this city... and presently its leader, at least during war time," Leopold said steadily.

Hirnala nodded. "Good. Things are simple, as I see it—I want to live more than simply 'well.'" Hirnala clasped her hands together. "You are wealthy and present a good business opportunity. We can forge new grounds, establish trade between Veiden and Berendar that makes both of us profit tremendously. There is no more trustworthy bind than marriage, I find—even better if we should have children. I do question if you still can, though."

Leopold seemed amused by the notion. "I've done so enough, and still can well enough. But I question if there is genuinely profit to be had."

Hirnala smiled. "A good question. We were delayed because of my cargo—a shipment of goods from Veiden, plus a tribute for the king," her blue eyes turned to Argrave. "Something to make your men a little more equal to the army of the Veidimen. Enough to arm these men, perhaps?"

Ebonice, Argrave realized. That might help their severe deficiency of magic users, and brightened Argrave's mood tremendously.

"Call him Your Majesty," Galamon instructed her.

"Your Majesty," she adjusted quickly, unoffended. "A bit unwieldy... but I will adapt."

"Let's see this shipment," Leopold said, some excitement shining through. "After... we can talk details."

"Good enough," Hirnala said. "I hope you don't expect me to help you walk."

"I can walk," Leopold said, stepping forth on his cane with more vigor than Argrave generally saw him with.

Once they left, Argrave looked to Anneliese. "She's... exactly as you said, huh?"

"The sincerest person I have ever met," Anneliese nodded. "Not a good thing, often. But still, I am proud to call her my friend."

"Think they'll stick?" Argrave questioned.

"Oh, yes. She was practically glowing at all the gold on the walls," Anneliese nodded. "And it'll help secure some Ebonice, even if not as much as we need."

"Good," Argrave nodded. "We leave to inspect the fortress today. You'll be fine? You've just returned from a fairly long journey."

"We set out once again. In truth, I am somewhat excited," Anneliese confessed. "Apprehension, though, looms."

Argrave nodded. "I know what you mean. I can finally get away from here. Elenore doesn't need me. She does everything near perfectly, and I just sit around looking big."

The prospect of a brief getaway from all of this did excite Argrave. He had to admit... he wasn't built for mundane administration. Moreover, he wasn't sure he'd make a competent commander in the slightest. As the days went on, he felt stagnant. Hopefully, heading to the Indanus Divide would revitalize him. Certainly, it would set Anneliese on a new path of magic...

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 280: To Work

A couple linked arms as they ascended up the mystic stone elevator in the center of the Tower of the Gray Owl. One was a fairly tall bald man with lean features and a grin that seemed markedly bitter. The one beside him was quite the enchanting woman with gray hair and sharp orange eyes. She wore tall heels—tall enough to be the exact same height as the man beside her. There was a strange air between them. It was not quite the harmonious aura one might see in a couple, yet it could not be likened to a couple who had fought.

"I wonder why the Tower Master calls all Magisters in the Tower to assemble," Vera said, breaking the silence.

"And you voiced that thought out loud," Hegazar answered back, staring ahead.

"Well, yes," Vera said. "This is generally the part where we *discuss* things, like civilized people who can cooperate, and share a similar lack of understanding regarding the present situation. Unless you know something?"

Hegazar turned his head. "Do you think I'm hiding something from you?"

"The irony hearing that from you, the illusionist. Historically, that is the case," Vera mused.

Hegazar shook his head and faced forward once again. Two people passed by on another platform, and both Magisters adapted smiles on their faces like nothing was wrong at all. Once they'd gone, both went stony.

"Listen... part of being a happy-go-lucky couple is being *nice* to each other. I started this conversation rather normally, don't you think?" Vera questioned. "A simple question, which, though mundane, was perfectly normal. Don't you think you owe it to me to respond in kind?"

"Why?" Hegazar questioned. "I released you from that vault without a hitch. We split the loot as we had intended to before the star-crossed lover betrayal—as equal partners. If anyone owes anyone anything, it's—"

"Is that why you did it?" Vera questioned. "To get me in debt? To have me as a partner once more, out of obligation?"

"No, I--!" Hegazar stopped as another set of people passed them by.

The smiles came to their face once more. Once the people had come and gone, Hegazar started laughing.

"You're laughing, now," Vera noted.

"I'm sorry," Hegazar said. "Not about the laughter, mind you. I did answer a bit harshly." Vera gave him a glance, a little surprised. He carried on, saying, "Do you know what our favorite little kingling did once he'd locked you in that vault? He embraced that girl of his, Anneliese. You should have seen how nauseatingly pleased he was—both of them were. The entire time, they'd been playing us."

"What, you'd prefer I'd be like her?" she rebuked, still moderately upset.

Hegazar sighed. "No. Just... look at it this way. Together, the two of them completely outwitted you—no, outwitted *us*," he corrected begrudgingly. "Two B-rank mages, with no one to trust other than themselves, and a king's army poking at the door to the Tower. Now, one's a king with an army to match... and the girl is bound to be a splendid queen, if I'm gauging things right. Two B-rank mages. That's what they achieved. If we could work together like that... imagine," he said with an unmistakable, almost primal avarice. "So, I'm sorry. We have to get as close as conjoined twins, you and me. And then we can ascend together."

"You're right," Vera admitted, enticed by the fantasy just as much as Hegazar was. "And I'm... sorry too," Her face slowly lost some tenseness. "...then, my question?"

"I have no clue why Castro is calling us," Hegazar answered. Just then, their stone platform reached the floor they'd intended. "But we're soon to find out, aren't we... partner?"

And so, the couple advanced onto the floor a little more comfortably linked arm in arm than they had been before. Beyond, a simple room waited them. It was little more than a conference room, but then not much more was needed to accommodate so few people. The two Magisters looked around the room.

About seventeen others were assembled, including the new arrivals—six men, eleven women. To call them only 'people' was perhaps a bit demeaning—these were true movers and shakers, Magisters of the Order of the Gray Owl. Some of them could wipe small cities off the map if they really put their mind to it. They had presences to match, each and all. Some of them had presences in a more literal sense—one man's shadow danced with wisps of smoke, while another woman left crystals of ice wherever she touched.

Of course, so many in such close proximity created a nigh palpable tension. These were people with grudges, alliances, and relationships spanning decades. The tension was higher amidst some, while others seemed relaxed: the political and apolitical Magisters respectively. Hegazar envied the relaxation of the scholars, at times... yet he loved the politics far too much to do as they did, poring over tomes and researching day after day. That tension was excitement. And that tension was here, today.

Eventually, Hegazar rested his eyes on a strange piece in the back of the room. It was a gray-green disc, placed conspicuously close to the head of the conference table. It depicted an eye in the center, strange abominations on its edges like some sort of vortex or portal.

"Hmm. Look at the decoration," Hegazar whispered.

Vera did as he asked. "It would seem Master Castro has been scammed by some new age artist," she concluded.

"Hmm, yes it does," Hegazar nodded. "Or maybe the man has finally gone senile, and that is the thing he intends to show us all."

Vera laughed under her breath. "Perhaps it's his apprentice's work. Let the old man brag—he doesn't have many other opportunities."

Hegazar laughed, beginning to see how this idea of theirs might work—instead of making mocking each other, they'd make fun of everybody else around them. His laughter died as he felt the wind stir behind him, and another person entered.

"Seventeen here?" Master Castro questioned, already having moved to stand beside Hegazar and Vera. "Who's...? Oh. Moriatran is missing. I suppose this is some grand show of his to one-up me by ignoring my summons," the man said, stepping past. "Well, I've called everyone here today for probably the most important thing I am to deal with in my lifetime."

Hegazar furrowed his brows. Castro had a vigor to his step unlike anything that he'd seen from the Master in decades. Though old, bald, and shrunken as ever, Hegazar found himself wondering how the man could move that fast and confidently at his age.

"Look at him. He's found a cure for arthritis," Vera whispered in jest.

The man with dancing shadows watched Castro as he walked. His name was Traugott. He had long hair like ink that accentuated his sharp and grim features, and cast shadows as though light obeyed his whims. His skin was quite dark, too, hinting he might hail from the Burnt Desert. Hegazar could not say as much for certain, though.

"Is this about the war, Master Castro?" Magister Traugott spoke respectfully, having a measured tone and a deep voice. "We're all well aware of your close ties with Argrave."

"Could care less about the war," Castro said disdainfully.

Traugott raised a brow, surprised that the usually even-keeled Castro would speak so tersely.

"I brought all of you here... for this," Castro declared, setting a bottle with a dropper on its cap atop the table and walking up to the gray-green disc.

Hegazar and Vera shared a bemused and amused glance, then looked back. "Is this a latest art investment of yours, Master Castro?" he dared ask.

Castro's gaze was enough to chill Hegazar—he'd seldom seen this side of the Tower Master. "It's an investment," Castro agreed. "But not art. It's an investment in truth." The Tower Master stepped away from the disc, grabbing up the bottle. "I'm going to make this rather simple for all of you..."

Behind Hegazar, the stone platform stopped once again. The couple turned their heads, where the Magister Moriatran stood. He was a man every bit as old as Castro. His hair was present, but its wispy whiteness made him look worse. His teeth were pristine, granted, and his eyes retained a sharp, if bitter, intelligence.

"It seems I'm late," Moriatran declared loudly.

Castro turned his head back almost disaffectedly. “You are. I don’t care to talk to you right now, Moriattran—sit down, shut up,” he declared, then walked forward to the disc, tipping the bottle over until a drop of black liquid formed on his finger.

Moriattran stepped forth, his face tight at the harsh words. “It seems I’ve finally gotten to your head, at least somewhat, if you would be so wantonly disrespectful.”

Most of the others were captured by Castro’s actions, wondering what it was that had made the old Master so fiery today. He stood up on the tips of his toes, craning up until his finger dabbed the black liquid into the center of the eye.

Tower Master Castro stepped away, moving to the head of the table. “Like I said, today is very simple. All of you are going to learn some uncomfortable truths. You’re going to put aside your petty differences, your grasping avarice, your useless apathy... and then, we’ll use those esteemed heads of yours to figure out what, exactly, we’re going to do about this.”

Behind, Hegazar watched the black liquid seep into the stone. The eye, once flat, gained depth, dimensionality. The black liquid formed veins in the now-alive image until the eye seemed bloodshot, almost drugged. Then... it moved, seeing. Hegazar’s eyes widened—he could see no magic, no sign of anything he was accustomed to. He could not comprehend that simple bit of stone.

The Magisters in the room took note of this, some rising uncomfortably, the others looking to Castro and asking for explanation. Yet the eye... it wandered, looking for something. And eventually, it seized upon Moriattran. Hegazar saw the wizened Magister’s eyes widen, then convulse until they were mirror images of the gray-green and bloodshot stone eye on the disc. When that was done, the image on stone faded, and the Magister collapsed to the ground.

“The first knower of the truth,” Castro declared, stepping around the table. “Perhaps this will shut him up.”

Castro walked up to the Magister. All present looked between each other, somewhat panicked one of their own had been cast to the ground. They looked ready to defend themselves against this seemingly mad Tower Master and his strange artifact.

Castro kicked Moriattran in the shoulder lightly. “Come on. Get up. You’re a real man, aren’t you?”

Moriattran did eventually come to, and he quickly scurried away from Castro like a spider. “What...!” he trailed off. “What was that?!” he demanded.

“That, my former friend, is the problem at hand,” Castro declared. “Gerechtigkeit.”

The Tower Master reached into his robe’s pockets, and people prepared themselves to react to whatever this new Castro might throw at them. Instead, he pulled out a booklet, and cast it on the ground before Moriattran.

“That vision not enough for you? I’ve got half a dozen leads you can pursue to find the truth of things, each and all every bit as compelling as this.” Castro turned back to the rest of them. “We have a problem of massive proportions, Magisters. I’m here to remind you of the responsibility of those in power... even if I, myself, need to use mine.”

Hegazar looked at Vera and whispered, “Usually, he’s supposed to mediate things, make the situation less tense, right?”

“Usually,” she agreed.

“So!” Castro clapped. “To work.”