

Jackal 281

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 281: First March

Argrave stood just beside Galamon, Anneliese on his other side. He felt a sense of relief no longer being surrounded by twelve additional warm bodies. This was because the twelve warm bodies that generally guarded him were instead training. At present, they trained in archery. Even the morning before they departed, Galamon insisted they receive basic training.

"They're decently equipped, Your Majesty," Galamon told Argrave. "Ebonice daggers, brought by Anneliese's friend Hirnala... I prefer axes, myself. Most Veidimen infantrymen do. Handles can be wooden without hindering the ice's effect, they offer additional reach to keep the spell away from your body, and they're still effective as instruments of war." Galamon crossed his arms. "Nonetheless, these daggers they're equipped with will suffice against lesser mages. I'd like to request some spellcasters to perform training with genuine spells."

Argrave nodded, more focused on the archery display. "I'd like to request that, too. We don't have many. Spellcasters like to avoid the big cities, generally... it makes it difficult for practice, et cetera. We're lacking woefully," He shook his head. "Only the Wratsons have some to spare, I should think. I don't like the idea of owing a debt to their vampiric patriarch..."

"Hmm," Galamon grunted. "The armor... certainly not the same quality as those in the royal forges of Dirracha. Metal's fine, but the enchantments... they're only protective. It's not the same." Galamon grabbed at his old armor. "The forges in Dirracha use old enchantment techniques that enhance strength, speed... that, coupled with the crown Your Majesty had me retrieve from that elven tomb, and I am far and away the best equipped. I can fight six of them at once."

"I think that's more because of you than them," Argrave turned his head. "Afraid I can't do anything about their enchantments. Dirracha reforges old elven artifacts into armor, you know. They don't forge new equipment. Most of it is locked away in Dirracha. After Levin's betrayal, I'm not sure the forges even have material."

"I see," Galamon nodded. "They've a lot to learn. At swordsmanship, most excel. It's a common weapon here. But archery, spears, axes... pitiful."

Argrave watched as an arrow hit in the center of a dummy's head. "Pitiful?"

"They're standing still on a windless field," Galamon shook his head.

"Maybe specialization isn't so bad," Argrave suggested. "Using so many weapons..."

"The best must be versatile. Knowing how to use a weapon means knowing how to fight against it, too. To guard a king? To guard with their lives? They are still lacking," Galamon declared, voice a low growl. "But they have good spirits, and they are willing to learn. Anneliese was right about their character. And once they learn, they can teach others. Twelve can become twelve hundred. The foundation of a structure is the most pivotal for building high."

"...let's not get carried away," Argrave said quietly.

“Let me advise Your Majesty as one who stood beside Dras in his conquest—as someone with grand ambitions, one cannot compromise for anything less than perfection,” Galamon said loudly, showing his commitment to his words. “The quality and cohesion of the kingdom’s forces are paramount, especially considering what comes in the future.”

Argrave looked at his vampiric companion, staring at his white eyes. “Alright. I trust you on this. I made you knight-commander not just to keep you close, but because I knew there is no one better fitting for that role on the continent.”

Galamon turned his head away. Argrave couldn’t tell if the words pleased him.

“On another front... how goes the self-drinking?” he asked.

Anneliese sighed. “Please do not call it that.”

“...I do feel it. I feel that artifact, the eye you wanted me to look for. The glass eye,” Galamon said, his voice low and dangerous. “No... I see it. And it sees me. It watches, peering through the world at me like the ground and the walls are all glass themselves.”

“Well... I think you can lessen on using the black bowl if the feeling is so intense. If it starts to fade, maybe pick it up again. In the future, you might use it before battle,” Argrave suggested.

Galamon looked vaguely discontent, and eventually asked, “...what is the eye? What are these vampiric artifacts?”

“Fragments from the source,” Argrave explained quickly. “That’s all I know, really. Could be the original vampire. Could be whatever brought vampirism about. I’m not privy to such details, even as obsessed with this world as I was. Sometimes, the answers just aren’t there. They like to keep us guessing.”

“Obsessed... that’s a fitting word. There’s obsession in these artifacts,” Galamon said, voice low. “The knife, Althazar... it’s self-hatred. The bowl... I’m not sure, not yet. Self-perfection? Narcissism? Purification?” the elven vampire popped his knuckles.

“Well, on that matter, perhaps it’s best not to get too absorbed into what they are,” Argrave said pointedly. “These are a means to an end. A means to get you well.”

“One of many means, yet we pursue this one,” Galamon said. “One that excises the vampiric beasts yet retains its powers.”

“This upsets you,” Anneliese noticed.

“I...” Galamon closed his eyes. “I don’t wish to be more than mortal. I want to live a good life and die amongst family. Nothing more.”

Argrave stared at the training royal guard for a time, listening to the sound of their bowstrings twanging, their arrows hitting the wooden dummies.

“Won’t act like I understand that desire. In your shoes, I’d be jumping at the opportunity for vampirism with no downsides—not even the whole ‘drinking blood’ part,” Argrave said evenly. “As it happens, though, you live in a time where the peaceful family life you want is threatened by a calamity hoping to end the world.”

"That justifies all? That justifies these Wratsons, a family of vampires in the heart of a city?" Galamon asked. "Don't mistake me—I will follow you until death, Your Majesty. These are merely my thoughts of late."

Argrave sighed. He hadn't minded that title at first, but when someone he considered one of his best friends used it, it put distance between them he didn't like. "You've been travelling with me a long while, Galamon. Longer than anyone else. I can say only Anneliese knows me better, and that's because she's made a very concerted effort. You'll know this, then: I'm quite good at compartmentalizing. And at this stage... do you think I can reasonably stop working with the Wratsons? Do you think that's prudent, in my new role?"

Galamon thought about that question for a long while, giving it a thorough examination. His body shifted, and he lowered his head once the answer was reached.

"No," Galamon said. "The Wratsons help us at every turn, despite their nature. Without them... the war would be harder, and more lives would be lost."

"I do want... to be a good person," Argrave said. "I do want to be a good friend, too. To you, to Durran. Sometimes, though... we can't choose just for ourselves. Do you think your wife, your son, would care about these new abilities of yours? They love you even as you are now."

"...that makes it... easier to swallow," Galamon finally said.

Argrave smiled bitterly at his manipulative mention of family. "I hope you'll continue to give me honest counsel, honest thoughts. And if I need to do something I don't want to for the good of the realm... please, help me see."

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"So, while Your Majesty is off delving into a brand-new fortress and living life up, we'll be doing the hard logistics of the march to restore order in the north," Durran said with a smile.

"Already 'we,' is it?" Argrave said, looking over a map that Durran had laid out across the table. "You're doing a war of a different kind. How goes it with Elenore?"

Durran frowned. "You want me to discuss my tactics against your sister? Odd. A bit more debauched than I took you for."

"You're dodging because you've made no progress," Argrave decided.

"Think what you will, Your Majesty," Durran shook his head, unaffected. Argrave couldn't determine whether it was because it was untrue, or if Durran was just unbothered by that fact. "Killing your digression in its infancy... I don't see supply being an impeding factor. Felipe, saboteur extraordinaire, is rotting in a cell a few blocks away from Levin, the second impediment... even so, Elenore is being cautious on that front. Our supply won't be compromised. Indeed, it grows every day."

Argrave nodded. "Do you have actual troop counts, I wonder?"

"Sure," Durran stood up, then walked away to look for something. He pulled out several scrolls, then splayed them out across the table. "Elenore... was really quite meticulous...", he said, voice trailing off as

he bent down and retrieved things. “She wanted to determine which patricians were threats to Leopold, you see.”

“And so?” Argrave pressed.

“Hmm... arithmetic...” Durran’s eyes wandered the pages. “Twenty-two thousand men, it would appear, give or take a few hundred. Leopold’s portion comprises five thousand men. This doesn’t account for spellcasters, or leaders. Central Vasquer possesses about twice our number, presently, but there are great disparities in how well they’re equipped—some are conscripted levies, while some are knights with glowing swords that cost thousands. Our force is well-rounded, well-equipped—crossbowmen, efficiently armed and armored infantryman. We have very little cavalry and fewer magic users. Ideally the expedition into the north will mitigate both.”

“Five thousand from the Dandalans? Leopold’s force is that strong?” Argrave raised a brow.

“Uhh... yeah,” Durran nodded. “You underestimate how much he benefitted from revoking the Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption, Your Majesty. Merchant families were willing to sell most everything they owned to be named patricians and be granted the dubious privilege of participating in city politics.”

“His son leads my escort to the new fortress, another of his sons is my personal aide, he’s the most wealthy man in Relize...” Argrave shook his head. “The Dandalans are on the rise.”

“Yeah. Well, if you’re feeling some spontaneous rise of paranoia, Your Majesty, rest assured—Elenore monitors the family closely,” Durran put the page on the table. “I guess it shows that loyalty to you is rewarded. It’s a fitting display for the rest of them.”

“A lot to keep track of,” Argrave shook his head. “Oh, well. I just wanted to check in before we left. Well, enough—everyone else is waiting.”

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“I’ll keep things well at hand here,” Elenore informed Argrave. “But you should travel safely going to the fortress. Things can go awry in ways you might not ever expect,” she reminded him pointedly.

“I have new, capable knights protecting me, each and all now armed with Ebonice weaponry,” Argrave looked back to his royal guard, Galamon heading them. “And you—you’ll be equally cautious, I hope? Things are different than they were in that greenhouse. You’ve poked your head out of the ground. People know you’re important to my operations. And important people, figureheads...”

“Make important targets, yes,” Elenore nodded.

“I’ll keep the princess safe, Your Majesty. Simply go off and conquer,” Durran gave him a wave.

“...I’ve taken measures regarding my safety, don’t worry,” Elenore said, brushing off Durran’s comment.

“I’ll be in Relize, the center of our power. It’s you who should be worried of their safety. Only one thousand troops...”

“We have scouts that use druidic magic, and I know how to avoid battles,” Argrave shook his head. “If this goes on, we’ll get into a worrying competition.”

“Should take ten days to there and back, given the majority of our troops are on foot,” Galamon noted, and Argrave turned his head to listen. “We’ll garrison the place, take care of Your Majesty’s side business, and then return. We’ll establish supply lines, provision the place, and keep a close eye on the nearby fortifications. Once we return here, the true danger begins—restoring order in the north,” Galamon reminded them.

Argrave stepped forward and hugged his sister. “I think he speaks to hurry me up,” he reflected. “Take care,” he said, stepping away.

“And you,” Elenore smiled. “I will be in contact if anything should arise.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 282: Blossoming Spring

“Duke Rovostar heads south, Prince Orion, to combat the approaching forces of the south. Though we can still see the dust clouds from their horses, we long ago lost sight of the army itself,” a kneeling royal knight said to Orion. Bandages peeked out from places in his golden armor, marking him as a plagued Waxknight. “We would need to send scouts to confirm where they are precisely.”

Orion patted the man on the shoulder. “I would not risk lives by sending men out on foolish scouting missions. I trust what we can see from the walls of Dirracha,” he assured his man.

The knight knelt a little lower and continued, “Our conjecture, my prince, is that the army of Rovostar heads to reinforce the southern fortresses. By now, the Margrave will be heading out to begin his war. Winter has passed, after all, and the snows melt from north to south.”

Orion nodded. “Good, good. Felipe has stocked this city well enough to last a year with its provisions—even the city’s residents itself can be fed. Distribution fares well, does it not?”

“It does, my prince,” the knight confirmed.

“Excellent. The people will not starve under my watch,” Orion declared. “Carry on. I must visit with Vasquer.”

The knight walked away, leaving Orion alone in the royal palace. At once, he clutched his head.

Ninety-six voices raged against his mind constantly, battering at the walls of his consciousness. Orion had always been whole and hearty and remained so, yet dark circles underneath his eyes indicated both stress and fatigue that were foreign to him. Just as he had gone against his parent, defying the wisdom of the gods, so too had they gone against him.

The gods—for indeed they were still gods, even as deceivers—did not allow Orion a moment of repose. He was acting against their instructions, and for this, he was constantly beset by their pleas and demands. Their whispers became not comfort nor guidance as they had always been, but an insidious punishment. He was kept from sleep, kept from focus.

They could not take away the blessings they’d bestowed upon Orion, even rogue as he had gone. Instead, they constantly insisted upon the debt that he owed them, the relationship that they shared. It was like a leash tugging at the neck. Worse yet was that the gods of Vasquer were not in unity—some

wished for him to kill Felipe and take his place as king, while others yet wished for him to resume the status quo. It wore at Orion's sanity, day by day.

Before he could even realize that he had travelled, Orion opened his eyes and found himself gazing upon Vasquer. The snake moved, coiling around Orion in greeting. At once, like a balm upon his wounds, some of the intensity of the pressure pushing at his mind was alleviated, the burden shouldered by Vasquer like a parent taking a child's backpack. He stayed, wrapped in the embrace of the great serpent that was his ancestor.

And then, he began his duty—his sole task locked in this City of Dragons before his other kin could come and relieve him. He strode to the metal rings binding Vasquer. They were numerous, thoroughly enchanted, and took tremendous effort to remove... but all Orion had was his effort. He'd already removed enough to give Vasquer some measure of mobility, yet thousands more remained. He battered, kicked, and tore at them, slowly endeavoring to free his great ancestor.

Gerechtigkeit was coming. Orion would prepare for its advent. He would mend his shattered family, right all of the wrongs in the world, and be a hero to the masses.

It was as Argrave said in the visions shown to him by the great serpent: "If there was ever a line in the sand between good and evil, I think 'fell calamity that endeavors to destroy everything' is quite obviously on the evil side."

Orion did not know right and wrong. It was a difficult concept for him to conceive of, and so he had always been told. But as Argrave said, he knew of what was to come and the evil behind it. And now, lost spiritually and breaking down day by day... all Orion wished was to leave something good behind.

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A flash of crimson soared through the sky, leaving a roar in its wake that shook the sky like thunder. Then, a mass of red scales slammed against the walls of the castle. Margrave Reinhardt's wyvern clung to the stone, its breath a low roar of defiance as men on the walls scattered in fear. The Margrave himself stepped atop his mount's head, gazing at all below with a battleaxe in hand.

A mage on the walls cast a spell, and a mana-ripple indicating an A-rank spell was coming split the air. A great blade of fire manifested, swinging towards the wyvern's head and the Margrave both. But Helmuth, the dark-haired spellcaster with eyes like purple vortexes, stepped up to defend his liege. His own spell created a mana ripple in turn, a silver streak spreading out.

A solid shield of silver met the blade of fire, and flames billowed up into the sky like some kind of solar flare. By the time the flames subsided, the Margrave had already dismounted and charged into a crowd of men flanked by his white-armored knights.

The Margrave's knights slammed into the men manning the walls like the tide during a storm, their enchanted blades cutting through the defenders with practiced skill. Bodies fell into the inner courtyard of the castle, some of them in pieces. The Margrave himself rushed after the mage. As the man prepared another spell, Reinhardt grasped at his belt and threw a dagger. It stabbed through the man's wrist, ending his spell prematurely. Margrave Reinhardt fell upon him, cleaving him in the neck with his axe.

At the foot of the walls outside the castle, the now-unmanned walls could not even attempt to stop the approaching force. Numerous brave men carried a large and sturdy ladder, preparing for an escalade. The ladder was tilted, fitting into a spot between the parapets so naturally it seemed to be engineered to fit there—and perhaps it had.

More and more ladders fit against the walls of the castle. Knights began climbing up them. By now, mages on other sides of the walls moved to reinforce the point of assault, but mages on the side of the rebels countered whatever magic was thrown at the invaders. Like this, the fortress was breached—knights under Duke Sumner, Duke Enrico, Count Delbraun, or Duke Marauch flooded the walls, soon outnumbering the defenders.

Better-trained, better-equipped, better-supported—the rebel knights swarmed into the fortress and dealt with the invaders. Soon enough, the largest problem became the cramped spaces. One unlucky soul was pushed by those behind him and fell into the courtyard where the defenders had retreated.

The assault was quick and bloody. Soon enough, the defenders that were not slain surrendered. Highborn captives were quickly isolated, secured, and brought to the courtyard. Spellcasters received the same treatment. All others were seized and forced to provide directions to what had been their castle's dungeon, where a harsh fate likely awaited them.

"The castle is ours, Margrave Reinhardt," one of his knights reported as he walked the walls, his breathing still heavy and his ax still held close at hand. "All our captives be lamenting the fact that they had not surrendered when given the opportunity, I should think."

"Do not treat them cruelly. They are men of the realm just as you or me, and we have put them all in a difficult position by our act of rebellion," the Margrave instructed. "Take five good men and scour every inch of the castle, interrogate all staff. I would not have this place trapped or harbor some assassin in our midst because of negligence in the wake of victory."

The Margrave's knight received his order and stepped away. A knight in gray, a white moon as his sigil, stepped up beside the Margrave. His armor was quite ornate.

"A splendid assault, Reinhardt," the man said, removing his helmet. The knight was Duke Sumner. Judging from the blood on him, he'd not shied away from battle, heading into the thick of it just as the Margrave had. "Your mage, Helmuth—a capable one."

"Hmm," the Margrave agreed. "It was only possible because the walls were low enough for an assault. These fortifications are meagre."

"Yet we need them all the same, unless you would have our armies sleep in the fields," Duke Sumner reminded, looking into the distance. "Fine prey for an army of armored horsemen."

Far away, a great dust cloud filled the sky; a telltale sign of an approaching army. Margrave Reinhardt had received some information from Stain, formerly Veladrien of Jast, about this opposing force that came to meet them—helmed by Duke Rovostar, they were mainly highly-trained cavalry of central Vasquer. Armored cavalry were unmatched in the field, and so these fortifications would be vital to resist them.

“We hold the advantage, ostensibly, but I will not throw lives away in a reckless assault on the field,” the Margrave continued. “We hold the fortifications we’ve seized, and we slowly push at vulnerabilities.”

Hopefully, this will give the north time to rally under Argrave, invade from the opposite side, the Margrave thought, though he left those words unspoken before Duke Sumner. We can yet end this war without thousands of souls dead. Rovostar cannot throw away his men’s lives so foolishly if he knows defeat is coming. And Argrave can win men like Sumner over, I’m sure of it...

“You might be used to holding a fortification, having held the tide against the barbarians of the Burnt Desert in your Lionsun Castle...” Duke Sumner said, placing his helmet back on. “But I fear the rest of us will not be so content in passing the seasons by behind walls. You are our leader, and we follow your order... but still. Spring has just arrived. Summer comes, and then fall. I would not like to see another winter with this war unended. Something to keep in mind,” Sumner contributed.

Margrave Reinhardt nodded, having experienced the zeal with which these men conquered firsthand. Victory felt close at hand for them, and they lusted for battle, glory, and wealth. But Reinhardt knew that no war was won through confidence alone. Rovostar had campaigned alongside Felipe in his many conquests of the past. He was not a foe to fall easily, not a foe to cede even the smallest advantage.

And spring had just begun.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 283: Untamed Valley

Argrave gazed up at the towering black rock dominating all of his vision. Their darkness gave the impression that one might find a gaping hole at the top of these rocks that led down into pits of magma. Despite that appearance, they weren’t volcanic rocks, Argrave knew. And their party, numbering over one thousand, headed for a new addition on the face of these rocks—a fortress.

The travel had been at a brisk pace the whole four days. It had felt natural to be travelling again—Argrave and Anneliese donned their enchanted leather gear from Jast once more, wearing the more breathable black set from their journey in the Burnt Desert. Nothing felt better than finally getting the opportunity to get out. Elenore handled things every bit as well as he did—figurehead was the best descriptor for him.

The troops Relize offered were not cavalry. Instead, they were footmen, one and all. The only horsemen were Argrave’s companions and his royal guard. He didn’t like being on horseback while others walked, and that feeling did not fade throughout the whole journey.

One of Leopold’s sons, Vittan Dandalan, led the footmen. Anneliese had assured Argrave of his loyalty to his father and their cause. It was vitally important that whoever held this particular fortification was loyal; both the leader and the troops were sourced only from Dandalan’s ties. Passing by, Argrave could see castles he knew belonged to central Vasquer, ostensibly their enemy. It was unnerving, but their days passed without so much as a skirmish.

Argrave had a rather strong image of the fortress he would be seeing in the Indanus Divide. The preconception came from ‘Heroes of Berendar.’ He had, rather uncreatively, chosen a location he’d already used in the game. He was intimately familiar with this place and its strategic importance. But the

fortress that had been built in the past month... it was both entirely unfamiliar and completely astonishing. It was difficult to picture something of this scale being built in one month.

From this side, the fortress seemed an impenetrable wall of enchanted black brick a shade darker than the rocky mountain it protruded from. Its walls were half an octagon nestled up against the mountain, and their polish surface gleamed like metal against the sunlight. It seemed as tall as the walls of Dirracha—the only fortifications he could recall being taller were those at Mateth, Sethia, or the Lionsun Castle. Angular bastions protruded from the four corners of the wall.

Parapets lined the whole of it, with some artistic flair the same as he'd seen at Relize. This had been built and enchanted by their architects, after all. Altogether, this place reminded Argrave somewhat of the ruined fortifications before the Low Way of the Rose... yet these were intact, and their walls far taller. The sole entrance was a doorway of enchanted stone probably twelve feet tall—a doorway that opened as they approached.

"Rather wondrous," Anneliese said to him as he gazed upon the structure ahead.

"I'd..." Argrave turned away, looking at her as she smiled broadly. He couldn't bring himself to disagree.

As Argrave watched, black banners unfurled down the bastions, revealing a flag with his gold sun-and-snake heraldry on it. The past month at Relize, with Argrave being called Your Majesty and planning out his strategy for a war... nothing had ever struck home his newfound status so much as seeing this fortification. He had ordered it built, and so it was. Now, his banner swayed in the wind, lowered by men sworn to him.

Anneliese leaned off her horse and grabbed his wrist, and he looked over in surprise. "Remember what you said, Argrave, when I was worried about what we were to become, the path we headed down? I think you need to remember those words. Diligence, intent, and wisdom."

Argrave chuckled. He hadn't realized it himself, but panic had been rising in his chest as he realized the responsibility he now had. Her words were like a needle to that balloon, popping it before it could do real harm. When she had worried about being queen, he told her that those three traits were the most important.

"Yeah," Argrave agreed, looking towards the structure once again. "My own advice turned against me. Do as I say, not as I do, huh? Let's go meet Melan, get a tour of this place..."

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Melan Wratson, S-rank spellcaster and ancient vampire, escorted Argrave through the fortress with his hands behind his back. Galamon stayed near him, hand hovering near the Ebonice weapons. Indeed, all of the royal guard were suitably alert.

"The architects complained a great deal about this duty assigned to them, but I believe they relished the challenge. The place was well-chosen, and the stone from the mountain sturdy as can be," Melan explained, his stride quick. "Creating a stable tunnel through one hundred feet of stone with a bridge near three times the length on the other side, ensuring the integrity of the mountain above, and making a fortress fit to resist a military assault on one end... well, it was much to ask, Your Majesty. Their earth-working magic was pushed to its limits."

Argrave looked around the vast courtyard of this fortress. The architects had set up tents as they built this place, and now, the garrison set up theirs. Beyond, there was a great tunnel bored into the mountain that could accommodate large wagons and carriages. There were some apartments built into the side of the mountain, plus a central apartment built directly above the tunnel that offered a view of the whole place.

"It's excellent," Argrave decided. "Though a bit... fanciful at places. Nothing they did will compromise the integrity of the defenses?"

"The architects have worked at Relize, Your Majesty. They're used to building fancifully. I oversaw the process and tested many of their enchantments with spells of my own. They held up," Melan nodded. "Many of them were inspired by this project and worked harder than they typically might. Moreover, this black stone... as you said, it works well with earth magic. They could shape it easier than anything they ever had before. I wonder how Your Majesty knew of that," Melan wondered, looking about.

Argrave nodded, ignoring Melan's curiosity as he said, "Good. That apartment above the tunnel, carved into the stone—the commander's apartment?"

"Correct, Your Majesty," the blonde vampire nodded.

"And... I received news you found the structure I spoke about within the mountain," Argrave nodded. "It's ready for us?"

"It is," Melan nodded. "The architects were utterly puzzled by it. Not Order of the Rose architecture, not old elven ruins... they had never seen anything like it."

Argrave smiled. "I should hope not, otherwise what's within might have escaped long ago."

Melan cocked his head curiously but did not ask questions on the matter. "On the other side, where the bridge spans the valley... there's a fishing settlement downhill. They've been antsy about the construction work."

"I know of the village. Wurthen, the place is called," Argrave nodded.

"I cannot confirm that, as we've had little interaction with the locals. Just informing you of their presence, Your Majesty." The blonde vampire stepped forward, and Galamon stepped in front of him threateningly. Melan kept his hands behind his back, green eyes sharp as he asked, "So, Your Majesty... my duty... can I consider it over and done, or do you have more to ask of me and my family?"

Argrave shook his head. "You gave spellcasters to the war effort, you guarded these architects, and you helped me back at Relize with those terrible, no-good vampires," he said somewhat facetiously. "You've done more than your part," he concluded.

Melan stood for a long while, eyes hovering near the Ebonice axe at Galamon's waist. "...it puts me ill at ease that someone knows the Wratsons as intimately as you do. How can I be sure my family is not... put upon, in the future?"

"So long as the people of Relize are never 'put upon,' I see no reason to get involved," Argrave informed him smoothly. "That said... if you feel Relize to be unwelcoming, or if you feel better opportunities exist elsewhere, you might simply leave."

Melan's green eyes stared at Argrave. Then, slowly, he gave an acquiescent nod. "I will return to Relize with the architects with your leave, Your Majesty."

"Safe travels," Argrave nodded.

With that, Melan disentangled from Galamon and the royal guard, and made for the tents in the far distance.

"Keep a close eye," Galamon informed the royal guard. "Especially during the night."

The knights returned with an affirmation and a respectful call of 'sir' in a multitude of ways.

"So, this is to be a hub for our future activities?" Anneliese asked.

Argrave gave a slow nod, eyes lingering on the distant entrance to the tunnel. "Let's go check out the other side."

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The whole of the tunnel had been embedded with magic lights from Relize, illuminating it all with faint blue light. Argrave made sure that Vittan Dandalan set to work establishing the garrison at the fortress, and then travelled with his guard to the other side of the mountain. Once there, a bridge of black stone awaited them. This bridge stretched over a long valley that housed a powerful river down below.

Beyond this bridge, a great and beautiful vale stretched out as far as the eye could see. It was like a little pocket of nature largely untouched by human hands. It sported bright green grass, beautiful wildflowers, and the occasional tree popping up out of the ground. Rocky mountains thousands of feet tall surrounded it on all sides, some rivers cutting through the land. To the right—east, by Argrave's memory—the elevation decreased steadily until the land melted away in way of a coast. There, civilization made itself apparent. A small road cut through the land, emerging from an opening in the surrounding mountains. This road led to the coastal fishing settlement Melan had described.

"This is your Blackgard," Anneliese said.

Argrave turned. Her grin was so broad he could not bring himself to feign ignorance. "Yes," he admitted, regretting having ever disclosed that. "Yes, it is."

"Well-protected on all sides by these mountains... one of the largest rivers I have ever beheld... yet no agriculture," she wondered.

"Most of the rivers in Vasquer converge a little bit upstream," he said, looking left down the valley, where the river flowed for miles. Argrave stepped off the bridge. "As for farming... the soil is nonarable."

"But..." Anneliese said, brows furrowed in confusion.

"I know—the grass, the flowers, they seem to refute that." Argrave turned, letting the wind blow across his face. "It's all poison. Even if you uproot it, plant wheat or other crops... it never grows. The villagers live off fish alone. It's why the place is so small, population-wise." Argrave stepped through the grass.

"This place is in the center of Vasquer. With the bridge and the tunnel, it now connects north and south, opening up its potential as a hub of trade. The soil... it's only conventionally nonarable." Argrave took a

breath. “We fortify the valley that holds the road, over there...” Argrave pointed to the road leading to the village of Wurthen. “It’s practically designed to hold out against armies. Or hordes of foul monsters.”

Some of the royal knights looked at Argrave strangely, and he quickly silenced himself. As ever, he felt burdened by their presence.

“Everything’s in order,” Argrave decided, mood soured somewhat. “Let’s go see this structure the architects unearthed.”

#####

Argrave stared upwards at a great slab of stone. The architects had revealed much of it with their magic, yet none of the sleek stone structure itself had been changed. In stark contrast to the dark stone surrounding them, the stone before them was light gray—nearly white. It reminded Argrave of concrete. There was a metal door at the front of it. It depicted a red crescent moon and two bright stars opposite it—the suns. It was quite a small door, barely six feet tall.

“This is it,” Argrave nodded.

“What is it, Your Majesty?” one of his royal knights asked, unable to restrain their curiosity.

“A reception room of sorts,” Argrave said ponderously. “And also the place where Anneliese might begin to go far, far ahead of me in the race of magical prowess.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 284: Entropy in Order

Argrave pushed into the red crescent moon on the front of the metal door, and it clicked a few times. Once enough of it had been pushed in, it made space enough to get a grip. Argrave fit his fingers into and pulled. He was rather pleased with himself when the door shifted—he’d half-thought that he’d need Galamon’s help to yank this thing open. The door itself was four inches thick, and quite heavy. Still, it shifted well enough.

Beyond, pure darkness awaited them. Argrave knelt down, getting a better look. “I am only now reminded how much this is going to hurt my back.”

“We’re entering, Your Majesty? Should we not get people to... scout this place out?” one of the royal guards asked innocently.

“Nonsense,” Argrave waved his hand behind his back, and not wishing to have their presence kill his fun, he quickly ordered, “Come on, then.”

As Argrave awkwardly shambled in a half-crouch through the door, he heard some of the royal guard call out in protest. Soon enough, everyone was pressed into the hallway. Argrave cast a simple spell to light the path, holding it below his face. It was a long and uncomfortable hallway, and his feet felt like they were walking on concrete once again. Yet soon enough, the hallway opened into a room, and Argrave cast the light away with abandon to illuminate the place.

The vast room ahead reminded Argrave somewhat of old architecture Rome and Greece, both from the symmetry of it all and the strange antiquity to the style. The room was round and tall, and rather than stairs, the balcony they stood on wound around the walls, slowly sloping downwards in a spiral towards

the bottom floor. The railings were intricately carved white marble with statues on them—statues of bugs, faces, bats, each and all facing towards the center. There were many rooms along the winding spiral ramp downwards.

The ceiling was high and round and painted so elaborately as to put the Sistine Chapel to shame. They were portraits, each divided from each other by winding patterns that served as frames. The people depicted on the paintings were unusual—short of stature, brawny, and dressed in unorthodox clothing. They had curly, dark hair, and wreaths of gold atop their heads. And on the bottom floor, there was a marble statue dimly lit by Argrave's spell. He couldn't help but smile looking upon it. The statue depicted a dwarf.

"Knight-commander, should we be...?" one of the knights questioned, before trailing off when he entered the room.

"His Majesty has survived enough trips of similar nature," Galamon confirmed, perhaps the least impressed of everyone. "Our duty is only to protect, not to decide."

Argrave walked to the marble railing. It barely came up to his knees, and it felt more a hazard than anything. He sat upon it, keeping one hand firmly grasped in case he teetered, then declared, "Welcome to one of the abandoned nexuses of dwarven civilization."

Anneliese's eyes jumped about quickly enough it seemed they were malfunctioning. The pure, almost child-like wonder in her expression made Argrave glad he had been somewhat reticent regarding what they would be dealing with here. Argrave was not divorced from the wonder, either—it felt like he walked in the Athens of old in the height of its power, suspended in time and devoid of life.

"In time, we'll come to occupy this place in greater numbers. Today, though, we're here for one thing alone before we seal it up again." Argrave stood up. "We're not the first non-dwarf to come here. Come along."

Argrave started to walk down the winding ramp along the wall, staying close to the walls, yet Galamon and his royal guards insistently took their place ahead of Argrave. He let them do their duty, despite knowing danger was not to come quite yet.

They passed by room after room, and Anneliese poked her head inside each one. There were only statues, tables, and chairs within each of them, and before long she was curiously asking, "What is this place? What purpose does it serve?"

"This was a diplomatic meeting area... and an entrance to a fortress. Considering the paranoia of the dwarves, they thought the two weren't mutually exclusive," Argrave explained. "That's why I'll make something very clear—under no circumstances do we try and press beyond the door at the bottom of this ramp," Argrave said insistently. "To do so is to invite death upon us all."

"What is death?" Anneliese asked, overwhelmed, then rephrased, "I mean, what would we invite?"

"The corrupted constructions of the dwarves," Argrave said simply. "And worse things. The Ebon Cult."

Galamon stopped abruptly at those words. "You mean to say..."

This was another reason that Argrave had not been too detailed about this place—Galamon’s focus might be swayed. A group by the name of the Ebon Cult had been responsible for turning his brother into a vampire, and after, turning him into one. Argrave couldn’t say for sure that this Ebon Cult in the old dwarven cities was the same, and nor could Galamon—frankly, Argrave thought it dubious. He couldn’t see the connection between the two.

But they were a threat for the future. They were a religious state persisting underground headed by a man named Mozzahr, the Castellan of the Empty. Comprised of elves, dwarves, subterranean humanoids, and regular humanoids, they worshipped Mozzahr as though he were a god. He viewed Gerechtigkeits as an opportunity for expansion rather than a genuine danger to the world. Consequently, he was a problem to be dealt with accordingly.

“Yes,” Argrave nodded, stopping. “This is the staging grounds for the war to come against them. And though I can’t promise anything, we may get answers for you, Galamon. But for now... let us focus.”

The royal guards looked lost. Argrave gave them a pleasant smile and kept walking down the ramp.

They’ll learn to stop questioning in time, Argrave decided. Or maybe Galamon will loop them in. I doubt it. But for now... let’s see what it is they can do.

#####

“The stone changes here,” Anneliese noted, looking down at the light gray floor. Things were as she said—the stone held the faintest hints of black streaks, each emerging from a room deeper within.

Argrave was fixated on the door behind them. It was a fortified door, with the same sort of mechanism locking the first door they’d entered—a red crescent moon, plus two suns opposite it. It was bigger, though, and there was something ominous about it. Maybe it was that the suns seemed to make a smile when next to the moon. Or maybe it was because Argrave knew what lurked beyond there.

But their destination was another hallway opposite the fortified door. Ahead, the stone went from light gray to darker like a gradient across the ground. Argrave cast a spell of light and sent it into the corridor ahead. It illuminated a different sort of room—wider and longer, it could accommodate many more people. It seemed like a gateway into something hellish, hued black as it was.

Argrave stopped at the precipice. “Why is the soil above nonarable? Why are these mountains black, and easy to work with earth magic? The answer to that lies beyond.”

Anneliese stopped just beside him. “It’s safe?”

“It is,” Argrave nodded.

As he walked forward, so too did his royal guard advance. The area ahead had a strange, almost entropic aura entirely separate from the orderly stone of dwarven make not ten feet behind them. It was difficult to tell from afar on account of the dark color, but the walls had scrawling on every inch of them. There were statues and tables in this room too, but the stone had become so dark it was nearly impossible to perceive them as separate. It was the darkest black Argrave had ever seen, and it made him feel as though he stepped on an abyss even despite the light swirling about the room.

Anneliese studied the writing on the walls with particular interest. Ever so slowly, her eyes roamed it, reading and attempting to absorb the information left behind. Finally, she took a deep breath.

"This is magical theory," she decided. "I cannot make sense of it, because I've been placed in the middle..." she stepped back, as though following an invisible line.

"Don't bother trying to find the beginning," Argrave said. "This text is incomplete. It was a frantic effort to inscribe a method of A-rank ascension as its creator slowly succumbed to death because of it." Argrave shook his head. "He found a better method to convey the information before he met his end."

Anneliese turned to him. Argrave, uncomfortable knowing what he was to ask, said quickly, "I know it might discomfort you knowing the one who wrote this method of ascension died... but trust me, I—"

"I do trust you," Anneliese nodded. "Where is it, then?"

Feeling a bit emotional at those simple words, Argrave looked deeper into the room then cast another spell of light. The ball danced into the room, slowly illuminating what looked to be a statue of a man hunched against the wall. It wasn't a statue, though—it was a corpse, preserved in time.

Argrave and Anneliese walked to this corpse together. She knelt down, looking to him. He gave her a nod, and she touched the flesh. Argrave could see that it was hard to the touch, like stone. He spotted something else on the floor and touched her shoulder.

"There. See that cube?" he pointed.

She looked around, lost. It was difficult to distinguish objects from one another because of the absoluteness of the black color. Eventually, she felt around until her fingers brushed it and picked it up decisively. The cube looked strange in contrast with the gray leather gloves she wore, like it wasn't real at all.

"Should be an indent in the—"

A click interrupted Argrave, then the cube made a horrible screeching noise. The royal knights all scrambled, panicked, yet the noise settled into a dim hum.

"I don't know if this will work," the cube sounded out—a recording of some sort. "The dwarves gave this to me near a century ago, long before the advent of the thousand-eyed demon drove them deeper beneath the earth. Meant for... music, I think. I can't remember. But I can't move anymore, and I long ago ran out of space to write... so, all I can do is try."

"He recorded his voice," Anneliese looked to Argrave. "How is that possible?"

Argrave said nothing. In the game, the player merely used the item and got a quest—he'd never recalled hearing a voice.

"My name is Llewellen. I had a terribly low affinity for magic my entire life. It took me ten years to reach D-rank spells, and the ranks after... far too long," the man said, that fact still bitter in his voice despite the time that must have elapsed. "My method of A-rank ascension was meant to alleviate that fact, give me access to limitless magic that I lacked all of my life. I have succeeded in this. But people have limits for a reason, and even now the boundless magic pouring within me kills me slowly. The only way I have

sustained my life whatsoever is by projecting some measure of magic into the earth around me. I came here to avoid corrupting the entire realm with magic.”

Anneliese sat down on the ground, listening to the device as though enthralled.

“I hope to leave behind a modified version of this method... for the dwarves, perhaps, should they ever reclaim this city. If not, for whomever should stumble upon me... no, my body. Hah... the person might not even be a mage...” There was a long pause, and Argrave could practically hear this Llewellen accepting his death once again.

“You will need to remedy the mistakes that I made. It will not be a simple task. But if you can... you can take what is not yours. You can harness the magic of the living. You can turn the attacks of your foes into your strength. You can circumvent the cycle of magic, become the first among equals. And so long as you never tap into the force I have... you can avoid my fate.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 285: Trust in Him

“Knight-commander, sir,” one of the royal guards said in a quiet voice as Argrave spoke to someone about sealing up this tunnel until the time came to deal with it fully.

Galamon turned his head and looked. His white eyes were chilling enough, but his size and proven skill made all of the guards beneath him both fearful and respectful of him—exactly the qualities one might need in a position of leadership.

“Speak,” he directed his subordinate.

“The king, sir... His Majesty...” the knight looked at the king.

Most of them had jumped at the opportunity to guard the man who would be king of all Vasquer. Beyond the personal glory and prestige of the post, they all personally had a great measure of respect for Argrave and his deeds. Their unit had a tight cohesion because of this shared respect. And yet, of late...

“How did things come to this?” the knight asked. “I mean... how did His Majesty know of this place? How did His Majesty know what would be within?”

Galamon turned around and stepped towards the knight. “That’s like asking your gods what came before or after life. For your sanity... don’t ask.” The elf turned his head towards Argrave. “I’ve been travelling with His Majesty for a long while—nearing a year after a little while longer. He is seldom wrong about what he knows. But how he knows it... that is a question you must content yourself with leaving unanswered, unless he deems it something worth sharing.”

The knight stared blankly, his commander’s answer only leaving him more confused.

“Right!” Argrave clapped, the sound and his voice echoing against the tunnel. “This tunnel is going to be sealed off for the time being to avoid any... unnecessary accidents. It’s a nice grave, but I don’t want to be buried here... so, let’s go. Galamon, you can inspect the garrison and whatnot, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Their knight-commander turned and dipped his head. “At once.”

#####

A large and burly tattooed man struggled with the cork on the wine bottle. His thick arms and brawny shoulders made the bottle in his hand look small. He unsuccessfully used his knife to attempt and pry the cork free, succeeding only in cutting away some of the brown matter. He sighed, a low growl behind it, then pinched the neck of the bottle between two fingers until it broke off quietly. He poured the wine into a nearby glass, then stepped out to the balcony where he sat at a chair.

"Duke Rovostar," a voice rang from the room behind just as he raised the glass to his lips.

Rovostar turned his head. The duke was a bald man and had a formidable size to him. Scars lined his face, some from burns while most from wicked cuts. He looked more a strongman or a thug than a duke, and his jutting brows cast a harsh shadow over his black eyes that made him seem further ignoble.

"The bastard has manned that gargantuan fortress he'd been constructing," the new arrival said.

"Reports from local fortifications suggest their force is a thousand strong. Positionally, it's a nightmare. If they march in force, we cannot hold many places for long at all."

Rovostar downed all of the wine in one go, then set the glass down, twisting it about with his hand.

"Weak stuff," he muttered, then focused on this new arrival. "Your information is appreciated."

The person stepped out onto the balcony. He was a middle-aged man whose elaborate facial hair only gave him dignity because of the rich clothes he wore. "I think it's best I speak frankly."

"Go ahead, count," Rovostar said with mock enthusiasm as he looked off into the distance.

"King Felipe is captured. Despite this, you firmly herald him. Is this best for the kingdom?" he insisted carefully.

"Is fighting for the *king*... best for the *kingdom*. What an insightful question," Rovostar laughed and poured some more wine into his glass.

The count looked somewhat taken aback. "I didn't mean..." the man sighed, running his hand across his moustache. He decided to change his approach. "The situation is hopeless for us. Outnumbered both in terms of sword and spells, assailed from two fronts—not to mention, with Dirracha lost to us... there are other ways to end wars than by the blade. And from our position, they seem rather appealing."

"My king is not dead. He won't be anytime soon. The situation is fine," Rovostar shook his head.

The count could not help but stare mouth agape. "If the roots are pulled from the earth, the tree will wither!" the count insisted. "How can you be so unfailingly faithful to a dying tree?"

"King Felipe..." Rovostar took another long drink. "He is a little more than most men."

The count looked perplexed.

"You're alone in your doubts, Count Agnil," Rovostar declared. "These lands, the fertile fields of central Vasquer... at one time, they were all crown lands, managed by crown administrators—our king's lands, in essence. His Majesty gave them to us. And he gave them to us because we did as we were bid, and because we were talented enough to do more. Myself and all the men beneath—we are King Felipe's men."

"I was a war orphan in the far northern kingdoms in that region of Atrus that existed before Felipe's conquests. I scavenged the battlefields for years, collecting and selling weapons and armor for paltry scraps of food. But then... King Felipe came, putting the land and its overlords to the sword. I saw it plainly—those that submitted were treated well, and those that resisted died most brutally. Hanged, drawn, and quartered." Rovostar let out light laughs through his nose as though he was recalling something. "I decided I'd rather do that from now on than watch it happen again."

"Just that? But... he is *beaten*, duke. The king has been torn from his seat by his son. And despite his meager force, we cannot take Dirrachia."

"Nor will I try again," Rovostar shook his head. "You don't seem to understand, Agnil. The reason why you stand here, gritting your teeth at me yet unable to say what you really want to, is because of His Majesty. The men around you—tanners, butchers, farmhands. We were all lowly, yet he evaluated us by talent alone, raised us to take our place by his side. He put me through the Order of the Gray Owl with his own funds, named me Duke of Whitefields."

Rovostar rose to his feet. "When we marched into the valley of Quadreign, His Majesty was the first to set his foot upon the warpath. He engaged whoever came side-by-side with his soldiers. Whenever that man made a promise, he delivered it shortly after: soldier's pay, rewards, land, or titles, it mattered not. He's earned our loyalty, our trust. So long as we obeyed, we were always given what we wanted. The nobility of your blood mattered none; all were beneath Vasquer."

Rovostar stepped up to the count until he towered over him. "Things are very simple: if you do as His Majesty wishes, you are rewarded. If you fail to do so... your punishment will be far crueler than you can ever imagine. Time and time I saw it happen—the king on the verge of defeat, the guillotine hanging over his head. He's been poisoned, buried beneath a mountain, and hurled into the North Sea wearing plate armor, yet still he lives. Call him a cockroach if you will, but he's a gilded one," Rovostar said amusedly. "And yet you ask why I remain faithful? Because something can happen only so many times before it becomes a predictable outcome."

"I'll say it plainly, Count Agnil—things are fine," the duke prodded the count with one thick, meaty finger. "The north will not soon forget the message taught in His Majesty's conquests. That promising new herald of the crown is there, completing His Majesty's project for Atrus. As for the south... I have designs of my own. The Margrave lives on borrowed time."

#####

The shadowy Traugott stood before the gray-green stone disc that held dark secrets. He held a bottle in one hand—it had been the bottle that Master Castro had brought to this meeting chamber. The dragon blood within activated this disc and convinced all of the Magisters of the existence of Gerechtigkeith. The Tower Master needed their unity for the battle ahead.

Traugott tipped the bottle onto his finger to get some liquid, then put the dragon blood in the center of the disc. The eye became animate once again. Traugott stared at it with his dark eyes, his shadow dancing behind him like a twisted tail of some sort that betrayed his anticipation. The eye locked onto him, and he convulsed. His shadow became frantic and inhuman, morphing into twisted spikes and unnatural shapes. Then... it solidified once more, a patch of darkness across the ground.

The Magister stared up at the gray-green disc, then closed his eyes. His breathing was irregular. After a time, he opened his eyes once more. He tipped the bottle onto the palm of his hand, and the black blood came dripping out noiselessly, creating a puddle of inky liquid on the man's hand that stained his already dark skin.

Then, he held the bottle upright, staring at the puddle of black liquid. Traugott knelt ever so slowly, setting the bottle upon that ground as he watched to ensure that none of the delicately balanced liquid spilled. His shadow wrapped around the bottle, shrouding it, and then it disappeared.

Magister Traugott straightened his knees, then took a deep breath and slapped his hand against the disc. It splattered against it. He rubbed his hand onto the disc, spreading out the liquid. Slowly, ever so slowly, the black blood seeped into the surface of the stone. It consumed the eye, and they beyond into the eyelid. The abominations depicted received some of the blood.

The eye came to life once again... yet to call it only an eye, now, was insufficient. It was but the eye of a giant body peering into this world. And this body... its eye moved about the room, seeking. Then, it met gazes with the awaiting Traugott.

The Magister spasmed soundlessly and then crashed onto the ground, his inky, long hair splaying out across the floor. His black eyes shifted and twisted until they were the same gray green as the disc before him. He clutched at his eyes, fingers not daring to gouge them out. Even still, his nails dug into his cheeks.

Then whatever force that seized him had gone, and Traugott collapsed against the ground. His breathing heavy, he slowly rose up, supporting himself with his elbow. The silence of the room was disturbed only by his breathing. The disc had gone silent once again, whatever message it intended to convey gone.

"Hah..." Traugott laughed slightly. "There is something... beyond the curtain."

Sound disturbed the room that was not his own. Traugott looked up towards the central elevator. In less than half a second, his shadow mirrored his own shape. The Magister tilted his body back into it. He fell through his shadow as though he'd just fallen off a cliff. Then, the darkness crystallized, shattering into air. Not a single hint remained of the Magister.

Master Castro stepped off the elevator and into the council room. He looked around intensely and saw nothing. A few others entered behind him.

"Get that, bring it to my room, please," Castro commanded. "I'll need... hah," the Tower Master sighed.

Castro stepped around as his men got to work in wrapping up the stone disc. He spotted something on the table, then stepped up to it. It was a bottle with a dropper atop it. He picked it up. He expected it to be fuller, heavier—he used undue force and it flew up quickly.

"Someone's..." Castro started but trailed off. He furrowed his old bushy brows, looking towards the disc. He reached into his pocket to retrieve Argrave's booklet, then flipped to a bookmarked page. He read all that was written about the disc.

Isn't harmful... just a means of conveying information, Castro read in his head. He looked around the room, looking for any incongruities, anything or anyone out of place.

“Tower Master?” the movers hauling the disc asked. “Should we go without you?”

Castro bit his lip, then shook his head. “No, I’ll lead the way.”

He watched the disc as his movers carried it across the room. Shaking his head, he stashed away the booklet and followed.