

Argrave pushed aside the tent canopy and entered inside. There, Anneliese sat at a table, a few royal guards standing around her.

“Wait outside, guard there,” Argrave directed them, reminded once again of how cramped these guards made him feel.

They gave affirmation and left, and Anneliese did not even lift her head from the notebook she wrote in. Argrave noticed the black cube, dormant and silent, just in front of her hand. He walked behind her and peered over her shoulder, feeling glad she was so entranced in this. Her notes...

“Filter essence, nascent force, right side...” Argrave furrowed his brows as he read, his hands idly playing with one braid of her long white hair. “Are you having a stroke?”

Anneliese looked up at him. “This is how I take notes.”

Argrave read it more. Her notes consisted of mostly two-word phrases placed nonsensically without punctuation or direction.

Her finger landed on some of the words. “I just need something to remind me of what I was thinking when I wrote this. These are just triggers for my mind to recall what was important.”

Immediately giving up on any attempt at understanding how that might function, Argrave grabbed a makeshift portable chair and sat opposite Anneliese. “So... I can assume you’re grasping what’s in there?” his eyes fell upon the black cube of dwarven make.

Anneliese leaned back in the chair, crossing her arms. She looked deep in concentration—that was a rare look on her. It wasn’t because she rarely studied so diligently, but because concentration was seldom necessary.

“Could you tell me what it is you expect from this method?” Anneliese asked him earnestly, amber eyes focused with eager intent.

Argrave placed his hands before him. “Llewellen described it pretty well from what I heard. You can take magic from those you touch. You’ll have a stronger resistance to all spells, and you’ll be able to actively absorb them—not so useful for things like fireballs or lightning bolts, which are concentrated masses, but it can degrade wards or protect you from wide, unfocused attacks. You can completely wipe away lesser enchantments with extended contact. And any spells you cast, provided they hit something living, return a measure of their magic as yours.”

Anneliese listened in silence, then picked up her booklet and wrote a few more things down. Argrave waited patiently. Finally, she leaned back, massaging her temples.

“Headache?” Argrave questioned.

“Yes,” she admitted. “This method is... ridiculously complicated, yet so insightful to the fundamentals of magic as a whole as to overturn many of my preconceptions. But... perhaps that is merely Llewellen in

general.” Her amber eyes locked with his own. “I think you should listen with me some—oh.” She stopped, leaning in. “I can see the whites of your eyes again, even if only barely.”

Argrave touched at his cheek almost involuntarily, then placed his hands down. “That’s good, I suppose. It’s been... what, four, coming on five months since I got these eyes?” Argrave shook his head. “Back to the subject.”

Anneliese nodded, then hunched over her notebook. “It... Llewellen deemed it would be impossible for the body to handle the possibility of all ambient magic entering within at once. As such, rather than contain it within what already exists, another vessel needs to be made. Once this vessel is made, the body would change in kind. It would be *part* of me, but separate... an envelope inside the body...” she sighed deeply. “It is quite difficult to wrap my head around.”

“What’s troubling you?” Argrave pressed.

“Llewellen used... a primal force of nature deep beneath the earth, he called it, to gain a recognition of the fundamental bits of magic. It was in the heartland of the dwarven cities that he encountered it. He called it ‘an overwhelming force beyond anything else.’ Its power was so overwhelming, he said it ‘put everything in small quantities that were comprehensible,’ which allowed him to both ascend to A-rank and tap into this force. It was the reason why he perished. This force, whatever it was... its power overwhelmed him,” she explained. “I cannot observe that force as he did—it’s in dwarven cities, and I cannot risk his fate. As such, I must find my understanding elsewhere. A difficult, almost impossible task without this enlightening experience, I must say. If it were easy, others would have done it already...”

Argrave scoffed. “It’s been two days, Anne. You’ll get it.” He tapped at the table. “Is Llewellen really...?”

“He’s a genius,” she said at once. “Thanks to you, I have spoken to many high-ranking spellcasters—Hegazar, Vera, Rowe, Melan, Castro... each and all have tremendous insights into the field of magic, but none have ever enlightened me with such succinct and poignant diction.”

“I’m glad for you,” Argrave said sincerely with a smile. A silence fell as both had nothing more to say on the matter. After a few moments, Argrave dipped his head and closed his eyes, deciding to speak his heart. “I have to bring war to the north. Time was, I set out to stop one.”

“Restore order to the north,” Anneliese rephrased, changing her tone to match the new subject. “You heard of the situation there. There are bandits and veritable warlords reigning over the peasantry and taking what they will. It is a good thing. The right thing.”

“The American way,” Argrave nodded with a cynical, bitter smile. “Well... I’ve never really felt at ease with this.”

“Perhaps this will put you at ease,” Anneliese said, rising to her feet in turn and walking over to their bed. She retrieved a letter and held it out to Argrave. “From Elenore.”

Argrave took the letter and read it. Within, it said that Castro had gathered together all of the Magisters within the tower and informed them of Gerechtigkeits existence. Though he still needed to get the information to the other Magisters beyond the confines of the Tower of the Gray Owl, in time they would all know.

Looking up, Argrave said, "That old man went ahead with things?" As Anneliese nodded, he kept reading the document. "She predicts... they'll announce public support of my coronation?"

Anneliese nodded again with a smile playing about her lips. "Did you read it all? Someone is already coming to rouse support. A Magister," she pointed at the letter.

Argrave set the paper aside, stepping around the grass of the tent. "That's... it is great news," he admitted. "But... it's also going to cause a big wave."

Anneliese's smile faded as she considered his point. "Will it cause a bigger wave than the sudden advent of the first wave of Gerechtigkeits influence when the boundary between this realm and the realm of the gods weakens?" she stepped after him then rested one hand on his shoulder. "I think not."

Argrave stood in silence for a few seconds as Anneliese offered comfort. "If you'll remember... the reason I sought out Elenore was to have a regent so that I would have greater freedom," he recalled, staring off into the distance. "She's doing a splendid job, thus far. I don't have any complaints. But... I'm wondering more every day why I'm here."

"You feel constrained," she guessed.

"Not really," Argrave shook his head. "I can do what I want. But I'm starting to wonder if I'm really doing the best thing I can by staying with everyone in Relize."

Anneliese took her hand off his shoulder and stepped around until she was in vision. "I have no confidence anyone could create such cohesion in the patricians... barring you. I think you are a good leader."

"I'm the pretty face of the operation," Argrave nodded with a smile. "But Elenore's the one really handling things. Administration, facilitation... all of it. Maybe... maybe I need to shake things up. Take a bigger hand. We still don't have the spellcasters we need. Maybe there's something I could do."

"Have you forgotten Castro's support already? What, do you wish to head to another far-flung region of the world, explore some terrible cavern, and fight against things barely within our ken?" Anneliese shrugged and looked away, then rested her finger atop the black cube. "Perhaps you need a distraction."

Nodding with her words, Argrave looked at the cube. "Well... alright, let's have a listen. Maybe I can see why it is you praise this guy so much. Maybe I can get some insight into my own A-rank advancement."

"Now?" Anneliese asked, yet she was already stepped towards it. "I can almost guarantee it will help. Come, let's sit. Listening from the beginning might help me..."

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"You're sure about this?" Durran asked Elenore.

Elenore nodded, counting coins and placing them into a box. "I am. Unless you'd stop me by Argrave's directive?"

Durran put one thumb through a loop on his belt and hung it idly. “Argrave didn’t give me a directive to help you, nor moderate you. I volunteered. He gave you the opportunity to refuse my presence, as you recall.”

“I thought you didn’t like helping others. You made me beg for it when I fell down at my greenhouse, from my memory,” she said scornfully.

“Made you beg? I asked you if you wanted help, and didn’t help until you said yes,” Durran laughed and shook his head. “This selective memory of yours might pose problems for your competence. Listen...” Durran shook his head, still laughing somewhat, then continued, “The only reason I ask if you’re sure is because I’ve met Magisters before. No one in this city can defend you from him. These people are monsters, and damned weird besides.”

“Magister Traugott is coming to the north to spread word to the other Magisters of Gerechtigkei, and ensure they will fight on the *right* side,” Elenore shook her head. “He’s already arranged to meet one here: Magister Vasilisa. He is a proponent of ours. It’s perfectly reasonable for him to request a meeting with Argrave. Since he’s not here, I’ll sit in for him.”

“Ostensibly,” Durran nodded. “I knew a guy that was a steadfast cooperator to us in the fight against the Vessels, but he had a whole different agenda the entire time. You said Magister Traugott volunteered to come to the north?”

“He did,” Elenore nodded. “Listen, Durran—the north has many, many valuable spellcasters in its midst. They are, of yet, completely undecided. The south, central Vasquer—the majority of their mages have thrown in their lot with the local armies. The northern mages remain... reticent. Magister Traugott was sent by Castro, and this could be a huge boon. Spellcasters can make sieges trivialities. We need all we can get, especially when we’re glaringly deficient in magical support.”

Durran scratched his chin. “Alright. What do you know about this guy?”

“He’s a scholar, fascinated by the unknowns,” Elenore summarized succinctly. “Apparently, his A-rank ascension has something to do with... shadows, or darkness. Reports vary. If only Argrave were...” she shook her head. “But he’s not. Traugott is travelling quickly by magic. Apparently, he’ll arrive very soon.”

Durran looked off to the side. “...yeah, it seems reasonable to meet. But do you have to go personally?”

“If he’s coming here to help us, I think it would be best to show proper respect, and help his task here,” Elenore nodded. “I want you to come, too—apparently, he might be from the Burnt Desert. Having you there might lower his guard.”

“Traugott’s hardly a Burnt Desert name,” Durran said suspiciously. “But... sure, I’ll go. I’ve got an idea, too, something to... mitigate some worries of mine.”

“Then I’ll send out someone to receive him,” Elenore nodded. “Melanie can handle this, I should think. When Argrave returns... I should hope it would be to good news.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 287: Unknown Factor

Durran opened a door, beholding the man waiting on the other side. His name was Traugott. As Elenore said, his skin was darker than most people in Vasquer. Even still, Durran had seen darker men in the Burnt Desert, and his other unusual features drew attention first. His hair was as black as ink, appearing soft and inhuman. It looked more like grafted strands of black silk than hair. And his shadow... it looked solid, almost tangible, and did not move with the light of the room.

Despite that, he had a pleasant and somewhat round face. That, coupled with his ordinary gray robes bearing the insignia of the Order of the Gray Owl, somewhat grounded the Magister Traugott back in the mundane.

With a white-toothed smile, Traugott inquired of Durran, "Hello. Who might you be?"

"Just some help for the princess," Durran answered, opening the door wider. "Please, come in. We're happy to have you here, Magister Traugott."

"The princess? I see," the Magister said evenly, stepping within the room. "Greetings, Princess Elenore. It's currently rather nice to make your acquaintance despite the circumstances around us." His eyes landed on another person in the room, and his expression slowly lost some of its cheer. "And... Magister Vasilisa of Quadreign."

Magister Vasilisa stood in one corner of the room. She was a tall woman, blonde of hair and blue of eye. She came from the very distant north, part of the noble family of Quadreign—apparently, the majority of their members were renowned spellcasters. Elenore was happy to have this Vasilisa's presence, but Durran was not.

Elenore, despite her haste in arranging this meeting, had not done so without some precautions. The princess had called in a lot of favors and spent a lot of money to merely have this woman present with them. Durran had complained that having two Magisters was more dangerous than having one, but Elenore had rebutted that at least this Magister was of proven character.

In the end, though Durran was not entirely content about this precaution, he had to admit it was better than nothing. Traugott came as an ally on paper, but he was still an unknown quantity. Indeed, the lack of information she was able to find was alarming. No one seemed to know anything about him. Vasilisa, contrarily, had an upstanding reputation. Traugott had already arranged to meet with her, too, so it wasn't a disrespectful measure.

"Traugott," Vasilisa greeted. Though she had been completely unenthusiastic before the meeting, now that it came she was at full attention, playing the part of a diligent escort.

"I'm glad I managed to get in touch with you," Elenore spoke to Traugott kindly. "I thought I might facilitate your journey here. You intended to spread the word of Gerechtigkeits to your fellow Magisters, didn't you? But some of my sources say that you had a personal support of Argrave's cause. Please, have a seat."

"Well... you've saved me some travel." His face recovered from its change in demeanor quickly, and Traugott smiled as he sat down upon his chair. "I should ask—might I meet His Majesty, the King Argrave?"

Elenore raised a brow at his grandiose address. "His Majesty is absent from Relize at present."

“Ah,” Traugott nodded. “Such a shame.”

Durran walked to stand behind Elenore, keeping his arms before him as he kept a close eye on the man ahead. Traugott didn’t seem to mind.

“I was rather interested in meeting a man who could write something like this,” Traugott reached into his robes and pulled free a booklet. “So many... proofs, truths, each and all leading back to Gerechtigkeits. His Majesty must have made a formidable study of the situation. With this level of detail... that’s only natural.”

“He was quite diligent,” Elenore nodded simply. “Castro gave you that?” she pressed curiously.

Traugott smiled. “How else would I have gotten it?” He opened the booklet, fingers turning the pages gingerly. “I do wonder how it is the king managed to find all of these leads. I, myself, am quite a scholar, yet all of these things... passed right under my nose,” he said, tone deepening as he said each word deliberately.

Durran tensed, prepared for anything. Would the Magister try something in the heart of enemy territory? So many were aware of and prepared for this visit, Vasilisa foremost among them. Durran looked, but the blonde female Magister seemed unworried.

“Because Gerechtigkeits has been deliberately suppressing things,” Elenore posited.

“Ah...” Traugott exhaled slowly. “Then how, I wonder, has King Argrave managed to find the truth?”

“You must have heard the news,” Elenore said without skipping a beat. “Vasquer has been discovered. She was held by the Bat. Argrave has long been aware of these things.”

“Hmm. It’s a very reasonable, plausible answer,” Traugott nodded.

“My sources tell me you had a personal support of Argrave’s coronation,” Elenore said quickly, hoping to change the direction of the conversation. “I thought you might be amenable to detailed cooperation, considering you volunteered to come to the north to convince your fellow Magisters of Gerechtigkeits’ existence.”

“It’s a good justification,” Traugott nodded with a smile.

“...bluntly put,” she continued, “I wanted to discuss how you might use your sway in the Order of the Gray Owl to recruit some undecided spellcasters in the north and beyond to our cause.”

“Certainly, I did come to offer some help,” Traugott tilted his head. “But I’m only a scholar—a seeker of the unknown. What sway have I?”

Durran felt greatly uneasy by the way the man talked. He spoke of how things were ‘plausible’ or ‘good justifications,’ as though he knew some sort of truth and was mocking them to their face.

“I think you and I both know that’s not true,” Elenore shook her head. “Your title alone, your visit alone... they’ll have ramifications: namely, positive results for us. The title of Magister has weight, you know that. Your vocal support for our cause would be immeasurably valuable, I think you know. Right, Vasilisa?”

Though the blonde Magister did give a slight nod, another spoke first.

"I know nothing," Traugott shook his head. "That is a fundamental truth I long ago accepted. Everyone would be better off if they admitted they know nothing. The past—how are you sure it happened? Because you can recall memories? How do you know they're yours? What is 'knowing?'" He grinned again. "Who knows?"

Elenore furrowed her brows, sitting in silence for a few seconds. She seemed just as perplexed as Durran was. Was the man trying to avoid answering them in an elaborate way? Durran could not be sure of his intent.

"If you spend too much time asking those questions, you stagnate," Elenore said, deciding to engage with what he said.

"And why is stagnating bad?" Traugott answered back. "Ah—I've made a mistake. I've made an assumption that you meant 'stagnate' negatively." Traugott shook his head. "But going with that assumption I made... how should one live their life? What is bad, what is good? What's the point of doing or not doing? What's the point of these questions?"

Elenore stayed silent for a few moments, then answered, "You've stumbled onto why people have faith, I should think."

Traugott chuckled. "Precisely so. These questions... a lot of people go around claiming that they have the answer to it all. They *know* how we get here, and they *know* how it'll all end." He shook his head. "But the word you used... it's faith. People don't know. They cling to assumptions, reasonable or unreasonable, without ever truly knowing." The Magister leaned back. "Well... I'm not satisfied giving up. I am rather deeply fascinated by the unknown."

Traugott's shadow spread throughout the room, entirely enveloping it and shrouding it in darkness in not half a second. Durran didn't even have time to panic before he stopped being able to see anything. Quickly, he cast a spell of fire, but it, too, was consumed by darkness. What was up, down, and all around ceased to make sense.

"People fear the dark because it's unknown. Myself, I've always wanted to be steeped in it. Rather than leaving it be, nothing entices me more than heading into the lurking shadows and what lies within them."

Just as quickly as it consumed them so did the darkness release them. When it was over, Vasilisa stood before both of them, holding her hands out towards Traugott with a spell swirling about that ate away the darkness. Durran struggled to stay on his feet—whatever this darkness was, it was not so simple as an absence of light. It consumed the senses—touch, smell, sound. To have them so abruptly returned was jarring.

Durran looked down at Elenore to be sure that she was unharmed. She sat there, the same as ever. But could Durran be sure that nothing had happened to her? Tearing his gaze away and back to the Magister, he knew one thing—this man maddened him.

"But now... I've seen something almost... incontrovertible," Traugott said wondrously, one leg crossed over the other in a casual display. One might not think a Magister had spells prepared in his face. "And

all of the information... I thought it came from Castro at first, but that isn't the case, is it? No... it came from Argrave," he said, the honorific address dropped. "There are so many places to visit in this little booklet. So many leads to follow, so many other proofs. Or so is claimed... I've yet to verify them. The arbiter of the world? Such an unknown quantity... so, let me ask you something. Where is Argrave?"

Elenore didn't respond to the question immediately. The Magister did not rush her for an answer, staring back with that white-toothed grin of his.

"He's not in Relize," Elenore repeated. Durran cast a glance at her, wondering where her boldness came from. "I don't believe I need to answer someone being so blatantly hostile and insincere, Magister Traugott."

Traugott laughed. "I see." His gaze settled on Elenore. "You're right. I was being insincere. I don't have any interest in your war. I really only came here to meet Argrave... but he's not here. Or if he is, I certainly won't have the luxury of searching for him." His eyes rested upon Vasilisa.

"Try nothing like that again," the female Magister said in warning, hands still prepared to cast a spell.

"I don't plan on it. Conflict is something I mostly prefer to avoid," he said in disdain. "Really, all I wanted was answers. But if they're not to be found here, I'll be moving on once again. There are many places to visit in this booklet. If they're more than mere guesses... well, I will be most interested in learning more."

Elenore rose to her feet. "I think it's time for you to leave."

Traugott's shadow danced, and Durran braced for another wave of whatever had come before. Instead, Traugott fell away into his own shadow. Vasilisa lowered her hand once his shadow vanished.

"Is he...?" Durran questioned after silence reigned for a time.

"He's gone," Elenore nodded. "Whatever that darkness is, it can't fool these," she tapped at her bronze jewelry. "He's reappeared outside. Vasilisa—please, ensure he leaves."

The Magister gave a cautious nod, then stepped towards the door. She paused. "Don't forget what you owe my house," she reminded Elenore.

"I won't," Elenore shook her head.

Vasilisa nodded and left, moving after Traugott.

"Imagine if I had been cheap," Elenore looked to Durran pointedly once the Magister had left.

Durran stared at the shadows in paranoia. "I was wrong, alright?"

"Still... I don't regret this. It confirmed things. If we have a saboteur, it's best to confirm his presence as soon as possible." Elenore shook her head. "If that even describes Traugott. I need to speak to Argrave, find out what the hell just happened."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 288: Reignition

Argrave returned with a much smaller entourage than what he'd left with, and he was glad to have it that way. Elenore waited outside Relize with a similarly small escort, and when he looked upon her, he

could tell she did not bear happy news. They joined somberly, and Elenore caught him up to speed as they walked through the city.

"Traugott was looking for me?" Argrave repeated, turning to Elenore as they walked through the streets of Relize. They headed for Leopold's mansion, escorted by his royal guards.

"I'm worried for your safety," Elenore said. "A man like that is as easy to predict as a grasshopper—namely, not at all."

"We should first tell Castro that his choice of aid wasn't exactly stellar," Argrave said.

"Already done, though I put more politely than that," Elenore confirmed. "Even still, Durran has been eyeing the shadows like they're diseased, and I am similarly paranoid."

"Relax. With vigilance, we can be prepared for anything might try. Traugott's shadow is only a link to the Shadowlands, another realm beyond this one," Argrave said evenly. "Beings far greater than you or I roam in that senseless abyss. He can travel short distances, maybe transport the odd object. It's too much of a risk for him to do much more. His shadow itself has the same offensive capability as a blanket; resist, and you can get out fine."

Elenore nodded, somewhat comforted by that.

"Anything happen while I was absent? Papers to sign, troubles to solve?" Argrave pressed somewhat hopefully.

Elenore thought for only half a second before responding, "No. Some matters did arise, but I handled them in short order. We can talk details later, but for now... we should talk about safety measures."

"You seem to have run this place well," Argrave noted. "That shouldn't surprise me. All along, you've been the engine and the oil for this machine."

"What do you mean?" Elenore looked to him, perplexed.

"I told you long ago that I wanted you so that you could be regent in my place while I handled other matters," Argrave told her. "You remember, right?"

"Argrave?" Anneliese asked worriedly, recalling their conversation.

"You want to go into hiding?" Elenore guessed. "I... can certainly run things in your absence, but..."

Elenore paused, hesitant to mention that she'd facilitated his arrival.

"Hiding? Far from it." Argrave smiled. "I think that's been my issue, why I've felt in such a rut about this upcoming war. I lost a bit of my proactivity. I'm just waiting for reports from you, acting accordingly," Argrave looked at Elenore. "Not like I'm ungrateful, but..."

"Walking around with an escort... leading armies... it's unwieldy," Argrave said, looking around at all around him. He conjured a ward to hide their conversation, then bunched everyone together. "All these resources are weighing me down."

"Argrave, you're not suggesting..." Elenore stepped back to him.

“What if I am suggesting? You said yourself that Traugott was very curious where I am. If I stay here, if he *knows* that I’m here... if I can say one thing about that man, it’s that he endeavors to learn things that fascinate him.” He rubbed his hands together as he gained momentum. “We have a problem with our spellcasters. So far, all I’ve done is wait around for old man Castro to send some support... when I’m forgetting how I got here in the first place.” Argrave looked at Elenore. “Has Magister Vasilisa left yet?”

“No, she hasn’t. As far as I know, she leaves by ship soon,” Elenore shook her head, then got closer to him and asked with urgency, “Will you tell me what’s going through your head?”

Argrave looked to her. “You said you always had trouble predicting what I’d do. I’d say that worked to my advantage a lot of the time.” He took a deep breath. “I think it’s long overdue for me to take a personal hand in the north. So, I’m going to see Vasilisa. She’s almost definitely returning to Quadreign.”

“What?” Elenore’s brows rose in shock. “Argrave, we—”

“We need spellcasters on our side. It’s our biggest weakness, currently. Our army can stand up to our enemies, I’m sure of it. Once we have sufficient magic, it’s all but a straight shot to claiming the fortresses of central Vasquer, and then heading to Dirracha. Why should I rely on whoever Castro sends to earn support? Have I forgotten how I got here? On top of that, Galamon tells me the man with the glass eye is in the north *right now*.” Argrave gestured to the knight-commander.

Galamon gave a hesitant nod of confirmation.

Anneliese touched Argrave’s shoulder. “We should discuss this more, I think.”

Elenore nodded in agreement, but Argrave continued, saying, “Sure, alright—we can talk about it. But I don’t think anything’s missing. I head to Quadreign, work a little magic, and it all falls down like dominoes. Elenore handles the army, that side of things... while I patch up our biggest weakness, solve our issue of lacking spellcasters. Once that’s settled, we reconvene near Vysenn, get that business taken care of, and then finish this war.”

As Elenore’s face betrayed skepticism, Argrave continued, “Rather than me sitting at the helm doing very little at all other than looking handsome, we can be working on two problems concurrently. I deal with the far north, you deal with the near north... and we converge in the middle. What happened in Atrus—it’s something I haven’t been taking ample advantage of. I haven’t been using my knowledge to my advantage.” Argrave tapped his temples.

“I-I...” Elenore sputtered before gathering herself and saying calmly, “You’ve stayed here thus far because it’s not safe outside of Relize. Even the small journey you just went on...!”

“But that’s the thing,” Argrave nodded. “It isn’t safe. I got some of my best work done when it wasn’t safe.”

“What is this, superstition? Don’t be ridiculous,” she shook her head. “How will it look if you depart for Quadreign on the eve of our army’s march?”

“Who says anyone has to see at all?” Argrave held his hands out. “This is all going to be very low-key. It might be for the best if I stay out of sight, out of mind.” Elenore’s face remained steeped in disbelief, and so Argrave hurriedly said, “I think Anneliese is right. Let’s go somewhere else, talk about what I had

in mind... for starters, let's talk about how Magister Vasilisa's presence is a boon and a half. A good thing, too—I think I rather liked being a nobody.”

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At early morning, the bars were not so rowdy. Indeed, any that were there this early in the morning were likely looking to leave quietly as their heads would be pounding. A few sat at the bar: among them, a tall blonde woman. She drank slowly and seemed more lost in thought than revelry.

“Excuse me, miss,” a voice interrupted Magister Vasilisa's thoughts as she drank.

She turned her head to a party of three, then raised her head to get a better look at them. They were ridiculously tall, all three. One was a brawny man with long white hair wearing sailor's clothes. The other was a woman wearing some heavy white furs that concealed most of her. And the third... a man just shorter than the first, with some mass about him with long, wavy, almost snow-white hair.

“Not interested,” Vasilisa said at once, turning back to her drink. “I have passage.”

She had seen these people about—apparently, Leopold Dandalan, elected leader of Relize, had taken a snow elf to wife. Beyond that, the king kept one as company—rumor whirled she was his fiancée, but those mutterings were never confirmed officially. Regardless, elves wandered the docks at Relize frequently, and Vasilisa had seen some of them about. Their goods were in very high demand, foremost among them being fur. The Relizeans certainly did not discriminate how coin entered their pockets, and so these new arrivals were welcomed.

“I am told you're from Quadreign,” the man continued. “Your house ruled the region as queens before Felipe III came and conquered your lands.”

Vasilisa turned her head to look at the man once more. She considered harming him then and there to silence him, but further scrutiny exposed this man as a mage. She could not say for certain what rank he was, but his magic pool was certainly capable of being A-rank. The woman beside him, too, was not particularly lacking.

The Magister straightened on the bar stool, then turned her whole body. “Speak carefully,” she warned the man. “If you have something to say, say it.”

“I'm told that your region was home to spellcasters entirely unaffiliated with the Order of the Gray Owl,” the man continued. Vasilisa looked at his eyes—they were peculiar. His iris was dull gold and gray at seemingly random points. “Furthermore, you assured your supremacy over regional powers because of a magical flame—a flame that's now extinguished.”

Vasilisa inhaled and exhaled slowly, hiding her interest as best she knew how. “Continue,” she gestured with her chin.

“I am rather interested in this flame,” the man continued.

“This concerns me how?” Vasilisa set one arm on the counter loudly, fed up with how slow this conversation proceeded.

“With Veid as my witness, I’d like to enter into contract with you, Magister Vasilisa,” the man said. “My wife... her ascendancy to A-rank may hinge on coming into contact with that flame. As such, I would re-ignite it. In return, I hope you can take us as guests to Quadreign... and allow us to do so.”

Vasilisa ground her teeth, but then leaned back in the stool, contemplating. “Fifteen years, I’ve been investigating this matter. Suffocating a fire of that nature is much easier than starting one, elf.”

The man nodded, then reached into his pocket. Vasilisa eyed him cautiously, but he pulled free a stone tablet and set it upon the table. Looking at it, recognition dawned on her. It was but a simple stone tablet, but the rune stained on its surface in strange blue ink was very familiar.

“That fire... you’ve been unsuccessful because you’re ignorant of its origins. It isn’t your heritage. It’s ours.” The man crossed his arms. “But, please, let’s have a conversation. I’m sure I can answer some questions that you have.”

Vasilisa bit her lip in the quiet, then scanned the three before her. “Your names?”

The man smiled. “I am Silvaden ‘the Smiler.’ I answer to my name or my sobriquet—whichever pleases you. This is my wife, Sanora, and my father-in-law, Vulras.” He clasped his hands together. “Can I take it you have a positive predisposition towards this arrangement?”

#####

Argrave watched as sailors loaded shipments onto the galley that Vasilisa was taking. Things had gone rather smoothly with Vasilisa. The bigger headache had been justifying everything to Leopold... and getting this wig on such short order. It was difficult to avoid adjusting it constantly, yet the person beside him swayed him against doing so. He caught her eye.

“Are you disappointed I ride on a merchant vessel?” Vasilisa inquired. “Were you expecting more grandiose treatment, elf?”

Argrave turned his head. “My father-in-law is a merchant. I have great regard for the profession,” he disagreed.

Was this plan of his ridiculous? Perhaps. But Argrave earned Elenore’s support to name her regent—he’d fully expected to do things like this. He hadn’t expected to do so exactly in this manner, nor so suddenly... but Traugott’s unexpected arrival and change in character in light of his revelations of Gerechtigkeits existence could pose problems. He had to be proactive before the problems mounted and overwhelmed him.

Above all, he felt the only way to ensure things were done perfectly in the north was to get personally involved. Quadreign was a domino in a long line—he firmly believed this. More issues spurred him forward: Anneliese might gain insight from the flame in Quadreign of a similar nature to what Llewellen experienced, and Galamon might manage to find the bearer of the glass eye related to vampirism.

Good reasons, one and all—enough so that Elenore had even agreed with Argrave. And frankly, his sister would handle things better than he might be able to. Their army was restoring order, not going to battle—they’d subjugate bandits, communicate with local lords, earn allegiances through trades and promises. The majority of that was something Elenore was overqualified to deal with.

Argrave's royal guard would be remaining here. Bringing them along would take too much in the way of preparation and would only rouse suspicion from Vasilisa. Indeed, their continued presence and protection of Elenore gave credence to the idea that Argrave was simply avoiding the public. Honestly, Argrave felt free without them.

"We'll be leaving as soon as they're done loading the cargo," Vasilisa informed him. "Apparently, they spun Traugott's meeting with Elenore as an assassination attempt with me as the savior. I won't have them use my presence as some sort of sign of allegiance. It's bothersome, these games of theirs... but I needed the money," she sighed. "I talked to your kind, Smiler. They say you're important in your land."

Argrave nodded, looking back to the ship. He'd used a real name to make the story a bit more credible, and he was rather glad to have done so. "I'm only a servant of Veid, as all Veidimen are."

Vasilisa nodded. "So long as you don't think you're important, you won't need to be checked. You'll be in my family's land. Conquered we might be... but this land is torn asunder, and you are foreign to our soil. Am I clear, Silvaden?"

Argrave nodded. "Absolutely. Don't forget—we Veidimen hold contracts sacred."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 289: Embers in the North

"Feels like I can think again," Argrave said loudly into the wind, one arm wrapped around Anneliese.

He hadn't realized how much being stagnant in Relize had been weighing at him until he was gone. He hadn't been doing anything too grandiose. His time had been spent giving his name to things, ordering that things get done in his name... but real, genuine progress? It was hard to come by. Certainly, this maneuver might damage his reputation somewhat... but Argrave was sure that would be overshadowed when they returned with an army of spellcasters under his command. Already, his mind worked quickly to pull himself up out of the situation.

"You elves enjoy the cold that much?" Vasilisa spoke to him suddenly, and Argrave turned his head. Whenever she came around, he felt an urge to be sure his white-haired wig was on properly and concealed his ears well, but he resisted it. It was secured with adhesive—it was fine, he reminded himself.

"Well..." Argrave looked to Anneliese. "What do you think, Sanora, Vulras?"

"We were made for it," Galamon nodded quickly, showing no reaction to the alias.

Vasilisa stepped on the railing and looked over the sea as it passed on and on, an endless plain of tumultuous water that whipped up winds. Her blonde hair danced as she noted, "I should hope you travel the cold half as well. We'll be on foot." Her blue eyes fixed on them—she didn't seem particularly happy, but then maybe that was her natural disposition. "What business have you with the flame of Quadreign? It's for those beginning their journey on the path of magic... not midway through it," her eyes lingered on Anneliese.

"I feel comprehending something borne of magic sufficiently grandiose may give insight into something I research," Anneliese described succinctly.

“Do you even know what the flame does?” Vasilisa stared at her coldly.

“We know what your house used it for... and we know what it does,” Argrave answered for her. “The two are separate. It burns away the magic inside... but more than that, it burns away mental fatigue, stress, fear, and some insecurities. Physically, it improves fertility, fights disease, and generally improves health... for a time. These are the things your house used it for,” he shook his head.

Quadreign used the flame much like Argrave used the Blessing of Supersession—in repaying his magic debt, he drained the magic within himself quickly. Continued depletion and replenishment was pivotal to growing one’s magic supply—that, coupled with his black blood, was why Argrave had been advancing so quickly.

House Quadreign used the flame on their family and their loyal vassals’ families since birth. In essence, by the time they reached adulthood, they had already been performing highly efficient training as spellcasters for nearly two decades. Those that they favored became magical juggernauts, while those that they didn’t had to struggle just as all the rest. Like this, Quadreign secured hegemony over the region.

“But that’s not the sum of what it is. You called it... the Flame of the Tenebrous Star?” Anneliese looked to Argrave, and he nodded in confirmation.

Vasilisa took her foot off the railing and crossed her arm. “Then, what can this Flame of the Tenebrous Star do, exactly?”

Argrave took his hand off Anneliese. “I see no need to tell you. That information is valuable. We have our contract. If you’d like more from me, I believe it only fitting I’m suitably compensated.”

Vasilisa tapped her foot against the deck as she looked at the two of them. “So be it,” she decided levelly, then turned her head to the side. “I see the shore.”

Argrave looked where her eyes went. Just as she said, the shoreline was in sight. The place they saw wasn’t Quadreign. It was quite a stunning sight nonetheless—there were pine trees as far as the eye could see, blanketed by a thin layer of melting snow. Like a pocket of civilization amidst the wilderness, a river ran through a small city that verged on being demoted to a town.

“Prenviania,” Argrave recognized, sitting on the railing and looking at it with a smile.

Vasilisa turned her head to him as he sat. “...correct,” she said begrudgingly. “These lords here, House Prenvia... they were once vassals to the Queen of Quadreign. Now, they rule most of the coastal settlements here as its duke.”

There was bitterness in Vasilisa’s voice. It was part jealousy, part longing, part sad defeat, expressed so clearly Argrave did not need to look to Anneliese to ask what it was.

“We land, sleep the night, then move,” Vasilisa said. “I won’t travel by night.. too risky,” she decided. “You and your father-in-law can handle traversing the pine forests, I trust?”

“On the contrary. It will be welcome,” Anneliese nodded. She grabbed at Argrave’s shoulder as he sat in admiration of the coastline. “Let us prepare to take our things... and then spend whatever time is left studying what master Llewellen left, shall we, Silvaden?”

#####

The north of Vasquer was dreadfully cold, even in the middle of spring as they were. Argrave and Anneliese donned their heavier gray enchanted leather gear, and Galamon put his armor back on, making some effort to conceal it with fur. Vasilisa looked at him peculiarly but did not question that—Argrave imagined Vasilisa viewed it as inconsequential if he failed during their travels. Such a thing would be their problem, not hers. If she asked why their companion remained stalwart, Argrave would explain merely that his armor was enchanted.

The towns of the north had a separate culture from all those of the south or central Vasquer. It was densely forested, and many creatures of yore still roamed night and day, dangerous and mythical both. The soil was poor, and the cold made it poorer. Here, the people were primarily hunters and herders. Exceptions existed, naturally, yet the point stood. They traded in rare hides and mined the earth, but beyond that few other industries existed here.

To that end, Argrave was glad Anneliese had long ago mastered the B-rank [Progenitor] spell of the druidic family—she could bring an animal other than her Starsparrow about, even if in limited capacity. It would facilitate getting a little souvenir for their friend back in Relize. On the matter of their druidic bonds, the Brumesingers loathed the cold, and stayed nestled deep within Argrave's backpack.

Vasilisa, true to her word, allowed them only one day of rest at Prenviania. While they were leaving the next morning, Anneliese spotted a familiar building.

"That is one of the branches of the Order of the Gray Owl, is it not?" Anneliese asked of Argrave.

Argrave hardly needed to look to answer, but he did. "It is," he confirmed.

It was a stone building, two owls looking over the entrance like gargoyles. It stood in stark contrast to the homes made of pine logs all throughout the city of Prenviania. Even the grandest estates were wooden. This stone building, a branch of the Order... Argrave had been to one a very long time ago at Mateth, and now here another stood. As he recalled, the place had few facilities in 'Heroes of Berendar,' nothing more than the bare essentials. It stuck out, to say the least.

"Just an abandoned building, now," Vasilisa said, overhearing them. "People tore it down not too long ago. Inside is in pieces."

Argrave furrowed his brows. "What? Why?"

"Order isn't well-loved everywhere," Vasilisa said. "Might have heard grand tales in Relize... but they're a new presence here, a foreign presence. This building was like a token of the north's fall. I think it's a waste, but the people did what they did." She stepped down the simple dirt road. "Don't gawk, elf. People seldom see your kind here. It'd be best if we're on the road. I won't trouble the people of the north. They have it hard enough."

Argrave spared one look at the building, then followed. He supposed nothing like that could happen in the game because the player always needed those facilities. It gave some insight as to the culture of spellcasters in the north, though—many of them weren't Order-reared, merely converts after Felipe's conquest. Vasilisa hadn't been taught in the Order, for instance. Already, an element of the disparity started to make sense.

How, then, would he win them to his side? How could he build momentum here? These were ideas he pondered as they trekked through the pine forests, their party following only a simple dirt road that was more a trail formed by game than humans. He engaged in conversation with Anneliese and Galamon, feeling of greater spirit today alone than he had in the past month. He saw bizarre snow formations as they melted for spring, and they passed by hunters, babbling brooks... a lively, yet markedly different, community.

Soon enough, though... Argrave could not afford to be so carefree. The path started to grow steeper, more treacherous. The path beneath their feet went from densely packed soil with pine needles scattered everywhere to hard stone and rock, slick with the water from the melting snow at many points. With both breath labored and mind taxed, he devoted himself to the task fully.

Anneliese had a much different experience. After all, she had her special boots with wind enchantments—like Argrave's silver bracer that stored his blood for blood magic, the boots were one of the things that Elenore had appraised. They'd been obtained from one of the various places they'd looted. Whether moving faster, moving upwards, slowing a descent... her boots could do it all. Anneliese used them sparingly, testing and training herself to use them best. The steep path made a good opportunity for that, even if Argrave did find it somewhat bothersome when he was hit by snow.

At a point, Argrave heard her yelp and retreat, and he looked up to see what was going on. He saw a white paw moving through the air where she left, and he immediately turned, prepared to confront whatever was coming. A truck-sized beast chased after her. It had white fur, and a squat, low-lying body. Its mouth was clearly that of a predator's, but could not be called dog, cat, or anything familiar. Argrave recognized it—a *lyr*, one of the many wild beasts of the north. He prepared a spell.

"Stop what you're doing," Vasilisa grabbed his wrist, fingers wrapping around his silver bracer.

"What?" Argrave protested.

Vasilisa stepped forth, and then conjured a simpler spell of fire. She held it before the creature as large as a rhino and warded it away as one might any other wild animal. And it behaved as a bear or wolf might, snapping at her with its strange bark before retreating back whence it came.

"Unless you intend to skin and eat it... you kill nothing in the north unless absolutely necessary," Vasilisa turned to Argrave. "I will not deprive the people of what might one day fill their bellies. I would think snow elves of all people would understand that."

Argrave straightened. "I apologize. It's difficult to remember such things when they concern A..." very nearly saying Anneliese, he quickly salvaged things, finishing, "...a person very precious to me."

Vasilisa clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Quadreign is not so far. Let's proceed."

Argrave pulled his pack up over his shoulders, casting a glance at a guilty-looking Anneliese. He could not bring himself to blame her, and merely bid she continue as they pressed forward through this snowscape.

Familiar landmarks and mountains marked Argrave's vision as they neared Quadreign. When they crested the top of a particularly steep incline...a city spread out before them, nestled deep within a valley. To put things simply, it appeared like an isolated community of the rich. All of the buildings within

sight were so grand as to suffice as a noble mansion back in the south. And in the back, above it all, was a towering palace. Its furthest wall supported a large clocktower, overlooking the valley and city both.

And yet... further scrutiny revealed many oddities. The streets were quiet and ill-kept, some of them entirely blocked off by snow. The clocktower did not move. So many parts of the palace had been destroyed as to make it worthless in any defense. A lot of the grand estates were abandoned—even more had been partially torn down to make room for a burgeoning pasture of cows.

“One last steep decline, and then we’re in Quadreign. I’d like you to get to work right away,” Vasilisa looked back. “Let’s go, Silvaden, Sanora, Vulras.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 290: Time On Our Misery

Vasilisa grabbed the iron gate that stood out front the palace in Quadreign. She fit in a key and opened it wide. Argrave eyed the gate—it was cheaply made, and the iron had grown rusty and brittle. The Magister had led them through the city with purpose, and they’d diligently followed behind their escort. It wasn’t as though any people blocked their way.

The quest line in Quadreign had always described the city as failing, as a fragment of its former glory. Certainly, the player could observe the failing houses, the decrepit palace, and the stagnant clocktower. Even still, Argrave felt as though he was seeing the city for the very first time. These were living people enduring hard times in this land of bitter cold. He saw how thin they were, how they shuddered in their poorly heated homes, and how they slowly withered away in this isolated valley.

There was an old man waiting for them in the palace’s courtyard. He wore clothing that once might have been brilliant blue but was now faded and worn and lined with fur to ward away the cold. Vasilisa stepped right up to him.

“Young lady,” he greeted. Argrave recognized him—he was the steward of this palace. Befitting an elder member of House Quadreign, he was a mage with quite a formidable magic pool.

“That title is no longer applicable, Ferrel,” she said coldly. “Here.”

Ferrel took a bag from her hand, and Argrave heard metal clinking within. The steward looked inside, then looked back to Vasilisa. “But... my lady... all of what you earned?”

“I am still part of this house. Take it. I will brook no protest,” she commanded him.

The steward acquiesced with a quiet bow. “It will help alleviate some of the debt.”

“Forget the debt,” she disagreed. “That money is for supplies. The Lous family lost half their herd. We need to buy food, other essentials, distribute them.”

“Of... course, my lady,” Ferrel bowed a little deeper.

“These elves are my guests,” Vasilisa looked back, blue eyes steady. “I want them to meet my sister. They... are here about the flame.”

“Your sister is...” Ferrel’s lips twitched. “I’ll speak to her. It might be difficult. You know how she is.”

“Alright,” Vasilisa nodded, her stern voice lightening up somewhat. “You three. Come along.”

#####

Vasilisa escorted the three of them to a guest house within the palace. It was poorly maintained, and this fact seemed to embarrass the Magister greatly. She promised it would be cleaned, but Argrave insisted it was something they’d be willing to handle themselves. She seemed insulted at first, but gradually she accepted the proposition.

They didn’t have the chance to do much, though. Ferrel returned after a time, and they were escorted within the palace proper—specifically, the great hall beneath the clocktower. Though there was a great ascending set of stairs leading to a throne that seemed to be made for a giant, the person they had been brought to meet—Vasilisa’s sister—sat in a simple chair at the foot of these stairs, the steward standing just beside her. Her name was Diana, and she was the present baroness of Quadreign. She looked quite like Vasilisa, being blonde and blue-eyed, yet age marked her a little more than it had her sister.

As they approached, he heard Diana question Ferrel quietly, in a voice almost too low to hear, “Do I know them?”

“No, my lady. They are new to us. Your sister brought them,” the answer came, just as quiet.

Diane nodded, then leaned her head against her hand and massaged it gingerly as they approached.

“Vasilisa says that you came here to look at reigniting the flame,” Diana said at once.

“That’s correct, baroness,” Argrave dipped his head. “It is Veidimen work. Consequently, we are the only able to help restore it.”

“I see,” Diana said. Her eyes weren’t quite focused on their faces, but they were in their general direction. “And... reigniting this flame. What...” she paused for a few seconds. “...actions do it... does it require from me?”

“The way I understood it, sister, was that he would need only my aid with this matter,” Vasilisa interjected. “I merely wanted to keep you informed about things and get your approval.”

Diana’s eyes wandered for a few moments, then refocused. “Then you have my leave,” she finally said.

“Thank you for your graciousness in this matter,” Argrave lowered his head once again. “I can promise confidently that you won’t be disappointed by this.”

“If there is no thing... nothing more, I’d very much like to be left alone with my duties,” Diana said.

Her hand twitched, and she gripped the arm rest of her chair firmly. Anneliese took note of this and stared for a long while.

“Of course,” Argrave said. “Thank you for your time.”

With that, Vasilisa very eagerly shepherded them back towards the courtyard of the palace. “Diana is very busy and overworked with things, otherwise I’m sure she’d ask for more,” she explained as they walked. “The territory is... not what it once was, and my sister has been working very hard to curb our decline. There are many troubles with being isolated as we are—troubles that were once addressed by

this flame. On that matter..." she eagerly drove the subject away from her sister. "I think it's best that we start discussing what it is you plan to do."

"Then we can do so," Argrave agreed. "Indeed, I think things would be for the best if we got to work immediately. To that end... I'd like to see the site where the flame is kept. From old Veidimen records, I believe it was stored underground."

Vasilisa scanned Argrave's face, then nodded slowly. "Yes, it was. I need to take care of a few other things before we go there. Return to the guest house a moment while I prepare things."

#####

"Feels odd, being left behind," Durran commented as he watched the docks of Relize from Leopold's estate. One didn't have a clear view of the sea, and even if there was, Durran didn't know which ship they left on. It hadn't even returned to the docks, yet.

"It's odder that they're going," Elenore said.

Durran turned his head back. "Things will turn out. You'll see."

"All I know... is that Argrave has saddled us with a lot of work," Elenore said. "We have to maintain respect for Argrave when he won't be marching beside his army. And the spellcasters we have, meagre though they may be, have to be kept in check by someone."

Durran laughed. "Well, shouldn't you be well-accustomed to earning respect, no matter the situation? You earned a place in the world with a name alone. A rather unintimidating name, at that. I hardly think of bats as the foremost authority, yet here you are."

"Let's get to work," Elenore changed the subject. "The army moves. I think the first order of business... shall be a show of strength for the soldiers of the north who went bandit."

#####

Argrave hunched over a set of runes, doing his very best to make it look like he was doing some important deciphering. As a point of fact, though, it was all just acting. An investigation quest had little meaning when one already knew what it was they were looking for.

He rose to his feet and turned around, where Vasilisa stood expectantly. "Well? Were you all talk?"

"The flame isn't extinguished," Argrave said.

Her blue eyes narrowed into small slits. "That's a bit difficult to accept when we're standing in the brazier it used to burn."

Argrave looked around, making a point to survey the place. "...still, the runes are working. They're maintaining the flame."

"There's nothing to maintain," she shook her head. "If they are active, they're faulty, and need to be fixed."

"They don't need to be fixed," Argrave shook his head. "The flame isn't here anymore. The runes are somewhat degraded because they've been sustaining the flame from quite a long distance away." He

looked up. "Given the nature of sending energy through the air... you might have noticed some people getting sick. Muscles seizing up. Vomiting up blood. These runes weren't made for long-distance maintenance, and the energy travelling through the air probably brought many unwanted afflictions to anyone above ground."

Vasilisa took a deep breath and stepped away, and Argrave suspected many pieces were falling into place in her mind. Her eyes trembled in rage, and she swallowed deeply. Galamon eyed her cautiously, keeping his hands near his Ebonice axe.

"It was stolen, then? Pilfered, taken away, used by another?" the Magister asked.

"...yes. If someone knowledgeable enough came in close contact, they could steal it away," Argrave confirmed.

"Can it be reversed?" Vasilisa spoke through clenched teeth. "The connection... severed?"

"Certainly," Argrave nodded. "But it would take around a year to reignite the flame. The runes would need time to rebuild its essence from the ground up. Though I should note the thief would lose the flame, wherever they might be. As such, if you can wait... it might be worth it."

Vasilisa stood there, breathing heavily in the quiet stone chamber. Argrave looked to Anneliese, yet the fact that she remained calm said that there was probably no chance the Magister lashed out rashly. She looked to pity Vasilisa.

"Alternatively, we could recover it," Argrave gave her the second, much better option.

"Recover it?" she laughed. "It had to be the king that stole it," she stepped around the cold stone chamber, practically fuming. "Do you think us capable of heading to the palace and doing such a thing? As I understand it, that place is a hotbed of activity. Even if I collaborate with one of the... the foolish claimants, Argrave, or... or the south..." she trailed off.

"I don't think it was the king that stole it," Argrave shook his head. "If the capital of this kingdom is further south than Relize, the runes could not sustain it so. In addition, as I mentioned... it would have to be someone knowledgeable about the flame. I'm not sure the king fits that criterion."

Vasilisa turned. "It's close, then? It's... it's far enough to still be in the north?"

Argrave nodded. "Almost definitely."

Vasilisa's blue eyes took an icy calm to them. "You said it would have to be someone who came into close contact," she noted.

"I did."

The Magister seethed silently, her eyes closed harshly. Her right hand clenched and unclenched into a fist as she stood there, wrapped up in her own world of rage.

"I'm going to flay him," she decided with a calm voice that disguised her anger. Then, she stepped off towards the exit.

"Not sure that'll help," Argrave called out as she stormed away.

"It'll help me," she called back, then stopped to punch the wall. Argrave winced as he heard something crack that wasn't stone, but Vasilisa kept punching the wall.

Since it was evident she wasn't going to be leaving, Argrave walked closer slowly. Anneliese joined him.

"That man... took the flame of our house for his own," she said, voice trembling in anger. "Since birth, we gave him its gift freely... and not only did he betray Quadreign to join Vasquer..." Vasilisa turned back. "He made it seem like he was the only reason our family was not killed."

Argrave crossed his arms. "I take it you have an idea who the flame might presently belong to, now?"

"Yes," she said with a hoarse voice, blood dripping from her now-disfigured hand. "Yes, I know exactly who. And he's had quite a time on our misery... not only are we deep in debt to him, but he also holds most of the inland territories that once belong to Quadreign," she said, almost hysterical by this point. "And he's come by every single month to collect the interest for his debt, seeing this place fall into disrepair, seeing our people starve and freeze to death, seeing my sister..." she trailed off, her eyes wandering to Argrave and Anneliese to remind herself she was not alone. It seemed she still wished to keep some things hidden from them.

"So, this person... they're influential here," Argrave nodded calmly.

She laughed like it was the funniest joke, then slouched against the wall, sliding down until she sat. "Yes, Silvaden. Yes, you might say Margrave Ivan, Magister of the Order, owner of most of the former Quadreign crownlands, leader of a potent coterie of northern spellcasters, and possibly the richest man in all the north... is slightly influential in the north," she said drolly.

Vasilisa sat there, despairing.

"Is there anyone else it might be?" Anneliese asked innocently.

That brought some vigor back to her for but a few moments, until she shook her head with gaze distant. "No. Not possible. He, alongside the king, were the last within this place before the flame was exting— no, stolen."

Argrave scratched at his chin. "Well... a contract is a contract, Magister Vasilisa," he said.

The blonde-haired woman looked up at him, eyes wide.

"A traitor and a thief... in Veiden, such a man should be eliminated completely," Argrave said, smiling.

"So long as you're willing, of course... I think all we have is a new obstacle. One that Veid would view righteous to tackle."

And if some of that influence Ivan possessed might find itself in another hand that might be more positively predisposed towards helping Argrave's army? Well... that would certainly make that king that was definitely in Relize right now very happy.