

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 291: Enemies of a Different Measure

Magister Vasilisa watched the man beside her pour a drink into her cup. Cups, rather—the bartender filled multiple tankards, each and all just beside Vasilisa’s wrist. Her eyes jumped between the brown alcohol and their party of three, sitting adjacent from her and waiting expectantly.

“You sure you don’t want anything?” Vasilisa questioned.

“Alcohol does nothing for me,” Argrave said vaguely while the two beside him shook their head.

The drink finished pouring, and she handed a set of gold coins to the man. He tried to refuse her, but she insisted until he took it.

“Just, uh... feels a bit...” her blue eyes jumped between them, then she shrugged and tipped the tankard back. “Whatever. You don’t want it, that’s your business. But what’s my business...”

She snapped. Though no matrix formed, she’d cast a spell, and a ward enclosed them. Casting spells without matrixes—that was one facet of Vasilisa’s A-rank advancement. None of the other customers in this tavern in Quadreign seemed to react to the spell, perhaps well-used to Vasilisa being here.

“What’s my business is what in the hell you’re speaking of when you talk about taking down Magister Ivan,” she said, sipping at her drink slightly. “You might not get things, being from where you are... but me, my sister’s territory? They’ve become nothing before what Margrave Ivan owns, Silvaden. We’re dust before a castle. Maybe they call you ‘Smiler’ for your endless optimism, but I see things clear, and they’re *clearly* impossibly bleak.”

Argrave mulled over her words for a bit while the Magister let the silence hang, drinking deeply from her cup. She’d very nearly finished the first from what Argrave saw.

“Do you know how I discovered you were in Relize?” Argrave questioned. “I was speaking to a northerner... something mundane, I think it was about furs that were commonly traded to Relize... we wanted to avoid some competition, you see.” Argrave leaned in, entwining his hands. “This woman, she was a little old. Still robust and firm, though, like a great deal of the people we saw on the way here. And she started talking about the good days beneath the reign of the queens of Quadreign.”

Vasilisa stared at Argrave as he spoke, so wrapped up in his fabricated story she couldn’t think of anything to interject.

“She spoke of your traditions here,” Argrave continued, locking eyes with her. “How your women ruled, because only those that create life can justly preside over it. She told me how the flames of Quadreign once flowed through this city, giving warmth even in the winters of this northern valley. She spoke of the queen’s mageguard—chosen from birth among loyal vassals, tempered by the flame, and holding two ideals at heart.” Argrave raised his hand, counting as he listed them. “Protect the queen... and protect her people. And this woman spoke of how they died to the last against the forces of Vasquer.”

Vasilisa blinked quickly then looked off to the side, obviously hiding tears. She grabbed a new flagon and drank it all, then set it down quietly. “What does it matter?” she questioned, her voice hoarse. “My

mother was the last queen. My sister has a brain tumor, and though it can be cured, all those capable of such a feat would wring us of our last coins. We have an obligation to the people—if my sister is cured, we couldn't afford to feed them. All of the queen's guard died, as you said. Those you would have us fight against possess all of what we once owned."

Quiet set in as the Magister opened her heart up. Anneliese leaned in, almost a mirror of Vasilisa's emotions, and said, "The people live, and the people remember. And even if you disbelieve that claim... no one succeeds if they content themselves with defeat."

"You seek the flame both for the people of this city and your sister," Argrave said. "I think that's clear."

The Magister looked back. "Yes. And?"

"People that honor their obligations are few and far between," Argrave nodded. "I greatly respect that."

"Respect my ass," she shook her head and fixed her blonde hair behind her ear. "I don't do what I do for respect."

Galamon chuckled, and Argrave briefly turned his head at the unexpected noise. Before long he turned back, continuing, "...but honor can blind you to a lot of opportunities you have at your disposal," he said, pushing past her comment.

"That's not a bad thing. I'd rather die than do something against my principles. If that's what you're suggesting..." the Magister's eyes focused on him.

"Of course not," Argrave leaned back in the chair. "Fact of the matter is, though... people like Magister Ivan will piss on your honor. They'll exploit your integrity, and the only thing they'll feel is disdain... disdain that you're so gullible, so easy to use and abuse. He thinks you're lesser than him."

Her jaw clenched tight, and she took a slow drink of alcohol once again.

"Silvaden does not try and offend," Anneliese quickly soothed. "This is merely to raise a point, Magister Vasilisa."

Her words did unwind the tense Magister a bit, and so Argrave continued, "And the worst part of all this? After his betrayal... after he let Quadreign fall to Vasquer, after he stole the Flame of the Tenebrous Star from your house... what do people view him as? Not a traitor, not a thief, not a callous usurper... but rather, they view him as Margrave Ivan. They view him as a man not to be trifled with. He's just the winner."

Vasilisa's jaw tightened once again... but her eyes dipped downwards from Argrave's, growing distant and introspective.

"Sanora..." Argrave put his hand on Anneliese's shoulder. "She's right. If you content yourself with defeat before you try... I don't need to spell out the results, I should think."

Vasilisa laughed exasperatedly and threw her head back, slouching against her chair. "And what can we do? Four of us? You, maybe A-rank. Her, verging on A-rank, and him..." she threw up her hands in Galamon's direction. "Ivan can match us person for person, spell rank for spell rank, and still have a territory's worth of people at his disposal left over."

Argrave took his hand off Anneliese's shoulder and set it on the table. "I don't think that northern woman I spoke to was particularly unique. I don't think the people, low or small, have genuine affection for Margrave Ivan. His power comes from the throne of Vasquer, not the people. And the throne... it's clearly in no state to protest. Perhaps that king in Relize is justified in what he does."

"Hah," Vasilisa leaned back in, tracing her finger around the rim of her third cup. "Argrave and his coalition of merchant princes playing at war?"

Argrave smiled broadly. "Even still, that man was able to get swords in people's hands. So far as I know, he was not even in the line of succession for the throne. And you? House Quadreign, reputed rulers, heralds of the good days of Quadreign? That cause has much more legitimacy than his, I should think."

Vasilisa took a deep breath and sighed, eyes wide in reluctant realization as she acknowledged that his point had some merit. "I wouldn't... know where to begin," she admitted.

Argrave nodded. "People with honor generally don't. But... as it so happens... I've gotten a fair bit of experience in this sort of thing. I can't say I've made no mistakes, but I've learned as much from each one." He clasped his hands together. "If you agree, we could leave Quadreign by the morrow, head to wherever this Ivan might be. From there, I'd be able to figure out where we might begin."

Vasilisa looked at Argrave and his two companions in turn. Then, she took another drink. "My mother taught me to be careful about how I answer strangely forward men when I've been drinking. Give me the night to decide."

Argrave nodded and gathered his coat as he prepared to stand. "If you want my cards laid out plainly, I have a vested interest in getting the Flame of the Tenebrous Star returned to you quickly. I can't really afford to wait a year. And... your sister... can she? Well, never mind," he shook his head. "I've made my pitch. The decision is yours."

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"...bandit forces were grouped up and herded by our armies. Upon this scourge being driven into core territories, much infighting broke out until they largely consolidated. In light of this, Count Pomten surrendered his fortress to our army and allowed us to suppress what remained in tandem with his forces, lest his land be turned into scorched earth. In other words, the soldiers are off to a stellar start," Elenore summarized, wearing a black dress and a golden blindfold over her missing eyes. "We have a base of operations that serves as a foothold into the north, a cooperative ally, and a good example of what surrendering can bring to Argrave's would-be enemies. I suspect we'll be largely unimpeded until we reach this place... Castle Cookpot, located in a valley."

Leopold nodded while looking over the map of Vasquer. "You say stellar start... I say that all the patricians are breathing down my neck, wanting to speak to Argrave."

Durran stepped in, presently armored in his wyvern scale. "Any matters they have, Princess Elenore can handle," he reminded the patrician.

"You think I haven't said as much?" Leopold shook his head. "Where is he? Why can I no longer speak to him? Is he even *in* Relize anymore?"

"He spoke to you before he went into hiding," Elenore reminded him. "After Traugott—"

“Yes, yes, he was nearly killed, and he’s at risk. So were those soldiers,” Leopold planted his finger upon the recently captured fort on the map. “Nearly each and every patrician has a stake in this war, yet the head of our operations isn’t open to communication.” The old man shook his head. “I feel for His Majesty, I do. But... it makes one wonder, simply put. Indeed, certain people wonder why some of their men have died. Why... and for whom,” he finished.

Leopold stared at Elenore as she stood passively, his gaze unflinching on her golden blindfold.

Finally, the patrician looked away. “I’ve said what I wanted to say... and now I have an appointment with my wife,” Leopold scoffed the word ‘appointment.’ “The woman is quite demanding. I’ll be off. But all said, I don’t think this matter is going away.”

The leader of Relize walked to the door, opening it and leaving swiftly. Once it was shut, Durran clicked his tongue.

“Happy marriage,” he noted.

“‘It’ll all work out,’ you said,” Elenore turned her head towards him, removing the golden blindfold around her head and ruffling her hair. “Do you still have that optimism after that conversation?”

“Optimism? I’m the wrong person to say that to. I just trust you can handle things, no matter what,” Durran said plainly, eyes fixed on her eyeless sockets.

“Well...” Elenore crossed her arms then hurriedly turned her head away. “The patricians wonder why they fight? I think we can give them ‘why.’ I think it’s well past time that our investors received some returns.”

Durran leaned on the table. “Yeah? How so? Planning to put some of that influence you have to good use?”

“No,” Elenore shook her head, turning back around. “There’s money in war. A gruesome trade, but there’s a reason Felipe grew so wealthy.” She came to sit on the table just beside Durran. “I’ve never had a position like this where I could so directly influence matters. It leads to new opportunities. None can complain if they’re well-compensated for their losses under the name of the king... certainly not Relizeans.”

Durran lifted his head up from the map and turned to her, face a foot away from hers. “Well... one detail’s missing. The money’s from the king... and his regent.”

Elenore grew still for a moment, and the only noise in the room was faint breathing. Then, her hand clenched around the golden blindfold she held, and she stood and stepped away.

“Can’t forget your role in this,” Durran continued. “People have to come to respect your position as regent. You have to show your hand. It’ll make the future easier.”

“...you’re right, yes,” Elenore admitted. “To that end... I need to increase my presence in Relize. There’s someone I want you to check out... details can come later, but I know you’re reliable and can take care of it. After you do, we can start bringing things to heel, maximizing the war effort in our favor.”

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Chapter 292: Lord of the March

A knock came at the door to the guest house, and Galamon stepped away to answer it. Once he did, Vasilisa stood on the other side. She looked about the room and then declared, "I won't act unless I'm confident in what you plan to do."

Argrave had been reviewing some of his writing in his notebook about Llewellen's lecture on the dwarven musical cube. He closed the book, rose to his feet, and stated, "That was rather prompt. Not as though that's a bad thing, of course. I don't think confidence in my plan is going to be a problem, unless you're someone who is unusually timid. I made it this far."

The blonde Magister shook her head. "I don't get your optimism, Silvaden. I do hope it's worth more than just words. They're all you've given me thus far—promises that Ivan stole the flame, promises that we can take it back, promises that we can beat the Magister in his own territory..." Vasilisa trailed off as she spotted Argrave putting a backpack over his shoulder. "Are you... already packed?"

Argrave nodded. "Well, I was rather optimistic about your answer. And would you look at that? I was right." He smiled broadly. "I think you can take that as a sign of what's to come."

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They traversed back over the mountains outside Quadreign on foot. It was a harsh journey and the steep climb brought Argrave close to exhaustion. By this point, it was obvious Vasilisa had some regard for their abilities, for she did not slow her pace at all for any reason. Her regard was warranted, though, for they kept pace all of the way.

Beyond a certain point, the road levelled out. There was a small village they passed by that had a stables—though they briefly contemplated buying horses, none of the ones they had were large enough to accommodate the sheer size of either Galamon or Argrave.

And so, with nothing but determination, they travelled the roads south. Eventually, the North Sea entered into sight once again. There was a settlement in view—not Prenviania, where they had initially docked. No, instead this was a low-lying island just off the coast, a grand tower rising up out of the center of it. Even from a distance, one could see the abundant farmland and the well-constructed homes. It was clearly a place of the wealthy.

"That island... it's called First Hope. Ivan makes his home in that tower," Vasilisa pointed. "It was constructed in the same manner as the Tower of the Gray Owl by the Order after their organization was permitted access to these lands. Well... you probably haven't seen that, being from Veiden," she considered. "Needless to say, each and every stone is enchanted. The building was meant to withstand earthquakes, storms, magical assaults all.

"The coast," she continued. "It's lined with settlements, each quite wealthy individually. Fishing and trading make them their living. Right there... that's Whiteden. They collect pearls there," she outlined. "Of late, a great deal of spellcasters have made their home on the coast and on the island. This place is secluded enough to allow them to commit to their research and close enough to a center of Order activity to make it ideal for other magically oriented activities." Her eyes wandered. "I can think of half a dozen High Wizards that make their home here. No other place is particularly conducive to the Order."

Argrave could see why. The coast was quite the beautiful place to live. The North Sea, at least in this area, was rather bright blue and beautiful. The pine trees were not so dense as they were elsewhere,

but their snow-covered needles still made an interesting sight. In the far distance, there was a view of ridiculous scale. They were grand towers of wood, so high that it baffled the mind. It seemed a land made for giants placed in a land made for humans.

"Are those... trees?" Anneliese questioned. "There, in the distance. They... make the tower look stunted. They must be hundreds of feet tall."

Vasilisa followed his gaze, then nodded. "Indeed. You see redwood trees. Most call that forest the Bloodwoods. Those lands... they don't belong to Vasquer. They belong to the centaurs and the elves. They were the only peoples able to repel King Felipe III in his conquests. People that wander there seldom return. It's said that giants and worse still roam those woods. Most learned long ago not to test that theory."

"We stray from the subject," Galamon reminded them.

"Vulras is right," Vasilisa agreed. "The point is this: this prosperous territory you see before you? There's much more of it inland, and all of it belongs to Margrave Ivan. Those castles in the mountains..." she pointed them out. "Lords of the local villages, and all sworn to Ivan. Say what you will of loyalty, but know this: contentment beats it out at most every point. Wealthy and happy... what chance do we have of prompting people to break the peace even if the truth should come out?"

"First Hope..." Argrave said the island's name. "Does it bar our kind entry?"

"I don't... I think not. I'd never considered it," the Magister admitted.

"Only one way to find out, isn't there?" Argrave said, stepping forth.

"Hold on a minute," Vasilisa called out. "Should I... I mean, if I come with, Magister Ivan might... every time I enter the city, he insists I visit. The ferrymen all know me."

"Would you normally hide away? He might think things are suspicious if you remain a little reticent," Argrave reminded her. "Tell you what... let's see if we can't get in the city, look around for a bit, perhaps secure lodging... and then we'll go speak to Ivan."

Her brows narrowed, and she said darkly, "Speak to him?"

Anneliese stepped up to the Magister. "Please... try and look at the bigger picture," she urged. "I know it might disgust you to feign ignorance of what he's done to you and your house, but if things go poorly..."

Magister Vasilisa relaxed somewhat, then looked up at Anneliese. "I'm beginning to see how this works. Silvaden says something provocative, and then you soften the blow with sweeter words. Well... fine," she conceded. "I guess we haven't even established that Ivan has our flame. Once again, we've only your promises."

"If that's how you want to look at it, that works for me," Argrave nodded. "So long as you don't accuse him to his face, I don't see the problem. Shall we go?"

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They took a ferry across the sea from a local village. It was a relatively serene ride with none recognizing any of them besides Vasilisa. Argrave rather enjoyed being one nameless face amidst many. Everyone

stared at him because the three of them were tall, but none stared at him because he was king, and that was a welcome reprieve. As Vasilisa predicted, the ferrymen requested that Vasilisa go visit Ivan as soon as she was able.

Despite the fact that three of them were ostensibly snow elves, they were not barred entry from the city. They walked by the farmland on the outer portions of the island, heading towards the denser urban area near Ivan's tower. Once there, Vasilisa led them all to an inn. She went off to her own room, while Argrave and them set up theirs.

As they settled their things in a local inn, Galamon grabbed Argrave's arm and said, "You."

"Me?" Argrave repeated, perplexed. "What's this about?"

"The glass eye... I think it's on a ship in the North Sea," Galamon told him. "And I think it comes here, to this island."

"A ship?" Argrave repeated. "Well, that's... I suppose that could be good for us. That could also be terribly inconvenient," he shook his head. "Keep me posted."

"The bowl... drinking my blood from it..." Galamon left a question unspoken.

Looking at Galamon, Argrave could tell it made him uncomfortable. Galamon hated his vampiric beast, and loathed being better connected to it—the bowl did precisely that.

"I know what the guy who has it looks like," Argrave patted his arm. "If he's coming here... you can lay off. Anneliese and I can find him."

"I see," Galamon nodded. "Thank you."

Giving a curt nod, Argrave resumed what he was doing, but Anneliese spoke to him next.

"Are you certain Vasilisa will accept your plan of action?" Anneliese asked quickly. "I mean... not to be condescending, but it is difficult to see it working."

Argrave considered her point. "I made all of Veiden believe I was an agent of Erlebnis. What's the big gulf between that and this?"

"Fair point," she conceded, releasing him.

"Besides, it's best we speak to Magister Ivan. I want to see if Traugott came by here," he nodded. "If he's come north with that booklet I wrote for Castro, I can think of a few places he might visit. I'm not sure of his intentions... and I'd like to find them out as quickly as I can. Coming here like this gives me a unique opportunity to do so."

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Once their things were settled, Argrave and his companions went downstairs. Vasilisa waited for them there, already with drink in hand. He was starting to realize the game Heroes of Berendar had not done her alcoholism justice. Or maybe it just hadn't existed, there. They walked up to her table.

“Ivan has agreed to having you three come along to our meeting,” Vasilisa said before Argrave even came to stand beside her. “I arranged a conversation under the pretext of a conversation of the debt Quadreign owes. I mentioned you three, and his messenger said it would be no problem.”

“That’s good. When?” Argrave asked, making it to the table.

“Whenever,” she shook her head. “That’s why I drink.”

“Of course,” Argrave said accommodatingly, tapping his fingers against the table to vent his desire to stay moving. “So... when shall we go?”

“When I finish my drink,” she looked at him with cold eyes, as though daring him to protest.

Argrave bit at his lips, choosing his words carefully. “Aren’t you... don’t you have a loose tongue when you’re drunk?”

“Not from one cup,” she shook her head.

Argrave took a deep breath, feeling a bit nervous now.

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With Argrave’s feet growing colder the more brew Vasilisa downed, they did eventually depart from the inn and head for the tower. Unlike most of the other places associated with the Order, this place was a private residence, meaning it did not have the same restrictions that barred non-members from entering within. They were granted entry without a fuss, and quickly boarded the central elevator.

“I’ve never seen something like this,” marveled Argrave as the central stone elevator transported them up the floors of Ivan’s tower. They were packed quite tightly on one platform. He was lying, of course. He was good at that.

“Just enchantments,” Vasilisa said almost idly. “Certainly nothing to gape at.”

The elevator reached the floor that they desired, and the stone platform clicked against the side of the wall before coming to a stop. Vasilisa took a certain step off.

The room on the other side was fairly ostentatious. The great majority of it had been lined with decadent furs and fine fabrics from further south—velvet, cottons, silks, and the like. It made the place seem stuffy visually, yet the inside was quite a pleasant temperature compared to the coldness outside.

Magister Ivan sat on a couch, leaning far back into it. A table straddled his body, both of his arms resting atop it as he read. When Vasilisa entered, he turned his head towards her but did not make to rise. Like many in the north, he had blonde hair and blue eyes. From the look of him, he was rather tall and slim. He wore loose-fitting robes, well-fit for this temperate room of relaxation.

“Margrave Ivan,” Vasilisa greeted stiffly.

“Vasilisa,” he returned. “I thought I told you to call me Ivan?”

“You did,” she admitted.

Ivan chuckled, setting his writing implement down. “These three... your friends, you said?”

"They are," Vasilisa confirmed.

Letting out another laugh, Ivan picked up the table over his body and moved it, delicately balancing the paper and writing implement atop it. He set it on the floor and stood. He seemed to pay the three of them little regard, being interested in only Vasilisa.

"I'm told you came here to talk about Quadreign's debt to me," he said, then raised a finger before Vasilisa could respond. "Before you say anything... I want to offer you something."

Vasilisa frowned. "What?"

"I want to give you an offer to reduce your house's debt," he explained, holding his arms wide. His robes came loose a little, and he quickly corrected that before anything untoward could occur.

"Reduce it? Why? What would I have to do?" Vasilisa frowned.

"A Magister is coming to visit soon," Ivan continued. "Now... I'm not sure of this person's nature. All I'd like for you to do is mention your house's debt while they're present. This person... if it were me, alone, they might get some overambitious ideas. They'll surely get no such greedy mindset if they know I have a Magister under debt."

Argrave took a deep breath, shocked that his gambit to locate Traugott worked out so well. The Magister surely wouldn't recognize Argrave or his companions—he'd never seen them before. Given how Vasilisa and he had interacted... it might pose problems, though. Argrave looked to the Magister. Her jaw was clenched tight. Belatedly, Argrave realized this wasn't about safety at all. Ivan allowed the three of them to come up alongside without issue. All he wanted was to get word of Quadreign's debt to a Magister.

"...who is coming?" Vasilisa questioned.

"Ah, good question." Ivan waved his hand, then stepped away. He walked up to a curtain and then tossed it aside, revealing a desk just beyond. After opening a drawer, he retrieved a paper. "Looks like... ah. I even misremembered it. Must've been because I got another note earlier about Magister Traugott..." Ivan looked up. "Magisters Hegazar and Vera are coming, under the direction of Master Castro himself."

And in moments, Argrave was shocked his gambit worked out so poorly.

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Chapter 293: Avenues of Approach

Magister Traugott, wearing the gray robes given to him by the Order of the Gray Owl, sat atop a parapet on the walls of Dirracha, legs dangling over the side. He peered down at the first level of the multi-segmented city, eyes wandering its streets. It was dark out and the red moon above was barely visible at this time of month. Unless one shined a light upon him, he was all but invisible to all below.

"You," a voice cut in, and Magister Traugott turned his head in surprise.

Orion of Vasquer stood there, looking worn and tired. His long black hair had lost its signature braid and devolved into a messy tangle atop his head, and his beard grew longer by the day. His gray eyes were firm, though, and they watched Traugott with every willingness to kill.

"Who are you?" Orion asked, voice cutting above the wind of the high altitude.

Traugott lifted his legs and slowly turned his body around. "Me? I am only a scholar with an interest that has revitalized me," he answered.

"You are more. We both know this," Orion responded, stepping forth. "If you cannot answer... you must leave."

"For now, a scholar is all I am," Traugott stubbornly refused. "I came here..." he jumped off the parapet he sat upon. "...because I heard the great serpent beneath this city has knowledge. She has answers to some of my questions."

Orion did not look pleased, but neither did he rush to attack Traugott. "Who told you this?"

"Princess Elenore," Traugott said, flashing a smile with white teeth.

"Elenore?" Orion repeated cautiously. "...my sister? What did she say to you?"

"That the reason the king knew what he did... of Gerechtigkeits, of the coming calamity... was because of Vasquer," Traugott outlined earnestly, stepping towards Orion. "I could not find the king. He was absent. So... I came here, to another thing that has drawn my interest."

Orion's tension finally dispelled somewhat, and he told Traugott coldly, "Vasquer speaks only to her descendants. Even were that not the case... I am uneasy having one who offers such dubious answers so close. Who are you?"

"Magister Traugott of the Order of the Gray Owl," the man answered, almost begrudgingly.

"A Magister..." Orion acknowledged, his wariness returning. "I killed one of yours outside these city walls. I don't trust your ilk, your political motivations..."

"Good prince..." Traugott shook his head. "You have forgotten one detail of this conversation. I know about Gerechtigkeits," he said, spreading his arms out. "As do you. Why would I ever seek to do harm? That would be an unreasonable conclusion. The calamity is coming, and most wouldn't dare risk strife in such... dire times." Traugott smiled.

Orion gave a steady nod after a time. "Even still... what are you here for, then?"

Traugott stepped up to the parapets of the wall, then placed one foot atop it. Leaning an elbow on his knee, he said, "You claim I cannot communicate with Vasquer... which is sad if true," Traugott admitted. "...but who says I cannot? We have not tried, my prince. And even then..." Traugott turned to Orion, his dark eyes lingering on him. "I have other reasons to stay in this city."

"I see no reason to let you stay," Orion decided. "I cannot risk any danger. You are a foreign element. I cannot allow myself to be swayed. I know the righteous path."

Traugott pursed his lips. "Even if I can offer reprieve from the voices of the gods?"

Orion stepped forward, the power in his gait seeming to rock the great wall they stood upon. "Do you know the consequences of that statement?"

"I do, prince Orion. You are another interest of mine," Traugott admitted, backing away a step. "Until you have tried it, you cannot deny the enticement, can you? I believe you suffer. From how I hear your royal knights speak, I believe that it is a reasonable conclusion. You have turned against the gods, haven't you? But what is a god?"

Orion paused, staring down Traugott. Then, he clenched his fist. "Begone."

"You are the prince," Traugott conceded, holding his hands up. "But if your mind should sway... I'll return soon."

Traugott's shadow whirled, and he fell into it, heading into the terrifying Shadowlands. Here, no sight, no sound, no sense existed—yet Traugott fumbled, seeking an exit like a man pounding against ice from below. Something told him of things lurking beyond, and the supposedly powerful Magister felt as though a great leviathan of this ocean of shadows sought to eat him alive.

And then... he reappeared on the mortal world, near the bottom of the wall of Dirracha. He spared a glance upwards.

"Your gods serve more than just you," Traugott said, then stepped away from the wall.

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As Argrave's brain was whirling, operating under the pretense that Hegazar and Vera might strut through the elevator any minute, Vasilisa asked a very reasonable question.

"When will these two be coming?" Vasilisa watched Ivan as he put the paper back in the drawer and slid it shut.

"I'm not sure. They might not come at all..." Ivan said, walking back to them. "Considering Traugott didn't, that might even be the expected outcome. All I need is for you to come by when they do. If you stay close at hand, it won't be a problem. Perhaps you can stay in my tower? Certainly, there is ample lodging. This place is ridiculously large..." the blonde Magister said, his tone verging on bragging.

Argrave very nearly breathed a loud sigh of relief. The Magisters' arrival wasn't imminent. That gave them some breathing room to figure out what, exactly, they could do about the arrival of Vera and Hegazar. Wait it out, perhaps? No, Argrave reasoned. Castro had sent Traugott to inform the other Magisters about Gerechtigkeits and have them return to the Tower to confirm support of Argrave's claim to the throne. That meant that after they talked to Ivan, they would come to Vasilisa.

It seemed a confrontation was inevitable. Everyone else could be easily fooled... but Hegazar and Vera both would surely recognize Argrave by face alone—if not him, then the two others alongside him. To say the least, they didn't have forgettable faces or statures.

"Can you give me some time to think about it?" Vasilisa responded amicably. "I'll return to my inn."

"Inn? Come now..." Ivan held his arms out. "It's truly no trouble for you to stay here. Your friends are welcome just as well," he said, for the first time looking upon Argrave and the rest of them. "Separate quarters can be arranged for them."

"My things are in the inn," Vasilisa said.

"So bring them," Ivan insisted. "Come now... you can't insult me," he said, tone somewhat low.

Vasilisa stared at Ivan, expression tense. Argrave finally contributed, "She's hesitant to agree because of us. We agreed to meet someone at the inn. They're expecting us to be there," he explained. "Vasilisa simply doesn't wish to leave us behind to meet with this man alone."

Ivan pursed his lip, then tapped one finger against his leg as he stared down Argrave. "Well, fine. But once that's done?"

"Of course we'll accept your offer," Vasilisa seized the opportunity Argrave offered. "You've made a lovely home for yourself here. I would be remiss to lodge here."

Ivan smiled brightly. "Wonderful. I'm looking forward to it."

#####

I'm indebted to Hegazar, but Vera is surely going to want to eat my spleen. What exactly does this mean? Why are they coming together? Argrave's brain asked a lot of questions, but few answers were given. Though Argrave wished to immediately return to privacy with Anneliese and Galamon and discuss what, exactly, they were going to do about the two coming...

"Good gods," Vasilisa fumed as they walked the streets. "Now that I know... every word that comes out of that slug's mouth is like poison. I want to crush him like a bug."

Though Argrave was amply distracted, he still managed, "I thought you said it wasn't proven."

"I don't need proof," she said. "Just looking at him... just the reasoning of it all, it all makes sense." She crossed her arms as they walked. "Everything he does, everything he says: it's all measured for personal benefit. He wants me to show proof of debt to two Magisters, wants me to stay in his home to show relations between his house and Quadreign are strong... it's all calculated. For the flame to be in his hands makes too much sense."

"Still..." Anneliese said. "Finding proof would be the best way to go about things."

"But how?" Vasilisa said, frustrated.

"The Flame of the Tenebrous Star has to be stored somewhere," Argrave pointed out. "I know a few methods I might utilize to find out where it could be hiding away. Problem is..." he stopped on the street, just ahead of Vasilisa. "It seems he's going to be keeping a close eye on you. He wants you for this meeting."

Vasilisa considered that, and then nodded. "I know. But it isn't as though you two can go about snooping on your own—that's just as eye-catching. And... we're losing the plot. I don't see any avenue of attack," she said, somewhat hopelessly.

"Don't you?" Argrave raised a brow. "Two Magisters come to the city... evidently, Magisters that concern Ivan."

Vasilisa narrowed her eyes. "What are you suggesting?"

“Maybe it’s best that we get ahead of this meeting,” Argrave clasped his hands together. “We have time. I’m not sure how much, but it’s time—time that can be spent planning, looking for opportunities. Maybe, just maybe, these Magisters will be more a windfall than a hindrance.”

Argrave felt he might be going mad... but if there was a way to swing this in their favor, a way to meet with Hegazar and Vera before Vasilisa? Presumably, they came because of Gerechtigkeits—that was why Traugott had been sent. Well... Argrave already owed Hegazar. He had a debt to Vera, too, though that was one of revenge. What could entice them?

“Alright,” Vasilisa said. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 294: Debt of Blood

“You’re sure this will work?” asked Vasilisa as she sat on one of the beds in their inn’s room.

Anneliese held the Starsparrow atop her finger. “It is most certainly our best bet of finding the two Magisters ahead of time. What else could we do? Ask questions around the city? They have not yet arrived, so that would be a pointless endeavor. You cannot call upon any friends that might know, yes?” Anneliese questioned.

Vasilisa slowly gave a begrudging nod. “Alright. I suppose it is a reasonable way of going about things. Still... I think it’s far-fetched this will work, to be frank.”

Argrave looked to Anneliese, nodding. “I trust Sanora. She’s very good at finding things with that bird of hers.”

Or rather, ‘Sanora’ could get word to Elenore’s people with this bird of hers. Argrave didn’t know how Vera and Hegazar would be travelling. The sole time they’d travelled with the two in the past, they’d done so with a spell of Vera’s designed to traverse long distances. If that was the case once again... well, then their whole plan might crumble. But would Vera do such a thing again while travelling with Hegazar, presumably alone? More importantly, why exactly *was* she with Hegazar?

Questions bred more questions but seldom offered answers. The only thing left to do was the doing.

While Anneliese was preoccupied with that, Vasilisa, Argrave, and Galamon devoted their attention to another matter occupying them: thwarting Ivan. The Magister sought to illustrate a point, and so took the two of them walking through the city.

They stepped through a busy marketplace where people sold many commodities gathered from the coastal villages. The city on First Hope was remarkably flat. The water served as natural defenses, so no walls had been erected. One could often see for many miles in the same direction. To say the least of the place, it was thriving. First Hope contained the majority of the arable land in the entirety of the North, despite being a small and isolated island.

“You see?” Vasilisa commented as they stared down at a stall, far out of earshot for anyone. “They sell pearls here, Silvaden. Pearls. People have grown old, gotten fat off fish and caviar, and remain satisfied and rich underneath the reign of Magister Ivan. Let it not be said, at the very least, that Felipe III was not generous after his betrayal. All of Ivan’s territories are the richest in the north. What could possibly change the status quo here?”

“...and we already established you didn’t care for worsening people’s lives to get them to rebel, yes,” Argrave agreed readily.

Vasilisa glanced around uneasily when Argrave said the word ‘rebel,’ obviously not entirely at ease with the notion. “So? Then, what?”

“In the end... all power is a hierarchy,” Argrave said with authority, watching that stall of pearls even still. “Patriarch Dras, for instance. He conquered all of the tribes of Veiden and unified our people into one cohesive nation. Yet even still... even still, he’s one man. He delegates tasks to a select few underneath him. Like this, his power is divided and vested into those directly beneath him. These men further divide their power to yet more subordinates. Like this... a hierarchy,” Argrave illustrated with his hands, forming a pyramid. “Right, Vulras?”

After skipping a beat because he was unused to the alias, Galamon nodded. “It’s true. Vasquer grants more power to fewer than Veiden does, though. Most chiefs retain a great deal of power in... *our* land.”

Vasilisa crossed her arms, nodding steadily. “Your point being?”

“The person selling those pearls...” Argrave said, watching them with one hand beneath his chin. “They’re at the base of this hierarchy. It isn’t them we should be talking to. It’s the ones higher up.” Argrave focused his gaze down on Vasilisa. “Not the person selling the pearls, not the people collecting them, but the people who own the pearl... farms, I suppose would be the word. A coup d’état is what I’m talking about. We need a small, coordinated group of powerful people to oust Ivan, not a large group of uncoordinated revolutionaries. As you said, the people are content... but they’re not loyal to Ivan. They won’t bat an eye if he goes under, so long as things aren’t disrupted for them.”

The Magister gazed at Argrave for a long time. Then, her eyes wandered to the pearl stall. By this point, the woman who owned the stall seemed quite uncomfortable at being so blatantly watched.

“...what exactly did you do for Veiden? What was your role there?” Vasilisa finally asked, evidently ill at ease with how easily he came to his conclusion.

Argrave laughed, rubbing at his upper lip. “Well... the patriarch didn’t conquer every tribe through battle alone. I have certain specialties.”

Galamon frowned and disagreed, “Dras is an honorable man.”

“And the Ambers? What was that, then?” Argrave rebutted, recalling the story of Anneliese’s past. Her mother’s husband had betrayed his tribe’s chief to seek revenge. The betrayal was Dras’ scheme, and came to fruition because of his scheming.

The elven vampire grew silent without a rebuttal. Vasilisa glanced between the two of them, clearly hesitant to get engaged in this discussion. The sounds of the marketplace washed over them.

“If I were to suggest something, we need to start integrating ourselves—no, rather, integrating *you* with local powers,” Argrave pointed, diverting things back to the subject. “I think... provided you can follow instructions well, something I don’t doubt...” Argrave rubbed his hands together, pondering. “I think you can get all of what you want. You can find where the Flame of the Tenebrous Star is, and you can prepare to take it back in the same fell swoop. All you need is a pretense to reach out to them. And we already have it: your debt.”

Vasilisa furrowed her brows. "House Quadreign's debt, you mean."

"Yes," Argrave nodded. "Let's say... if House Quadreign had a way to repay their debt in full... a new mine, perhaps, or something else of similar value..." Argrave spread his arms. "I can work with that."

"We don't," Vasilisa answered.

"Not yet," Argrave agreed. "But they don't need to know that. You can consider it a risky loan, of sorts, with the prospect of repaying your debt and regaining your flame in one fell swoop." Vasilisa looked at Argrave blankly, clearly skeptical. "I'm not denying it's going to be a complex beast to navigate. But I've learned from what I've done in the past. I'm confident in juggling this."

Between things in Sethia, Jast, and the months of experience in Relize of politicking, Argrave had learned a lot. He'd learned from Leopold and Elenore both, and he'd learned from his own experiences negotiating with the various patricians as king. This? Argrave had to try it. He wanted to. He knew a great deal of the powerful people in First Hope.

Above all, Argrave couldn't deny that seeing Quadreign had been a somewhat profound experience. To see Diana and Vasilisa's selflessness even in the face of their personal tragedy, and to see how their territory had declined since Vasquer conquered the land... he loathed seeing them taken advantage of without any recourse. He felt in his bones that restoring them to power was the best hope for the future of this land. He wanted people like Vasilisa at the helm in the future coming to this world.

"...why do you do so much?" the Magister placed her hand on her hip. "A vague hope for Sanora's magic advancement?"

"Is that so strange?" Argrave answered.

Her blue eyes narrowed. She pursed her lips, appearing to debate mentioning something. Going cold as steel once her mind was made, her gaze jumped between the two of them. Vasilisa said plainly, "I know who you are. *What* you are."

Argrave's composure went from fully relaxed to utterly strained in a heartbeat. Magister Vasilisa watched, silent and still, waiting for a response.

"...and what might that be?" Argrave asked, dreading the answer.

Vasilisa stared at Argrave for what seemed to be time eternal. Then, her eyes shifted to Galamon. "He's a vampire." Her gaze came back to Argrave. "And that's why you seek the flame."

Argrave's mind went blank for a solid ten seconds. The sounds of the marketplace muffled out all that came to mind, the distant chattering of people and wheeling of barrows washing over them like a flood. Beside him, Galamon tensed. Magister Vasilisa remained only still and silent, just as she was before.

"If that were true, what happens?" Argrave asked, still in disbelief at the unexpected turn.

Vasilisa looked off to the side, thinking. "Will it work? Will the flame cure him?" she questioned.

Argrave swallowed, choosing his words carefully. "I don't know," he said.

And he didn't, truthfully. Maybe it would. He didn't plan to test the theory.

The Magister looked at him. “You had best hope it does.”

Argrave said nothing. Was that a threat? He wasn’t sure.

“I hope I won’t need to mention this again,” Vasilisa continued. “I hope it never comes up.”

“It won’t,” Argrave promised.

Vasilisa gave a curt nod. “Let’s get back.”

#####

A boat rocked steadily across the sea in the clear weather. It was a huge ship designed to carry passengers and cargo both in massive amounts. In a seaside cot, a man sat with a very particular posture. His legs were crossed, his back was straight, and his hands gripped the pommel of two blades sheathed horizontally on his back. The blades were made for chopping, being short, curved, and especially wide at the point.

The man was tall and lean with skin the color of light honey. His hair seemed like gold stretched into thin threads and was kept bound in a high ponytail longer than his own body. His eyes were wholly red, the only variance from that being the black dot fixed on the center. He kept those eyes fixed firmly forward on something enshrined before him.

The shrine was a simple thing—four metal discs that converged to hold up a small crystal ball, candles of red wax just beside them. But then, close scrutiny would reveal that the ball wasn’t just that—it was a glass eye. Yet the eye moved strangely, darting about like a compass needle seeking north with the rocking of the ship. It jumped between two targets—whenever it chose one, the eye’s color changed. At times, it had a white iris. At others, it had a blue. Whenever its iris became white, it fixed on the direction the ship headed.

“What a bizarre specimen,” came a male voice.

The man turned his head. There, a woman with gray hair and orange eyes and a bald man stood side-by-side, looking within his room from the window.

“What do you suppose he’s doing?” the woman questioned, making no effort to disguise their gawking.

“Some fetishistic ritual, perhaps,” the bald man mused.

The man rose to his feet in smooth motions, then stepped to the window. The two on the other side didn’t look bothered by this, staring back with amused smiles. The man quickly pulled shut the curtains, then stepped away. Beyond, the pair outside mumbled something about his cowardice.

The man sighed, brushing aside some of his hair. It revealed dominant elven ears. Jewelry hung from them: pearls at first glance, but they were truly teeth—very long and very sharp teeth, bundled in pairs. The elf glanced at the glass eye once again, watching as its iris grew white. He grabbed his blades once more, perhaps to reassure himself.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 295: The Spurned

In the days to come, Argrave amply demonstrated the fragility of Ivan's hold over the region to Vasilisa.

From the outside looking in, a fortress might seem unassailable. From the inside, one could see the deficiencies the outside hid. Ivan was lord of all the wealthy lands of the north. And yet... the things that he had done did not pass unnoticed, and his manner of rule paled in comparison to Quadreign significantly. Vasquer was shattered, and people took note of that. And lastly, a lord's vassals often mirrored their lord. Ivan was an opportunist and so surrounded himself with the like-minded.

Argrave first made mental notes of who he recalled being prominent in First Hope. Once these were established, he offered vagaries to Vasilisa suggesting places they might check out—it was just an excuse to confirm that things were as Argrave remembered. Though it wasn't easy to get in contact with these prominent people, everyone knew who had the power on the island: all they had to do was ask around.

In many cases, they were just the same as Argrave's memory. For instance, Margravine Sophia, née Drawnwater. She was the estranged wife of the margrave who lived on an estate outside Ivan's tower. She maintained a prominent position in the aristocratic social world which Ivan refused to take part in. That prominence lent her cousin Pavel of Drawnwater significant mercantile clout. He had a monopoly over luxury goods because Sophia ensured all would-be buyers went to him first.

Ivan and Sophia's marriage remained childless—a point of heated contention between husband and wife. With the right poison to an already strained relationship... with the right assurances from a third party... to say the least, Argrave didn't need to spell out the plan to Vasilisa. Though he'd need to speak to the margravine to be sure, Argrave believed these two could form the cornerstone of their faction.

Beyond that pair, there were many others. The margrave's knight-commander handled most military matters, as Ivan had no interest and no expertise in the matter. The mayor of First Hope handled the entirety of the city—administration, taxes, tolls, the city guard, and tariffs. He was in close contact with the margravine. On top of that, there were the many nobles swearing fealty to Ivan. They controlled the dependent settlements on the coast. Many of them were part of the aforementioned aristocratic social world dominated by the margravine—if not them personally, most had relatives involved.

Vasilisa and Argrave sat alone in their inn late at night. The magister was enjoying a drink as she often did. Galamon was out, refilling his flasks of blood.

"By now, I think things should be clear to you," Argrave told her as he tapped his fingers on the table.

"You've all but said it—most things link back to the margravine," she shook her head. "I still don't see a way she can help us, beyond giving more insight as to where my house's flame might be."

"Let's see if we can't talk to her. This is where that link of yours comes in—I think we can leverage the idea of something profitable in Quadreign to arrange a meeting with Pavel, and then in turn the margravine. Provided she's trustworthy, that whatever we talk about won't reach the margrave... I think we have our in," Argrave spread his hands out on the table.

Vasilisa bit at her lip. "I'm not exactly comfortable with the idea of promising something I don't have. Now that I know why you're trying to get the flame, I don't doubt your genuine commitment. Even still..."

Argrave nodded, thinking of alternatives. Then... it felt like a moment of genius had come to him.

"Do you have any friends you might call upon? People that would be willing to go above and beyond... or perhaps someone who owes you a favor? Someone very wealthy?" Argrave asked, leading her to a conclusion.

Vasilisa looked down into her empty cup. "...I do. Unfortunately."

Argrave asked with a blank face, "What does that mean?"

"The person in question is somewhat unsavory. And she's close to the claimant king, Argrave," Vasilisa said bitterly. "But... she does owe me a favor. Owes my house a favor, to be specific."

"Is that so?" Argrave raised his brow. "Where's the problem?"

Vasilisa raised both her hands to her temples and massaged. "I had hoped to avoid involving external powers in this..."

Argrave remained silent for a few moments, choosing his words carefully. "Frankly put, involving external powers might just be the thing that can unite the powers here easiest." Argrave placed his elbow on the table and rested his head on his hand.

Vasilisa squeezed her head tight, and then fixed her blonde hair back. "...I'll do it. But only once I know for certain that my house's flame is actually here."

Argrave gave a nod, suppressing his happiness. He had been deliberating how to tie their endeavors here to their base of power in Relize, and now it had come to him.

"Once Sanora's bird isn't tied up, she can deliver a message within the day," Argrave informed her. "For now, let's focus on arranging things with the margravine."

#####

After discussing a few more things with Vasilisa, Argrave returned to their shared room to find Anneliese pacing about. As soon as he opened the door, her head whipped to him. She stepped to the door and shut it quickly so their conversation could not be heard.

"You return. Vera and Hegazar made harbor on a passenger ship some time ago," Anneliese declared at once in a quiet, frantic tone. "I managed to get a message to them in hopes of arranging a meeting, but I cannot be sure how effective it will be. Hegazar concealed the both of them with an illusion once he received the message, and I could not follow them further. You know both of their personalities better than I do, and I am unconfident in turning their heads as easily as you—"

"Relax," Argrave said at once, placing his hand on her shoulder. "You said you arranged a meeting?"

"Yes," she confirmed, taking a breath. "I mentioned the living fortress to draw their attention. I could think of only one place in such short order—the ferry we landed here on. It was secluded enough, but far from town. Would they go to such a place?"

Argrave ground his teeth together, stepping towards their room's open window and peering out. "Only one way to find out, isn't there?"

“But Galamon is still out...” Anneliese pointed out, hesitant.

“Galamon can find us,” Argrave turned. “He’s steadfast. For now, I need to know these two on our side. Twisted though they might be, Castro has persuaded them of Gerechtigkeits existence—that must make them more willing to help.” Argrave took a deep breath, calming himself. “Vasilisa drank a lot, so I imagine that she’ll be going to sleep for certain. So... let’s go.”

#####

Galamon walked through the streets of First Hope. He never liked to return immediately after he’d finished filling his flasks of blood. It felt like there was some part of him that needed to be exercised until it calmed... though, perhaps ‘exorcised’ was the more fitting description. It had been a long time since he’d last killed while feeding and today had been no exception, yet the self-resentment remained no matter how he got his blood.

In sizable cities like this one, he preyed on the drunk or the beggars. He would knock them unconscious in a secluded area, then cut precisely to drain their blood into flasks. He never used his fangs—he hated doing so. Though he loathed admitting it, he had grown rather skilled at draining the unwitting of their vitality without harming them seriously.

Galamon found himself in one such secluded place: an alleyway, devoid of any but rats. He was feeling his mind begin to calm from the act, and so tried to remind himself of what he should do. It was time to return, his head clear.

A noise from above spurred Galamon to turn. He narrowly avoided something whizzing through the air towards his head. It sunk into the stone wall of the alleyway. Yet another projectile came just as quickly, this time grazing his helmet. He spotted two thin wires tied to each projectile. They quickly closed in around his neck.

Galamon grabbed the Giantkillers at his waist and raised them to the wires, catching them both. They sparked with hostile magic, yet the nigh-indestructible daggers resisted ably. Galamon was glad his instincts had not failed him, for he was certain his hands and gauntlets could not resist whatever these wires were made of.

After freeing himself of the precarious position between the wires, Galamon looked to who’d thrown those projectiles. They’d avoided even his senses. Something sounded behind him—a rock hitting stone—and Galamon pretended to be fooled by what he perceived as a distraction. On cue, a foe stepped out of shadows at another point, swinging a wide curved blade towards his neck.

Galamon whipped around, elbowing the flat of the coming blade to redirect it. His foe took the hit, arm reeling backwards from the tremendous impact. The assailant had another identical blade in his second hand, though, and it struck out towards Galamon’s stomach. He tried to dodge the blade by leaning backwards, yet the blade still met him. The royal-forged armor stood strong, though. The sword glanced off the armor with a spark of magic and a loud *clang*, leaving behind a sizable dent.

Seizing the opportunity, Galamon thrust out the Giantkiller in his other hand. His foe was agile—remarkably so—and managed to duck away. Undeterred, Galamon stepped forward, slamming his boot on the ground hard enough to shatter the road. He’d been aiming for his foe’s foot but managed only to

graze his boot. Still, the glancing blow did set his foe off balance. Galamon crouched low, then lunged forward with another stab.

At the last moment, the attacker pulled on the wires once again which remained bound to his arms. He pulled himself to the side, dodging Galamon's deadly thrust. The would-be assassin rolled gracefully, coming to a stop just beside his thrown projectiles. He yanked the items—Galamon saw they were strange, barbed throwing knives—free of the stone, and then wrapped them back around his wrists.

Galamon prepared for more combat, sizing up his foe. Whoever it was wore pitch black light armor, and the only detail visible was the man's eyes—they were wholly red. The man rose to his feet, jumped up, and climbed up the alleyway with uncanny speed. Galamon briefly considered giving chase, but then decided now would be the best time to get away just as his opponent. Both fled, leaving no witnesses other than the two of them.