

Jackal 296

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 296: Calling All Cars

A window jerked open quietly on the second floor of an inn, and then someone slid into the room: a man armored in black. Someone else occupying the room sat up anxiously at the sudden entrance yet let out a sigh of relief when she laid eyes on the person. She threw off her sheets and rose to her feet.

“You’re supposed to look out windows, and walk out doors, Ganbaatar. When will you do things normally?” she said, wreathing herself in the discarded sheets.

Ganbaatar stumbled a little, coming to lean up against the wall. “When the term ‘normal’ applies to me.”

As he slouched down and pulled off his boot, the woman stepped up to him with brows furrowed in concern. In the light, one could see her blonde hair and sharp blue eyes. She knelt down just as she wrenched his boot off. One of his toes had been completely crushed.

“You searched the vampire out, didn’t you?” she said, voice sharp as a whip.

“I found him, actually. He had white irises—the eye was as helpful as ever,” Ganbaatar countered with a pained voice, pulling off the black wrappings around his head to reveal his golden-thread hair and elven ears. “He was alone. I took my chances.”

“And lost, from what I see,” the woman knelt down.

“Svetlana...” Ganbaatar trailed off. “I surprised him. I took him off guard. Even despite that... I only barely avoided death thrice. Now... now he knows.”

Svetlana held her hand out, a magic matrix swirling before her hand. Slowly, his crushed toe began to regain some of its structure. Once it was done, she lowered her hand. “Had I come with you, this would not have happened. Had you allowed me to help, *this would not have happened.*”

Ganbaatar flexed his toes, then rebutted, “You don’t know these fiends as I do. I left the sacred forests of my people to hunt them down. The glass eye—”

“I wish you’d never found the damn thing,” Svetlana shook her head and rose to her feet. “The past two months since you’ve gotten it, all you’ve done is seek out those it displays.”

Ganbaatar looked away. “I won’t ask you to continue on if you don’t want to.”

“All I wish is for there to be a reason you brought me along, Ganbaatar,” she said, blue eyes fixing on his own. “My aunt is a Magister of the Order of the Gray Owl, and I heard tell that she’s here, visiting with Margrave Ivan. What’s more, vampirism is illegal within all the cities of Vasquer. You need not go about this alone.”

“But I—”

“Could you beat him?” Svetlana interrupted. “You surprised him, and yet you lost.”

Ganbaatar seemed to debate that internally. “No. I don’t think I could, especially not if he’s alert, now.”

“Is he recognizable? Any distinguishing features?” Svetlana pressed.

Ganbaatar laughed. “It’s harder to forget him. A great hulk of a man, taller than me by two heads. He had elven ears... though he could not be of pure elven blood. Perhaps he is one of the offshoots, those born outside the sacred forest...”

“Then we go to my aunt. Failing that, we seek out the margrave,” Svetlana declared.

“Innocent people may die,” Ganbaatar disagreed. “We cannot involve the uninvolved: this is the first principle taught in the Sunscourge Monastery. This vampire is not an active threat—I saw him feed. He knocked a man unconscious and drained him of some blood, then let him be. To involve others would be to guarantee deaths. I cannot say I saw the extent of his abilities.”

Svetlana lightly pressed her foot against Ganbaatar’s recently healed toe, and he winced.

“You’d just as soon die on the streets?” she said pointedly. “You ambushed him, yet you came away wounded. Was he as badly affected?”

Ganbaatar rubbed at his toe, no response coming to his mind.

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Argrave and Anneliese left from the inn they were staying at with Vasilisa as quietly as they could manage. Both moved with great haste towards the distant ferry on the edge of the island, eager to see if the Magisters had heeded the vague letter. As they approached, they saw the seaside docking house had no lights on at so late an hour.

“Do you think...”

Argrave turned to where he thought Anneliese would be standing beside him. Instead, a great dragon’s maw lunged out towards him, roaring. Every muscle in his body surged to action, and he triggered the Blessing of Supersession. Before he could conjure a ward to block the attack, though, the dragon’s teeth met him...

Yet nothing else happened.

As the illusory dragon’s head scattered into nothingness, Argrave realized belatedly what had just occurred. He took deep breaths to calm himself, then looked towards where he heard laughter over the beating of his heart.

Hegazar sat atop the docking house, his legs dangling precariously as he laughed. Vera smiled at the scene, but she wasn’t quite laughing as hard. Instead... there was some caution in her eyes. Slowly, Hegazar came to regard Argrave much the same.

“What a perplexing sight,” Hegazar noted as he stared down Argrave. “I thought to question why exactly the great and mighty king might be out here in this dreadfully cold wasteland, his hair having gone white... yet now I find a more urgent question on the tip of my tongue: why does His Majesty possess such a terrifyingly large pool of magic?” he used a respectful address, but the words seemed to have a different intonation on his tongue that lent it none.

“It’s no illusion?” Vera asked, a question Hegazar answered with a simple nod.

“Nice to see you, too,” Argrave called out. His eyes darted about as he looked for Anneliese. Once he found her, he relaxed somewhat. She was just as off-kilter as he was, likely having been hit by Hegazar’s illusion in the same fashion.

“What in the world are you doing here?” Hegazar asked, leading the conversation. “When we passed by, it seemed like the stage was set for you to head to war... yet you’re here? You seem rather out of your element...”

Argrave looked to Anneliese, silently communicating her analysis of their disposition. She gave him a nod—that was answer enough. They weren’t hostile.

“Let’s talk,” Argrave called out. “It’s quite a long story.”

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“You really have some... get up and go, eh? Not a fan of letting others do your work for you, Your Majesty?” Hegazar remarked of their story.

They sat on the sandy coast just outside the ferry in a small circle, the two like a smaller mirror of them. As though to demonstrate a point they wished to make, Vera sat on Hegazar’s lap, wrapped in his arms—evidently, something had brought them back together. Argrave wasn’t exactly sure how long that would last. And frankly... it did make him a bit uncomfortable. He didn’t like their unity.

“Well...” Argrave grabbed both of his knees, rocking slightly. “Things needed to be done. And there was something worth getting out here. I certainly feel of much better use—things are starting to come together. I think I know why you’re out here. You came to speak to Magister Ivan about spreading word of Gerechtigkei, right?”

“Hmm...” Hegazar said, staring him down. “I don’t like admitting you’re right.”

“But you are,” Vera answered for him. “Let’s get down to business. You asked us to meet you here. I trust it’s for a reason, yes?”

“It is,” Argrave admitted. “You see this thing over my head?” he pulled at his ‘hair,’ which was in actuality the wig of white hair he’d donned to feign being a snow elf. “My hair hasn’t gone white. I’m wearing this for a little deception of mine. And it’s my hope that you can play along.”

“With what?” Vera pressed, and Hegazar nodded in agreement of her question.

“As you might expect, I don’t walk around here calling myself ‘king,’” Argrave said, placing his hand in the sandy banks. “The people here don’t know what I look like. The Magister I’m travelling with... she definitely doesn’t. I’m working something to make this city—and in time, most of the north—supportive of Vasquer. If I have your cooperation, this can be greatly facilitated. I was hoping the two of you would be amenable to the idea, given that you’ve been persuaded of Gerechtigkei’s existence.”

Hegazar scoffed, “Persuaded? The old man beamed knowledge into our mind with some strange stone disc. Practically locked us all inside until we were brainwashed—no ‘persuading’ done at all. Maybe that’s why Traugott went off the deep end.” The bald man raised his brow. “And I’m told *you* were the one to give the old man his lead to that disc. That doesn’t matter, not for now. What exactly is it you hope to achieve here?”

Argrave bit his lip, deliberating. "The one thing my faction lacks is spellcasters. The north remains staunchly undecided. The former Quadreign crownlands have an abundance of magic users—magic users that can be swayed and brought to the war. That was my intent," he decided to disclose plainly.

"Then let's lay it out," Vera said. "Hegazar's already told me of the great favor you owe him... to speak nothing of what I believe you owe *me*," she said, her orange eyes common in House Jast seeming rather fearsome in the moonlight. "Isn't that right, Hegazar?"

"It is," he agreed casually, smiling.

"But... the two of us put *our* grievances to bed," she said as she gripped Hegazar's leg. "And there is quite a pressing matter to deal with: namely, the nightmare we are all aware looms on the horizon."

"I'm glad of that," Argrave said honestly. "Not the nightmare part, but the cooperating part."

"Cooperation is paramount. I think Vera and I both agree that we shouldn't do something so foolish as fishing in troubled waters... right, dear?" Hegazar looked down at Vera, and she nodded back at him.

"Right. I don't know what came over Traugott, but I much like living. Given the breadth of your knowledge and Castro's predestined support, we can offer support."

Argrave raised a brow. "Just like that?"

"No. You're going to make a few promises to us. You're going to sign them with your magic signature, so we at least have a document offering proof," Vera shook her head. "We'll help you win. We'll help you build up your kingdom. But given our situation... I think it's best we leverage a future. For the both of us."

"Maybe a city. Or two?" Hegazar looked down at Vera, and she nodded with a smile.

"Maybe three," Vera continued. "Or four. A nice, even number. Archduchess Vera, Archduke Hegazar... it has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? Once the war is over, of course."

Argrave remained silent, looking between the two of them. They were right—they had great leverage in this scenario. Even still... was he content to let things go their way?

"How about one?" Argrave proposed, and their faces hardened. "How about Dirracha?"

Hegazar frowned. "The... capital? What?"

"I'm serious," Argrave nodded. "How would you like to own the former crownlands?"

Vera looked up at Hegazar, then jerked back to Argrave. "You're not... planning something, are you? Is the city going to be crushed by a meteor in the near future?"

"Of course not," Argrave replied, offended. "I just don't plan on keeping it as the capital."

"What, will you move to Relize?" Hegazar questioned. "Did the frilly clothes and feathered hats rub off on you?"

"Hardly a fitting place, considering their insistence on independence," Argrave shook his head. "Once Gerechtigkeit comes, the wealth of a region won't matter. It'll be a desperate struggle to survive. I have a more defensible location in mind."

“Hmm...” Hegazar let out a noise of discontent deliberation. “I don’t like letting him decide things,” he muttered to Vera.

“Even still... to gain the capital?” Vera muttered back.

Argrave sat in the sand, waiting for them to decide on things.

“I suppose... it would be a fitting seat,” Vera begrudgingly admitted.

“But once this journey of yours is done, you need to announce us as the owners immediately,” Hegazar added.

“That’ll lower my legitimacy some... but sure, done,” Argrave agreed. “We’re in agreement? Your help in exchange for the capital?”

Hegazar seemed to squirm. “No. I don’t know. Yes?” his answer changed quickly. “Fine. It seems... fair. And that’s why it’s hard to take from you. You agree, dear?”

“I... do,” Vera agreed, hesitating a beat.

“Then, shall we get to work on the north?” Argrave picked up sand, letting it fall between his fingers.

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Chapter 297: Borrowing to Invest

Argrave and Anneliese made their way back to the inn rather satisfied. Argrave felt things with the Magisters had gone quite well, which gave ample comfort for the tasks ahead. To show their commitment to their work together, the Magisters agreed to refrain from visiting Ivan until asked by Argrave. And in turn, Argrave gave them a document signed with his magic signature, detailing his promise to bestow Dirracha upon them after the war’s end.

He had half-expected the two to quibble about the precise details, yet they only wanted one adage—that the city should be granted to them as a single unit. That is, the package was bound by law as a family. In essence, it was nothing less than ownership by a married couple. It perplexed Argrave and did stir some anxiety... but he abided by this condition, despite his gut questioning how long this couple might stay as such.

Before they could come anywhere near the inn, Galamon lunged out and seized the both of them. Argrave was amply surprised, but the vampire’s voice calmed him at once.

“I was attacked,” the elven vampire declared as he dragged them away into seclusion.

“You were?” Argrave furrowed his brows, pulling free his arm. “What? By whom? A mage?”

“No. A man garbed in black,” Galamon looked around in paranoia, then knelt down. “The only distinguishing features I noted were his eyes—wholly red, no white at all.”

“Then he’s elven,” Argrave decided at once, adapting quickly. “Or at least partially so. But... what...” Argrave took a deep breath to gather himself and looked around in paranoia. “Tell me everything you can of the encounter.”

The big elf nodded, still kneeling. “I will.”

“Maybe not here,” Argrave decided. “Let’s return to our room.”

“And if I’m watched?” Galamon pressed.

It was a fair point, Argrave had to admit. He bit his lip as he deliberated. “Anneliese, could you...?”

“At once,” she agreed before he could fully voice his request. As though reading his mind, she sent her bird out to scout for any watchers.

Finally, her search offered nothing, and Galamon was content none around could see them go. They returned hastily, being mindful that they did so quietly. Once inside, Argrave sat on his bed and listened to the report of happenings.

Galamon described with more words and more details than he often spoke with so as to provide Argrave with the best assessment of the situation. That said... not many details existed. The fighting strategy only confirmed the assailant was elven—only elves used wires of that sort, so far as Argrave knew. They were crafted in the Bloodwoods, and often used to traverse the often thousand-foot tall redwoods and the structures built upon them by the elves.

No words had been exchanged during or after the battle. No justification was given for the attack... and it was far too methodical to be a simply robbery, at least by Argrave’s estimation. It was a targeted attack—an assassination, almost. The person was professional enough for the term to apply.

Once Galamon’s report was given, Argrave sat still and utterly perplexed on his bed. “The only thing I can say for certain is that the man is not under the employ of Margrave Ivan,” Argrave decided.

“This is an elf from the Bloodwoods that Magister Vasilisa described?” Anneliese questioned, kneeling beside Argrave lost in just as much thought. “The ones that held out against Felipe, retained independence?”

“He has to be,” Argrave nodded in answer, then rose to his feet. “And I can’t picture why he’s beyond those Bloodwoods of his.”

“To think of why he attacked... Galamon said the glass eye was aboard a ship, coming here,” Anneliese reminded him. “He said that the eye saw him just as he saw it. Galamon?”

“I...” he stepped away. “I have not been drinking of the black bowl anymore. The days have been busy, and closely monitored... I had not been paying close attention to the matter.”

Argrave took a deep breath, about to criticize before he recalled he had given Galamon leave to lessen up on the drinking. His anger deflated in a resigned sigh as he asked, “The one who holds the glass eye is a vampire in my memory, not an elf. Was this person...?”

“No. Impossible,” Galamon shook his head. “The wound I caused on his toe did not heal quickly, or at all. He was strong, but not unnaturally so.”

Argrave shook his head with a bitter chuckle. “Then we might be dealing with someone who hunts vampires,” he reasoned. “But... an elven vampire hunter? I can’t think of anyone. No, I can say for certain there *aren’t* any, at least not in Heroes of Berendar. Something like that isn’t easily forgotten.”

Quietude took over when Argrave announced he had no answers to this conundrum.

“If Galamon was attacked, we should stick together,” Anneliese finally reasoned above the silent din of uncertainty.

“Perhaps not,” Galamon suggested. “That man... I cannot guarantee he will not harm the two of you. I cannot guarantee my protection should he attack one other than myself.”

“Vampire hunters are generally self-righteous,” Argrave pointed out. “It’s a thankless task, quite often, and not... implicitly legal. So, I think I’m willing to risk it.”

“Your Majesty,” Galamon said at once. “You named me your knight-commander. I do not wish to bring risk upon you.”

Argrave stepped to him and grabbed his shoulder. “You’ll just have to be more alert than normal. And by the way... it’s Silvaden. Don’t forget that.”

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Their only lead on the matter of the elven attacker was Anneliese’s suggestion it might be linked to the glass eye. Argrave had Galamon once again drink his own blood from the black bowl to get a lead on where the eye might be, but beyond that they had nothing to go on. They asked around about elves in the city, but nothing came back to them, and Anneliese’s scouting revealed nothing. Still, they remained on high alert.

Concurrent with that matter, early the next morning Argrave knocked on Vasilisa’s door. They were very, very loud and insistent knocks, yet even after them he waited about half an hour for the hungover Magister to rise. On top of all that, she would not speak to them until she’d had a drink that morning. It was quite the unproductive start to things.

Yet once she came to form they started moving, keeping Vasilisa entirely ignorant that the two Magisters had already arrived. They already had their fingers in the pie, so to speak, and that was sufficient enough for them. Now, they were to be introduced when they were most effective. Vasilisa’s favor from Elenore alone wasn’t enough to tie the north to Argrave’s faction in Relize, yet the two Magisters... to say the least, Argrave had some ideas for their role in things.

At Vasilisa’s direction, Anneliese sent out a message to Elenore—in actuality, they sent it alongside a message of their own—intending to secure the promised favor. Per their direction, Elenore answered positively, with a small stipend sent to demonstrate earnestness. That promise leavened with physical proof put Vasilisa’s mind at ease enough to venture into the riskier strategies Argrave had in mind.

Their goal was to arrange a conversation with Pavel Drawnwater to get a lead into the meeting with the margravine, and in turn wrap their fingers the whole of First Hope. Argrave had a good feeling about a conversation with them, and yet he and Anneliese would need to meet them to be certain of their character. ‘Heroes of Berendar’ only revealed so much about people, and Argrave would not like to have another Titus on his hands.

And so... Argrave spoke to a dock worker, bringing Vasilisa along as a trophy Magister. This shipyard laborer directed him to the dock’s manager. This overseer directed Argrave to his manager, Bran Livermore—a fairly rich bureaucrat under the employ of Pavel. It was such a short chain, yet one advanced so quickly that Vasilisa was baffled.

In not a week, they sat in a well-decorated office of a prominent citizen within First Hope, speaking of a future investment that had no other details than 'it involves House Quadreign' and 'it'll make a lot of money.' All of it stemmed from the power of fear: namely, the fear of making a huge mistake. The dock worker didn't want to offend someone speaking about big money, and even the dock manager found things beyond his paygrade. Could either afford to rebuff a Magister—moreover, one who spoke of making their employers vast quantities of money? The answer was clear based on their actions: no.

And because of that fear, Argrave sat on a velvet cushion across from a portly man wearing luxurious white furs that made him seem half a seal. Vasilisa stood just behind him, still the ever-diligent trophy Magister, with Anneliese and Galamon just beside her.

Argrave proposed, "If you can work things out with us, there could be goods worth hundreds of rose gold magic coins moving through these docks... by the week," Argrave explained to Bran. "Mister Livermore... I'm sure I don't need to explain the value of these coins to someone like yourself."

Bran swallowed, one of his chins trembling. "Hundreds of them, sir?" he looked to the side, where Vasilisa stood mute. "And... Magister Vasilisa, he speaks for you? He speaks the truth?"

"He does," she confirmed stiffly.

"The fortunes of House Quadreign are shifting," Argrave continued. "So much so, Mister Livermore, that lady Vasilisa can afford to hire us to speak in her stead. I'm only a humble trader and administrator. We have a great deal of business that we'd like to do... but given the competitiveness of the market, and the necessity for secrecy... we'd like to speak with someone who can handle the great bulk of what we offer."

"That's... sensible, sir," Bran nodded, though he seemed perplexed at the mention of a 'necessity of secrecy.' Nonetheless, he continued, "Given the flow of this conversation, I imagine you have an idea in mind?"

Argrave nodded pleasantly. "An associate of mine recommended someone. Pavel Drawnwater? I'm told you work for him..."

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"What in the name of the gods have you gotten me into..." whispered Vasilisa urgently as the four of them—Argrave, Anneliese, Galamon, and herself—walked towards the Drawnwater estate.

"I gave them nothing but words that were vague and meant little at all, and now we're walking into the Drawnwater estate," Argrave replied back.

It had taken three days for Pavel Drawnwater to reach out, but he had. During that time, they'd not been idle. Vasilisa's feet got colder and colder, and Argrave had to speak more words to stop them from freezing solid and stopping their progress. All the while, the two other Magisters working with Argrave endeavored to get in contact with local powers of a more mystical nature: the wizards belonging to the Order.

"Yes, yes... you just staked my entire reputation on this, nothing more..." Vasilisa rubbed her hands together as though cold. "Why should I worry? Of course not..."

“If things don’t go right... I got us in, and I can get us out just the same, no loss of reputation,” Argrave assured. “I promise things will be fine. A vow from a Veidimen is not light.”

Ahead, the doors to the estate opened. Two men stepped out into the cool midday sunlight. He was rather lean, well-groomed, and fair of hair—rather the opposite of the white-furred seal that was Bran Livermore beside him.

“Pavel Drawnwater, I presume?” Argrave greeted.

“Vasilisa’s man, Silvaden, and his company... a pleasure to meet you all.” Pavel greeted in kind. “Has the day treated you well, Magister?”

“As well as could be expected, Pavel,” she answered politely.

“Good,” Pavel nodded. “Well... it would be my honor to invite you into my home. I am most interested to hear the two of you out.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 298: Underhanded Handyman

How does one profit from war? That was a question that Elenore had asked a lot throughout her life. Her father, King Felipe III, warred throughout most of his reign, expanding the already significant holdings of the kingdom of Vasquer to a level beyond what it had ever been before. She had learned how to profit from the large industry in that generous allotment of time.

Those doing the warring received some of the profit, of course. Looting was commonplace in war, but that was a crude thing, and difficult to control or moderate. In terms of appeasing the patricians of Relize and elevating their faction’s reputation simultaneously... it was of no help to her. Above all, it was bad for the future of the realm. If Relizeans soldiers looted Atrus in the process of restoring order, Argrave’s faction effectively spent lives and money to gain a wasteland. The short-term benefits vastly paled before the profit lost in the future. The older patricians had an intrinsic grasp of that concept.

Those of the fractured kingdom of Atrus would naturally be opposed to looting, too. If Relize’s army had a reputation of incontrovertibly damaging the lands they marched across, resistance from the lords of Atrus would be fiercer the deeper they pressed. On the contrary, if more merciful options were presented consistently, resistance might lessen as they proceeded. Acquiescence would become a common alternative to battle, better both for the realm, the people, and Argrave’s future prospects.

Altogether, looting was an unideal form of war profiteering for the future.

The way that Elenore profited from war in the past was rather simple: she bought industries the war needed. Metalworking and criminal enchanting—namely, non-Order enchanting—formed the core of her profits. Land—agriculturally developed land, that is—was also another core component, but her status as the Bat had limited her ability to own said land.

Now, land was falling into Elenore’s hands day by day as the army advanced.

The lords of Atrus wanted two things: to maintain control of their land, and to keep its value. The patricians in Relize wanted a return on their investment of bodies and ships. Both wanted a future, even at the detriment of the other. Yet Elenore believed the two weren’t necessarily mutually exclusive. With

her agents in Atrus and her position of power as Argrave's regent, the two could be all but forced to cooperate.

To that end, Elenore developed a system that was partly based off anecdotes she had wrested from Argrave about the difficulties of the financial system in the world he came from. It was a concept that had technically existed for a long time. Elenore merely formalized it and distributed it according to merit, with ample explanation to pitch the benefits.

Upon surrender, the lands of the lords of Atrus remained theirs. It was, however, deemed a debt owed to the crown. This debt—Elenore had named it a resistance debt—could be owned by anyone, regardless of status. Consequently, Elenore distributed them as rewards. This resistance debt was to be paid off in increments twice a year. Failure to meet payments meant that whoever owned the debt could seize the allotted land lawfully with the permission—and even aid—of the crown.

It was not in favor of the nobility of Atrus. But then, such was the power of leverage. The theory behind it was that the people in Atrus would be willing to enter into this resistance debt that potentially stripped their lands, as the alternative was resisting mindlessly and *definitely* losing their lands. And in the time since Argrave's absence... she had been proven right.

On the other end of things, many patricians realized the implications of such a debt. It bound each and every recipient of such a reward to the crown almost absolutely—this debt of theirs was secured by the crown, so all had a vested interest in keeping Argrave and his successors in power. And yet that didn't matter. A biannual payment of significant quantity, with the potential of turning into real land should their debtor default... and that wasn't even mentioning the fact this debt could be sold to others freely. It was undeniably appealing.

Elenore was certain it would work because the people she was dealing with were business-minded. The patricians, near one and all, were traders: the title of 'patrician' came only from the Grand Council of Relize. Outside of it, they were nothing. The promise of either great wealth or land was acceptable to them. Land was hard to acquire as a commoner, and wealth formed the cornerstone of Relizean power. That was why she had taken this path. Had the makeup of their army been nobility, such a resolution would never have sufficed.

That isn't to say the resistance debt hadn't come without its problems. The administration and codification of the matter was a tremendous burden—calculating debt, dividing land, and negotiations alone were monumental duties, not to mention the thousands of other minutiae. The number of people that Elenore employed seemed to be increasing exponentially—in turn, the strain on her pre-existing financing had to bear that weight.

And yet Argrave still asks me to send money to that god-forsaken northern wasteland while he plays dress-up, Elenore reflected as she travelled in a carriage, some of Argrave's royal knights escorting her just outside. To say the least, Argrave was not one to hesitate in asking for more of people. *In time... we need a far more centralized army,* Elenore noted. *If we're to tie people to the crown, there has to be a way of enforcing that tie beyond the armies lent to us by our vassals.*

All that said, her handling of the matter had worked thus far. The complaints lessened. People started to heed Elenore as Argrave's regent, seeking her out as they had him in the past. It was war, and people would never be fully content... but Elenore knew enough of the situation to deem dissatisfaction a non-

imminent issue. Elenore, herself, was not dissatisfied with things. She merely viewed her financial losses as the transition between a business and a government.

Yet now she travelled to the northwest, following the coast of the North Sea. Durran would be waiting for her there, facilitating her arrival. The beginning of this northern expedition had gone very well... but the initial push was always the strongest point. Their numbers swelled slightly from surrendering lords, but enthusiasm and unity both suffered as a consequence. And as they headed further, their most striking weakness would be put plainly on display: their lack of quality spellcasters.

The carriage Elenore rode slowed steadily until it stopped. Outside, someone new entered her field of perception—it took her only a heartbeat to recognize the dark hair, tan skin, and golden eyes as Durran. He opened the door.

“Princess,” he greeted, offering his hand to help her down.

Elenore took his hand, alighting as gracefully as she could. “Is the opposition as we feared from Castle Cookpot?” Elenore asked at once, sparing her own greeting.

“Worse, reasonably,” Durran replied without hesitation. “As a matter of fact... I’m getting a rather bad feeling about things.”

Elenore took a deep breath and sighed as they walked along a well-worn road that had been trampled down by a marching army. “Why is that?”

“They’ve made a name for themselves. It’s always bad when they unify enough to decide on a name,” he said half in jest as he made a show of leading Elenore along. “The Unhanded Coalition stands ahead. All of the reports I read from your people suggest this isn’t a headless organization. Indeed, they’re rather well-headed and unified in purpose, despite the lack of support from local lords. And worst of all... they’ve gotten very adept at using the taiga around the mountains to their massive advantage. Forget taking fortresses—we can hardly advance an inch more. More died last night than the first week of the war. Our casualties aren’t astronomical, but ambushing, covert operations, sabotage... we’re fighting an enemy of a different sort, now.”

Elenore gripped Durran’s arm a little tighter. “It seems like things are finally coming to a head.”

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Vasilisa, Argrave, and his companions followed Pavel into the Drawnwater estate without encountering much fuss at all. There were guards, but the only discourtesies they offered were somewhat awed glances at the presence of three people as large as the snow elves. No words were exchanged between any as they were led to a private room with only two black couches with a table between them.

Argrave took the central seat of the couch, Galamon to his left, Vasilisa and Anneliese to his right. Pavel Drawnwater sat across, scrutinizing. He had eyes as green as freshly printed dollar bills. Once the niceties had passed he spoke with the principle that time was precious: namely, briefly. He had no guards with him. Even Bran Livermore, their initial point of contact, had left along the way.

Was it boldness, or arrogance? Argrave didn’t think so. Maybe Pavel was merely sensible enough to realize not much could be done in the face of a Magister if they wanted him dead. It matched with the man’s personality well enough: he was quite shrewd.

“I’d like to hear what exactly this business opportunity of yours offers, Magister Vasilisa,” he said, respectfully though insistently. “Even now, I know nothing of it.”

“That’s because it demands secrecy,” Argrave spoke for her. Only then did Pavel’s eyes focus on him.

Pavel leaned forward to the edge of his couch. “Yes... I’m told you’ve been speaking for Magister Vasilisa. Why is that?”

“Because he handles the business side of things for me,” Vasilisa summarized.

Pavel nodded. “And are you certain that he has your best interest at heart?”

Argrave said decisively, “Our interests are closely tied. You might say they’re one in the same. And she needs my specialty—or rather, my people’s specialty—to access this wealth.”

Pavel nodded. “Not my concern, anyway. What does concern me is a need for secrecy. I don’t break the law.”

“The need for secrecy stems from the fact that I’m in debt to Margrave Ivan,” Vasilisa answered.

“Frankly put, I think this business might have a way of freeing me from my debt in short order. I am convinced Ivan prefers to have my house in his debt than to have the money we owe him. As such, I’d like to earn the money quietly and expediently, then pay him back all at once.”

“I see,” Pavel nodded, wrapping his hands together. “I think I’m obligated to inform you my cousin is married to the margrave.”

“I know,” Vasilisa nodded. “That’s part of the reason I decided to reach out.”

“How do you like your cousin’s marriage to the margrave?” Argrave pressed.

Pavel frowned, evidently confused. “Is this pertinent?”

“Very,” Argrave nodded. “So... your answer?”

“It’s been a blessing to my house,” Pavel said simply.

Anneliese coughed. It was a premeditated signal—she felt confident in proceeding.

“But that isn’t the whole of it, is it?” Argrave pressed. “Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone wants a happy family life.”

Pavel looked unamused. “Are you speculating about something?”

Anneliese coughed once more.

“No. Maybe I can state a few facts, though,” Argrave shook his head. “Margrave Ivan has a history of unfaithfulness. He turned his back on Quadreign all those years ago. Maybe we’re trying to justify the need for secrecy... or maybe there’s something more,” Argrave suggested calmly. “A lot of new details have come to light in Quadreign—details that could shake many foundations.”

“What kind of details?” Pavel pressed evenly, well-used to vague situations like this in the circles he travelled.

“Old secrets to confirm. New secrets to deliver,” Argrave shrugged. “They’re both related and unrelated to the matter at hand. But like I said... your cousin Sophia is a point of interest.”

“I see.” Pavel leaned back into the couch. Then, he reached over, tapping his knuckle against the table. A man walked in, and Pavel whispered some words into his ear. Once the man left, Pavel continued, “She’s here, as it so happens. Considering the things you’re mentioning, I think it’d be best to involve her.”

Argrave shared a glance with Vasilisa. Just like that, the woman they’d wanted to involve would be coming here.

“Well... that’s good to hear,” Argrave said enthusiastically.

Pavel gave a tired-looking smile in response, then sat quietly on the couch doing nothing other than staring. Soon enough, the door opened. A tall, blonde, green-eyed woman entered, dressed in furs of vibrant colors. Behind her, another woman stood—she was blonde, had blue eyes, and looked much like the person sitting just beside him.

“Pavel,” Margravine Sophia greeted. “What’s this?”

“A few guests. I believe my man told you who they are,” Pavel answered succinctly.

“He did,” Sophia nodded. “That’s why this one came along,” she stepped out of the doorway, allowing the other woman passage.

“Svetlana?” Vasilisa rose to her feet. “What are you doing here?”

Svetlana of Quadreign stepped into the room. “It really is you. I thought there must be some mistake. You’re here by chance, auntie? I thought you might’ve received my letter, but that can’t be right.”

“Letter? What about?” Vasilisa stepped forward. “Nothing... nothing’s wrong, is it? I thought you were in the south, in the Tower of the Gray Owl.”

“I was, but...” Svetlana’s eyes fell upon the three of them in the room with curiosity. “...some things came up. I made a friend. As did you, so it seems.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 299: Poison Upon Poison

Argrave surveyed Svetlana of Quadreign. She wasn’t exactly a main character, but she was a companion the player could recruit—these reasons alone made her notable. She regarded the three of them with the same curiosity. In particular, she studied Galamon.

“Svetlana—wait for me outside, please,” Vasilisa said. “I have some business to discuss with the Drawnwaters.”

The Magister’s niece gave a slow, steady nod. “...sure, I can do that. I do have something rather important to talk to you about. As a matter of fact, I was going to discuss it with the margravine.”

“Later, then,” Vasilisa said somewhat urgently. “I’d like to finish up here.”

Hesitantly, Svetlana stepped back outside and shut the door behind her with a small wave before it shut.

“Glad you’re here, cousin,” Pavel called out to Margravine Sophia. “Our guests were discussing something rather interesting—something I think you should be part of.”

“I’m not certain what the Quadreigns might need to speak of with us,” Sophia said as she moved to take a seat on the couch. “Perhaps they mistook ‘margravine’ with ‘margrave.’”

“Half-right. Secrets new and secrets old... about your husband, it seems,” Pavel described succinctly, making room for her. Sitting side-by-side, they seemed brother and sister more than cousins.

The margravine’s green eyes narrowed. “You want to discuss Ivan,” she repeated. “If you want me to change his mind on a matter, you’re wasting your time. My husband likes as few words from me as possible.”

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed. “I understand things have been strained between you and your husband. As such, I’m going to take a large risk, and ask to speak with you frankly,” Argrave explained.

The margravine looked at him. “Who exactly are you?”

“Here? No one,” Argrave clasped his hands together as he shook his head. “In my land, they call me Silvaden ‘the Smiler.’ Now, I’m merely one working beside Magister Vasilisa. She and I have been handling an important matter together. And this matter has come to directly concern you and your family.”

The margravine frowned. “Alright. Then... even if you speak frankly, since Vasilisa of Quadreign brings you into my home... I will allow it.”

Argrave cleared his throat. “As you know, House Quadreign bears a significant debt to Margrave Ivan. Without the flame Quadreign once owned, the city cannot function: the clocktower has ceased, the homes are unheated, and things have become unsustainable all around. This debt has been increasing month by month, as I understand things.

“Despite the fact that Margrave Ivan could send another to collect the debt, he comes himself every time,” Argrave continued quickly, before his listeners could grow confused. “We’ve come to find that this is because he has a mistress in the city.”

The Margravine’s fair skin grew paler, and she took a deep breath. Argrave her stew in the silence for a time, yet felt deeply uncomfortable looking at the rapid changing of emotions in her face. Vasilisa, too, looked quite tense.

“Quite frankly, we would have let the information be at that,” Argrave continued. “But... we have reason to believe that this union bore a child. Margrave Ivan took this child with him quite recently, which allowed us to discover key secrets from the mother.”

Margravine Sophia rose to her feet. “What are you talking about?! You come to my home to speak of *this*?! This... this *baseless* slander?”

“Margrave Ivan took this child from its mother for one simple reason—to use the flame that he stole from House Quadreign to enhance the child’s magical capability,” Argrave continued stoically.

“And *that* is why we have come here. Margravine—I’m certain that Ivan has never allowed you into the lower levels of the tower. Indeed, no one we’ve spoken to has been there. This is because it harbors the

flame of Quadreign—the flame that Margrave Ivan stole all those years ago, and the flame that Margrave Ivan uses to train a successor in the magical arts. This successor, namely, is that child born of his mistress.”

“Do you have any idea the implication of what you’re saying?” the margravine questioned hysterically. “Have you any notion the consequence of a lie of that magnitude?”

“I do,” Argrave said without flinching. “The fact is, Margravine Sophia, I’m sitting here today because I’m absolutely certain of this accusation. And if you disbelieve me, you need only head into the lower levels of your husband’s tower. Within, you’ll find a flame as black as the night sky. A flame he hid from you, his wife. A flame he hid from all.”

Margravine Sophia’s breathing was quick and labored. “...get out,” she said quietly. “Get out.”

“I understand.” Argrave rose to his feet. “I did what I felt obligated to. We’ll be in the city a while longer. We’ll see ourselves out.”

Vasilisa looked distraught, but she rose to her feet just after him. Their party followed Argrave as he made to leave. Pavel looked thrown off balance, looking between his cousin and their party with some concern. The margravine sat back on the couch, clutching her stomach as though it was upset.

Once they came outside, Svetlana was gone. Though Vasilisa briefly looked for her, given the atmosphere they’d just caused they decided it would be best to leave quickly.

“Is your heart made of stone?” Vasilisa asked once they stepped outside.

“Among other things,” Argrave responded. The joke was understood only by Galamon and Anneliese and found funny by neither.

“That... good gods...” Vasilisa rubbed at her stomach, seeming just as upset as the margravine. “This is what you intended by ‘poisoning their relationship?’”

“The margravine will find the flame. She’s resourceful, and distrustful of her husband already,” Argrave declared calmly, walking down the road. “The flame alone will be proof enough to sway the margravine, I’m sure. Then, they’ll reach out to us.”

Vasilisa grabbed his shoulder, stopping him. “But what you said... is it real?”

“What do you think?” Argrave turned, looking down at her.

“I... I don’t see how you could know any of that,” Vasilisa said.

“I know the flame is down there. It’s the only place it could reasonably be. The rest, it’s... merely speculative,” Argrave lightened his words.

The Magister stared him down. “You take many liberties, Silvaden.” She grew silent, perhaps expecting a response from Argrave. He offered none. “But then... I let you take them. I gave you this role.”

“You won’t regret doing so,” Argrave shook his head. “I have as much—no, I have *more* reason than you to see this work out in our favor.”

“Seeing all you do so easily... it does make me question how much you’re being honest with me about other things,” Vasilisa replied.

“You know the most dangerous secret we have,” Argrave answered without skipping a beat, looking to Galamon. “Any other secrets I keep from you... it’s only for the safety of me and mine. And in time, I hope they can be revealed to you. I dislike keeping secrets from people I would like to call friend.”

Vasilisa’s blue eyes seemed cold almost always, but Argrave swore they warmed somewhat. “I drink with friends, but I’ve not shared a drop with you.”

Argrave laughed, then cautioned, “You will sink even deeper into debt trying to get me drunk.”

“Is that a challenge?” she raised a brow.

“Besides, considering what your niece mentioned... perhaps now isn’t the best time,” Argrave reminded her. “It seemed rather urgent.”

Vasilisa looked sobered. “Yeah... you’re right. Let’s wait for a little bit for her to come out, then return. I want to be sure she’s not still inside.”

#####

Days passed with complete silence from the estate of Drawnwater. On the other front, Vasilisa did not hear from Svetlana again, either. This fact concerned the Magister greatly. Argrave, curious himself, offered to have Anneliese scout for the young woman around the city. In the end, nothing came of their searching.

On the fourth day since their visit, however, they received a visitor: a woman and a man, the former wearing a veil over her face. It was quite easy to tell who they were, and their party took them to their room in the inn and warded the place so that they might speak privately without any listeners.

When Margravine Sophia pulled back her veil, Argrave judged their might have been another reason she’d been wearing it. Her eyes were quite puffy-looking and red as though raw. There was something else, there, too. Her face was tight in anger as she sat at the table prepared for her, hands neatly clasped atop it.

“I visited the lower sections of the tower,” the margravine began, staring at the wall.

Argrave nodded, pulling a chair up and sitting down quietly. “I’m sorry,” he started.

Sophia kept staring at the wall. Her cousin, Pavel, put a hand atop the both of hers, offering silent comfort.

Vasilisa pulled up her own chair and sat. “You mean to say, Margravine Sophia... the flame was there?”

“Of course it was,” Sophia snapped. “You told me it was. Why do you ask me?”

“I didn’t share Silvaden’s confidence,” Vasilisa shook her head. “But I... what did you see, exactly? How did you get there?”

“It was hard to get there,” Sophia shook her head, coming to attention now that she was asked for details. “I had to sneak in. I stayed overnight in the library, then went down on the mystic lift when the

guards were less..." she laughed. "I feel such a fool. I was content never visiting a place simply because I had no interest and hated the man inside, not knowing that was the whole point."

"And once there?" Vasilisa pressed.

"It was on the bottom floor that my search bore fruit," she continued. "Once there, I looked around, finding nothing... until I found something. A staircase. It went lower. And I found a great blazing black fire, sustained by lesser flames and kept bound by some strange, black rock carved in a pit."

Argrave nodded. "He doesn't know the runes to contain it. He uses lesser means." Argrave looked to Vasilisa. "Anything else?"

"What did it smell like?" Vasilisa asked.

"Ah... it had a very distinct smell," Sophia's eyes focused, recalling. "It was like... vinegar."

Vasilisa took a deep breath and nodded. She set her elbow on the table and stared off into the distance, distraught just as the margravine. That she could say the smell uncoached was nigh incontrovertible proof.

"Given what you disclosed, I imagine you have designs on Margrave Ivan," Pavel continued evenly. "I feel for my cousin. She is pragmatic as I am. Even setting aside his betrayal all those years ago, Margrave Ivan stole from House Quadreign. He has kept such a large secret from his wife, while having an alleged affair."

Margravine Sophia clenched her hands together tighter. "This woman... who is she?"

"She doesn't even know who Margrave Ivan really is," Argrave shook his head. "We only learned of things through pure, dumb luck—she sought House Quadreign's help after he seized the child, and eventually we extrapolated the details."

Sophia fixed her eyes on Argrave. "You would keep her from me?"

Argrave sighed, searching for more made-up details. "She's a young girl, barely of age, that made a mistake when manipulated by a man decades older than her. She never knew he was married," he described succinctly. "Would you kill her? Punish her otherwise, cut out her tongue?"

Margravine Sophia tensed. Pavel spoke next, asking, "So, you can offer no genuine proof?"

"Ivan can prove things," Argrave suggested. "When he's overthrown, that is."

Both of the two's eyes widened.

"Vasquer is in civil war," Argrave leaned into the table. "The north stagnates under the poor rule of Margrave Ivan. House Quadreign can avenge the betrayal Ivan wrought upon its queendom and regain the power lost by the theft of its flame. And at the end of it all... the faithful of Quadreign here would not be forgotten. And unlike Ivan... Quadreign is generous." Argrave shook his head. "I'm tired of being vague. We want Ivan's downfall. And we want your help."

Argrave let his offer hang, sparing a glance to Anneliese who stood off to the side. She gave a nod that lent Argrave confidence things would go well.

“That is quite the offer,” Pavel concluded, swallowing. “Can we... have time?”

“I don’t need time, Pavel,” Margravine Sophia shook her head. “Ivan has never loved me. He hates even touching me. He refuses to let me into our bed, as though I’m some animal. And... I have little doubt he’s willing to debase our marriage. A traitor once is a traitor always, whether in marriage or in politics,” she said decisively. “I will geld that animal myself.”

The talk of gelding killed some of the satisfaction Argrave might have felt that things went well. Nonetheless... it was time to set things into motion. It was time to involve Hegazar and Vera.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 300: Intruded Sanctuary

Ganbaatar slid a thin wire into a door’s keyhole, Svetlana kneeling just beside him while watching an adjacent door. Something clicked from within the hole, and then the elven man tried the doorknob. It opened, creaking slightly. Svetlana’s head whipped back around, and then the both of them entered quickly, shutting the door just behind.

Svetlana cast a simple spell, and light illuminated the room in the form of a ball of light. In one corner, Magister Vasilisa slept rather soundly on her bed. Ganbaatar remained by the door, alert, while Svetlana stepped up to the Magister.

“Auntie,” Svetlana called out in a terse whisper, shaping the woman. “Auntie, wake up.”

The force that Svetlana used gradually compounded until she was practically tossing Vasilisa about like a doll, yet the Magister did eventually wake. She was still half-drunk, drooling, and altogether unfit for a conversation.

“Ganbataar,” she called out. “The smelling herbs.”

Ganbaatar reached into his pocket and threw a small jar at Svetlana. She caught it, unscrewing it as quickly as she could while Vasilisa mumbled something. Svetlana’s face twisted as soon as the jar opened, and she held it near Vasilisa’s nose. The jar was glowing.

“Ah!” Vasilisa winced, recoiling away. She shuddered as something came over her, then her eyes gained some clarity. “What in the gods—Svetlana?”

“Those are magic herbs to combat drug-induced slumbers,” Svetlana said, screwing the jar tight again until the glow faded. “Rather effective at purging the blood near instantaneously. It’s used for drugs that vampires employ to subdue victims, but it works on alcohol, too.”

Vasilisa rubbed at her nose. “That was the worst smell I’ve ever experienced. What are you... why are you here, Svetlana? Who is... he?” She stopped rubbing. “I’m almost certain I locked my door.”

“He—no, *we* picked the lock. Ganbaatar is a vampire hunter,” Svetlana said at once. “Auntie, I’ve been looking for an opportunity to talk to you in private. The men you’re with, the Veidimen—I don’t know how you’re associated with them, but one is not as he seems.” She fixed her blue eyes on her aunt’s own. “One of them is a vampire.”

Vasilisa grew rather still. “Svetlana...”

“Please, hear me out,” Svetlana continued. “Ganbaatar came here in search of a vampire possessed of certain powers—strong powers. He fought with this man. That man was sitting beside you in the Drawnwater estate... and we know he’s been staying here the past while, in the room over. He was the one in the heavy armor. Ganbaatar can even point out the dent in the armor that he caused during their battle.” She shook her head quickly. “I’m not sure the others are vampires, but we can say for certain that the armored snow elf is.”

The Magister slowly sat up in her bed. “Svetlana, I know.”

Her niece slowly edged away from her on the bed. Ganbaatar raised a judgmental brow from his spot beside the door.

“You... know?” Svetlana repeated.

“I know,” Vasilisa nodded. “I didn’t initially, but I do now.”

Ganbaatar leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. “Why is he still alive?”

“Because of the two with him. And because of the intent of their actions,” Vasilisa said at once.

“Silvaden, their leader, is helping me recover the flame of Quadreign—actually called the Flame of the Tenebrous Star. And he intends to use it to cure this man, Vulras, of his vampirism.”

Ganbaatar looked mightily perturbed, but Svetlana asked, “Can that be done?”

“I don’t know,” Vasilisa admitted. “Silvaden has brought to light many truths about the flame. It is something crafted by the snow elves, not by House Quadreign. As such... there may be truth to that.”

Svetlana and Ganbaatar both were stunned into silence. In the stretch that followed, Vasilisa rubbed at her nose, still bothered by those smelling herbs. Then, she paused abruptly.

“I’ve been here for days. Why did you come in here now?” Vasilisa asked, looking between the two of them.

Ganbaatar answered, “Couldn’t be sure the vampire wouldn’t hear our approach. He is sleepless and vigilant.”

“Like I said earlier, auntie,” Svetlana touched Vasilisa. “We needed privacy. But now...”

“Privacy?” Vasilisa repeated. “You mean to say we have it now?”

“Yes,” Svetlana nodded. “After all, the three of them went out.”

Vasilisa’s face hardened. “They went out?”

#####

Elenore awoke to noises. She lifted her head up as they crystallized in her senses. It was shouting... and the sound of crackling and popping.

At once, her attention diverted to the sphere of sense offered by the bronze jewelry gifted by Argrave. She saw the familiar—the royal guards that Argrave had left in her care. They were just outside the tent,

but their focus was on something else. She heard a word repeated time and time again, both distant and near: fire.

At that, she rose to action, moving off the bedroll she slept upon and reaching for her prosthetic wooden feet that Durran had carved for her. The royal knights just outside stepped away, speaking about collecting water. And then... *others* entered her sphere. The way they travelled was clever, taking full advantage of camouflage offered by the flourishing spring taiga. They crept towards Elenore's tent.

Their approach bred panic within Elenore. Her main guards had just walked away, outside of the sense offered by the jewelry—if she called out, could they hear her? Or would those closer hear her, those she feared sought her out only to end her?

In the end, Elenore felt frozen, her hands trembling too fiercely to even put the prosthetics on her feet. They came ever near to her tent, and she could see blades in their grasp. Trying hard to stay quiet, she crawled away, seeking out a portion of her tent that had been occupied with supplies. Just as she hid beneath a stretch of unused tarp, she saw the men tugging at the tent, trying to lift it up. It had been staked firmly, though, and eventually they merely cut the canvas with their blades, entering inside.

Elenore felt she was staring death in the eye as they spread out across her tent, searching for her. She held her breath, tried to stay her shuddering, tried to hide her existence as best she knew how. Just as she feared being discovered, so too did she desperately search for something to enter her senses, someone to call out for help to.

And then... she barely saw a peculiar gray scale boot enter her sense, then exit just as quick. Nevertheless, without hesitation she screamed as loud as she could, "Durran!"

Elenore's presence was exposed, and all of the men in the tent were quick to react, moving towards the pile of supplies she had hidden herself under. She kicked out at things in the pile with the stumps that once had been her feet, casting a barrel at them—foolishly, it only exposed her more.

Yet then, Durran burst into the range of her senses, running with determination as he emptied a bucket of water onto the ground. He pushed through the tent flap, coming to stand and survey the scene.

"Durran, help!" she called out again, trying to move closer to him.

Without hesitation, Durran cast the bucket he held at the nearest assailant, then rushed towards her. Magic was already swirling in both of his hands. Just as a man took a swing at her, Durran fired a spell—a lightning spell. It struck the man squarely in the chest, and he dropped the blade. Even still, it had momentum from the swing, and the tip pierced Elenore's thigh deep.

After crying out, she swallowed her pain and kept moving towards Durran. She pulled the blade free of her thigh and offered it to him, and he seized it without missing a step in his sprint. Two men were closest to her, and Durran became a whirlwind of steel to the both of them. His attacks were wild, serving only to create space.

The men were coordinated. Rather than foolishly rush Durran, they surrounded him, then prepared to press inwards and crush him with a coordinated attack. With his body shielding Elenore, his maneuverability was severely crippled if he wanted to keep her safe. He faced five foes.

"Why'd you stop screaming? Am I alone enough?" Durran quipped even here.

“...could be more of them,” she said, pained. “You’d best be.”

As though that were a finish to their conversation, Durran conjured a B-rank ward to his right with his ring. While it held off two, he worked on the other three—his blade darted towards one, yet just before it met his foe, he blasted them with a wind spell from his left hand. It was a mere wave of force, but it disturbed enough to lend Durran an opportunity.

After sinking his blade deep into the leftmost man’s neck, he released the handle and turned to the others who’d already recovered and came at him fiercely. He caught the next man’s blade with his bare hand, and his royal-forged gauntlet chipped slightly from the blow yet remained sturdy enough to stop the attack. He grabbed the man’s shoulder with the other hand and pushed him on top of his ally. They both stumbled, and Durran finished his attack with a C-rank spell even Elenore recognized—[Wargfire], a maw of a wolf-like flame that consumed the both of them. Now aflame, they were hardly stiff competition.

Durran took a step back as the last two circled around the ward he’d made. He pulled free the blade he’d jammed in the other’s neck, then stood back before Elenore. The last two both rushed synchronously. Durran prepared another spell, yet the man threw something ahead. Electricity exploded outwards from a simple enchanted charm, catching Durran and sending him reeling.

The two took the opportunity not to continue the assault on Durran, but to approach Elenore. One pulled his blade back to stab her through... yet Elenore had not been remaining idle. She threw a fistful of dirt she’d dug at the man’s eyes, and used all the strength she could muster to get away.

She was successful in staying away long enough for Durran to recover. With a strange lightning scar marring his face, he stepped up to the blinded man and seized his hair, jamming his blade through his neck. The other backed away, panicked and undecided, until his back met with the still-active ward Durran had conjured. He looked back for but a moment... but it was long enough for Durran to come at him. Their blades met—overhand met underhand, a stab met a hilt, yet Durran surprised his foe finally with a simple punch to the face with his free hand. Staggered, the man met a quick end with a blade into his chest.

The battle was ostensibly done, but Durran moved and mercilessly dispatched the two men that had been caught on fire. Only then did he walked towards Elenore, kneeling before her.

“Those worthless idiots... center of the camp, they let this happen...” he muttered as he kneeled before her, healing her leg.

Just then, the two royal knights that had left the tent returned, stepping inside. They grabbed at their blades when they saw Durran, completely bewildered by the scene before them.

“Where were you?!” Durran rose to his feet and shouted with wrath. “Where in the gods’ name were you?! The king’s sister was ambushed, and where were you?!”

“The... the fire, sir...” one of them mumbled.

“Durran,” Elenore called out. “Leave them.”

Durrant paused, then continued, "This is inexcusable. This is an embarrassment. This is a disgrace of the highest magnitude. I don't see any reason why these men should still be breathing after such a useless display."

"Durrant," Elenore repeated. "Send them out."

Durrant's jaw clenched, then he looked back. "Princess..."

"Send them," she repeated.

Durrant's anger did not quiet, and he stewed in silence for a time before commanding in a harsh bark, "Get out of my sight."

The men were all too happy to leave. Durrant stepped back to her.

"They don't deserve to live. The center of camp. The *center of camp*," he repeated, shaking his head. "What kind of drooling imbeciles populate our military?"

"My men were here, too. They got past all the guards. It's more a testament to their skill," Elenore said. "Durrant..."

Durrant knelt down. "Are you alright? You're shaking."

Elenore used the last of her strength to lean out towards Durrant, wrapping her arms around him. His armor was stiff and uncomfortable, and unpleasantly cold... yet even still, she wanted nothing more. Durrant let out a light exclamation, then resigned himself to the role, returning the embrace.

"I thought I was dead," she whispered, trying to calm her trembling.

Durrant said nothing, holding her in the quiet. "We don't get that luxury. Argrave decreed it was so."

"I underestimated this Unhanded Coalition," she continued. "You told me of their skill, yet I was still incautious. We cannot blame our subordinates when improper instructions are given."

Durrant shook his head. "Good subordinates know what to do."

"Hah," Elenore laughed. "Were that true, the world would be a paradise unto itself, all simply 'knowing what to do.' Leaders are important." She finally pulled away, still trembling. "And we need to know who leads this Unhanded Coalition. Elsewise... things will spiral out of control long before Argrave returns to remedy our lack of spellcasters."