

Jackal 301

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Chapter 301: Revealing Conversation

Argrave opened the door to the bottom floor of the inn, expecting to find it empty. Instead, Magister Vasilisa sat in an otherwise empty dining area, a great many tankards before her. Argrave was taken aback for a bit, and doubly so when he saw the blonde woman staring at him with clear and focused eyes. She certainly wasn't drunk.

Anneliese and Galamon entered behind Argrave, the two of them taking in the sight much the same as he had. There were few other sources of dread so intense as being caught returning after sneaking out. Nonetheless, Argrave remained calm and kept his facial expressions under lock and key.

"Have a seat, take a drink," Vasilisa commanded. She snapped her fingers, and a ward surrounded the room so that no noise would escape. As ever, her magic needed no matrix to cast—a peculiarity unique to her, he knew.

Argrave stepped within. "Vasilisa, I—"

"Have a seat," she picked up a tankard and set it down loudly. "And take a drink."

Argrave shifted his balance on his feet a few times as he thought about his options. Then, he pulled back the chair and sat. He sized up the liquid on the table, grabbed the tankard, and tipped it back. It was a potent, sharp brew—he'd been expecting something earthy like a beer or ale, but it tasted more like alcohol designed for nothing more than to make one drunk. He might as well drink paint thinner if he wanted a similar experience.

"That..." Argrave set down the empty bottle, mouth contorting involuntarily into a grimace. "...is very foul."

Across, Vasilisa sipped at her own drink leisurely. She showed no such displeasure. Argrave wondered if she'd chosen a different drink.

"Have another," she prompted, pushing a new tankard over by his hands.

Argrave sighed. He wish he had a cherry or something nearby to mitigate some of the discomfort, yet he obediently took the drink and drained it as quickly as he could. Once it was done, he set it down.

"We found Magisters Vera and Hegazar," Argrave began. "You were rather asleep, so we took the courtesy of confirming their presence."

"Took you three hours," Vasilisa nodded, her eyes seeming especially sharp at present.

Argrave furrowed his brows. He was about to play innocent, yet then Anneliese interjected, "You met with the man who is hunting Vulras."

Argrave cast a glance to her as she pulled a seat up beside him, completely perplexed how she had come to that conclusion. Having a near-supernatural empathy was one thing, but that claim—if indeed it was true—was far beyond. It was virtually mind reading.

Vasilisa looked taken off beat for a brief instance, yet she hardened in not a few moments. “My niece has allied with him. They thought to inform me I was keeping a vampire in my company. If you should put that forward as accusation, you cannot say I am being dishonest. I question if you can say the same.”

That Anneliese’s bold, out-of-the-blue accusation was correct surprised him more than the fact she had made it. Yet the Magister’s words did strike a chord with him. Their journey, brief though it was, had lent Vasilisa a newfound respectability in Argrave’s eyes. He didn’t enjoy lying to her. It had a necessity to it, though. And revealing the truth now might make the entire operation backfire terribly.

Even still... you can't forget the lessons you've learned in matters like these.

“Alright,” Argrave nodded. “If you want honesty, I’m prepared to give it.”

Galamon looked to him. “Are you sure that’s prudent?”

“Why not?” Argrave turned his head. “I like Vasilisa. I’m tired of keeping things hidden from her. This whole time, she’s been risking things time and time again. She showed us to her city, her sister. She exposed her house’s debt. She trusted us in all our endeavors here in First Hope. She let us have the lead in the conversation with the Drawnwater family. Trust goes both ways, doesn’t it?”

Vasilisa stirred in her seat. “...it’s not my city. Quadreign belongs to my sister, and always will.”

“Sanora? No... Anneliese, what do you think?”

Anneliese looked to him. “I agree. To her, and only her, I believe it more than deserved.”

Argrave smiled, then turned to a still-perplexed Vasilisa. “Alright. You two—give me a hand, would you?”

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Vasilisa watched, utterly confused, as those she knew as Sanora and Vulras stood up to grab at Silvaden’s hair. They pulled at it gingerly, and she saw the white slowly tear away with an uncomfortable noise. Soon enough, it was rather obvious that the long mane of white hair was a wig. She had seen their like before in the distant past, though mostly on balding or bald men.

Soon enough, a set of short, recently cut black hair of a particular dark shade revealed itself... and distinctly human ears just beneath them. For a moment, she didn’t know what to think. The more she stared, though, the more another face came to mind. If she removed the eyes... elongated the hair a great deal... then...

No, Vasilisa reasoned. The conclusion that she was coming to was ridiculous. What was she missing? Still, no matter how she tried to dismiss the thought, more and more evidence came creeping in. The moment before she left Relize, the king had allegedly returned to the city and gone into hiding. He was rumored to have wed a snow elf, and stood at seven feet tall himself. And the man before her, his hair... it was unmistakably like obsidian, just as all related to House Vasquer were purported to be.

As the implication of that thought set in more, her denial only increased. A king had abandoned his army on the edge of war to head to the north? Why? For what purpose? Moreover, her thoughts wandered back to the things she had said on the journey. She’d thought Silvaden neutral in the conflict in Vasquer, and so she’d spoken freely... what exactly had she said about Argrave?

Some words came to mind—craven, coward, opportunist. Had she said them about him? What had she said while drunk?

“You’re getting red,” Argrave noted. “Is your liquor that strong? Do I look that much handsomer with black hair? Or... and this is probably the most likely answer... do I not need to explain myself?”

Vasilisa raised her hand to her forehead. “No, I think you *do* need to explain yourself. I think that’s needed now more than ever.”

“Well...” Argrave ran his hand through his hair, fixing it from its time matted beneath the wig. “Magister Traugott was an unpredictable element. We don’t really have the long-term support needed to defend against him at all times. We didn’t really know what he wanted. On top of that, there was the north—largely neutral, extremely valuable in terms of magic potential, and with the flame of your House Quadreign lurking there, idle.”

“So... your first thought of solution was dropping everything you were doing, travelling with a Magister under the guise of a snow elf, and coming *here*?” Vasilisa placed both her arms on the table.

“Not my first thought,” Argrave shook his head. “...but among the first, I will admit. I was feeling useless cooped up in Relize. I thought I’d feel similarly useless leading an army into battle, considering how utterly ignorant I am of the matter.” Argrave leaned in. “But the matter with your house’s flame? A cure for Galamon’s vampirism? That’s his name, by the way...” Argrave glanced off to the side where the hulking elf stood. “Those two reasons were just as contributory to my coming here.”

“Your father-in-law,” she said under her breath, still coming to grips with things.

Argrave laughed. “No, no,” he shook his head. “He’s... a very good friend, and my knight-commander.”

Vasilisa cast a glance at the man called Galamon, and he gave her a slight dip of his head.

“My head is swimming,” Vasilisa said disbelievingly.

“I do apologize for the deception,” Argrave said. “But from the beginning, I never bore you or your house any ill-will. I just wanted to get a more direct hand in things, and I was a bit tied up with my current role.”

Vasilisa stood up from the chair and walked away, pacing back and forth for a bit as her mind quickly worked to figure out how this factored into things. It was still near impossible for her to accept this manner of king—a king who would simply up and leave the seat of his power in some far-fetched scheme.

Yet as her mind quieted, she came to confront a fact: his plans had been working. He had already gotten to talk to Margravine Sophia, and already convinced her to take part in his reckless coup d’état. What’s more, he had left today to speak to two Magisters.

Argrave’s designs on the north were more than feasible. They were coming to fruition.

When Vasilisa turned back, Silvaden was gone. King Argrave sat there—a shrewd diplomat, a manipulator unlike any other she’d come across. He had outlandish ideas and uncommon sense that made them come to being. Someone like that getting what they want... getting all of the north...

Maybe there was something in her gaze, but the knight-commander Galamon placed himself in her line of sight, and Vasilisa raised her eyes up. That brought another point to her mind. This man, this king... he'd come here for a reason. Argrave had come here, even if only in part, seeking some vague hope to cure his good friend of an ailment.

Vasilisa stepped forward slowly once again, putting her hand on the edge of her vacant seat. "What do you want with the north?"

Argrave considered his words. "I want its spellcasters. Whether in Atrus or the former Quadreign crownlands, they're a great untapped force. That's my sole weakness, at present. If we engaged with central Vasquer, we'd lose because of that."

"And after?" she struck at what was important to her. "What do you intend for the region?"

Argrave clasped his hands together. "I think you should speak to Vera and Hegazar."

"You'd make those two the north's overlords?" she pressed.

"No," Argrave said. "If I didn't have bigger concerns, I'd offer to restore the Queendom of Quadreign under Diana... once her tumor is dealt with. But I do have bigger concerns, so I can't promise that. This kingdom needs to stay united more than ever. As such, I'd like for you to speak to Vera and Hegazar." He rose to his feet. "War isn't the only problem coming. Things will climax only once this war is over."

Vasilisa crossed her arms. "Can I trust that meeting, with two Magisters?"

Argrave spread his arms out. "Hold me hostage," he suggested. "I trust you well enough to offer that."

The Magister raised her thumb up, biting her nail in anxiety. "... alright, I'll talk to them."

Argrave smiled. "This won't take long at all."

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Chapter 302: Weeding

Elenore heard a knock just outside her tent, and her head darted to the side. It was strange for anyone to knock given the fact her residence was cloth, and the knock itself sounded like a knuckle tapping against metal. Only one person knocked like that, and she could perceive him wholly just beyond the tent with her extrasensory jewelry.

"Come in," Elenore called out.

Durran pushed aside the flap and walked in. He walked in his gray wyvern scale royal-forged armor with his wyvern bone glaive. Ever since the attack, he remained ever vigilant.

"I think I've parsed through all the inconsistent reports your agents have been collecting," Durran said. "The leader of the Unhanded Coalition has been in close contact with the people in Central Vasquer, even Duke Rovostar of Whitefields. And I think I've figured out their name, at least. Georgina."

Elenore raised a brow at once. "That's one of the player characters in 'Heroes of Berendar.'"

"It is?" Durran scrunched his face together as he vainly tried to recall that detail.

"It is," Elenore nodded. "I made a point of remembering the names once I learned of Argrave's knowledge. Each and all have tremendous potential. Nikoletta, Durran, Ruleo, Dimocles, Boarmask, Ganbaatar, Georgina, Melanie, and Stain." The princess rose to her feet and stepped around the tent. "Georgina... she was a spellcaster primarily, a rogue secondarily..."

"The memory on you," Durran stepped closer, shaking his head as though to dismiss his admiration. "She's heading the Unhanded Coalition. From what I can tell, even if they aren't *officially* supported by the lords of Atrus, they've been receiving arms, armor, and supplies from them on the down-low. Were I to guess, the various lords of the region want to destabilize things to earn more favorable positions in negotiations." Durran smiled. "But this coalition struck at you. So I'll end them."

Elenore crossed her arms and said waggishly, "Is that right? Can I expect that done by tonight?"

Durran laughed. "You *can* expect that, but you might be disappointed." His smile wiped away quickly. "In all seriousness... something needs to be done about them. They've been attacking foraging parties, hunters, messengers, and camp followers with great success. They target our vulnerabilities so adroitly it's uncanny. Even with your men scouting with druidic magic, they avoid capture."

"Ending them won't come easily," she nodded, following his thoughts.

"Maybe," Durran nodded. "Maybe not. They target vulnerabilities. Let's give them one," he suggested, leaning his glaive against his shoulder as he popped his knuckles beneath his gauntlets.

"Should we lay on the ground, show them our bellies?" Elenore waved at him for a continuance, knowing he had more to say.

Durran looked to the flap that marked the tent's entrance, making no point to lower his volume as he declared, "I think Argrave's royal guards have a chance to make up for their display of ineptitude. I'll go with them into a rather ambush-prone location deep in enemy heartlands. When they come to gut us, we'll turn the tables on them."

"We should deliberately risk some of our best troops... and you, a vital component by this point... for what, exactly?" Elenore asked with an almost mocking tone.

Durran grabbed his glaive and walked about frustratedly. "An end to this stupid stalemate, this uncertainty. Whether we kill a lot of them or we learn something useful, it doesn't matter—something changes, and it makes me feel... I don't know. It makes me feel the good feeling," he said with a bitter jokiness. "We can't afford this stagnation. Argrave left to be proactive—I think we should be much the same."

"Proactive, is it?" Elenore bit at her lip. "I think walking out into the taiga waiting to be ambushed is rather reactive, but then I've been told I'm insufferably semantic. Well..." she sighed. "You can't just walk out into the wilderness like a duckling lost from its mother. There needs to be purpose. I think we can figure out something for you to do, a genuine task... and moreover, I won't tolerate you alone leading them. Melanie will come with," she said with finality.

Durran frowned. "That one? The mercenary?"

"We lead an army of mercenaries," the princess waved her hand as though dismissing the point. "Melanie has fought in more battles than most veterans, yet still she lives. She's a formidable ally, and

one I've underutilized considering how much I pay her. Much of that is your fault," she noted, eyeless sockets fixing on him as though they saw.

Durran stared at her face unflinchingly. "My apologies for being so talented and freely available," he responded, clearly not sorry. "It's something of a curse of mine, being so good at what I do. But the way you're talking... it sounds like you're in agreement with this idea I had."

"I am," Elenore nodded. "Let's start making some plans for this excursion of yours. I don't care if Georgina is a player character. We have an undesirable to be weeded out... and a battle to come."

Even still, as she thought of the notion of sending Durran into such a risky conflict... something about it bothered her, made her stomach uneasy. Was there a detail that she was missing? That would be revealed in the days to come, she supposed.

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Argrave led Vasilisa to meet Vera and Hegazar, supposedly a 'hostage.' The blonde-haired Magister of the north had a rather big heart, so her idea of taking him hostage was merely standing behind Argrave as they had a conversation with the other two. The dialogue between the two of them unfolded rather smoothly, fortunately for Argrave.

As the two Magisters had been sent to the north to spread word of Gerechtigkei, they naturally had something denoting Castro's authority—a peculiar badge. To learn that Castro intended to declare the Order's support for Argrave was surprise enough, but Vasilisa was doubly shocked when they discussed the reason: namely, Gerechtigkei and Argrave's opposition to said calamity.

Vasilisa had already been put off-balance by the news Argrave was the true identity of the man she thought named Silvaden. To hear of this calamity nearly turned her brain to mush. Despite the surprise, she was convinced of as much as was possible with no evidence for the claim beyond Castro's word. She agreed to two things: to return to the Tower of the Gray Owl to see the proof, and to support Argrave in his endeavors here. It was a tremendous victory.

Once the talk was over, the two Magisters said consolingly to Vasilisa, "Fret not. Argrave... he makes a habit out of fooling Magisters, it would seem. Perhaps we ought to tell you about the circumstances we first engaged with their party..."

Though Argrave was pleased the three of them seemed to be bonding, he was a little unnerved it was under the pretense of his habitual duplicity. Lying was supposed to be a bad thing. He didn't wish to be remembered as Argrave, the pathological liar. That was a poor reputation to have as a king... and even worse, it might make people finally wise up to his pathological lying.

With the crisis largely averted, Argrave returned to the inn where the four of them were staying with an increased understanding fostered. Argrave felt some burden lifted, even if he would need to wear that damnable wig for another long while to keep up with the persona he'd projected to the others.

"I've never needed a drink more than I have now," Vasilisa declared as the door opened.

Argrave held the door for her. "It's early morning after dealing with all this. I think the both of us need sleep."

“Maybe you’re right,” Vasilisa nodded, rubbing her eyes as though she’d been reminded she should be tired.

Anneliese and Galamon had been left behind, as dictated by the ‘hostage’ situation. Now, both stepped towards Argrave, eager to reunite. Argrave hugged Anneliese, then extended the same courtesy to Galamon, if a bit less intimately.

“I have news,” Anneliese said. “Someone working for the margravine stopped by. She’d like to have another meeting today—with more parties present, this time.”

Vasilisa sighed. “Good gods...”

Argrave, unlike the Magister, was pleased. He had felt things were moving too slowly, and now it seemed the new addition to their scheme was committed to her role. “No rest for the wicked. Did she ask for a reply?”

“I do need a drink,” Vasilisa decided, stepping off into the room in search of the innkeeper.

Argrave watched her go, pleased as punch with this start to the day no matter how fatigued he felt.

“No, Sophia needed none. I assume things went well?” Anneliese asked. “Looking at you, the answer is yes... but details?”

“The talk went as well as it could have, reasonably,” Argrave looked to her. “Vasilisa is still with us, but now fully and totally.”

“Excellent,” Anneliese clasped her hands together. “Shall we go join her, then?”

“Hold on,” Argrave stopped her. “Out of curiosity... how’d you figure out she met with that vampire hunter?”

Anneliese paused, then said somewhat proudly, “Just... a little gamble based on speculation. You mentioned Svetlana was a player companion. You also mentioned the attacker was elven. I recall you mentioning one playable character was elven... and given the liberty the playable characters had in their life paths, I assumed that might be our vampire hunter.” She strolled to him bouncily and then said, “I just did what I think you would have done. It was a little risky... but it was reasonably risky. Just like you like it, I think.”

Argrave clicked his tongue as he beamed at her, reminded once again why he loved this woman. His face started to fall as he thought of another matter. “Playable character... then it’s Ganbaatar,” he said, looking at Galamon. “Looks like the owner of our glass eye was looking for you as much as we were him. Problem is... I don’t see a good way to get it off him. Little bit more difficult to justify murdering and taking it from his corpse when he’s a reasonably good person.”

Galamon crossed his arms. “I’ve been drinking of the bowl again, yet the feeling has not yet returned.”

Argrave nodded. “Maybe... you don’t need to bother anymore. We can probably deal with this matter through Svetlana.”

“Can we?” Anneliese tilted her head. “So far as I know, she still thinks the cure you have in mind is the Flame of the Tenebrous Star.”

Argrave blanked for a moment, then held his hand to his face. “Good lord... I think you’re right.”

“You are amply tired,’ Anneliese grabbed Argrave’s shoulder. “We had best focus on the imminent matter—the meeting with Margravine Sophia. After, we can disentangle this complex issue.”

“If the opportunity passes us up?” Argrave rebutted.

“Even a juggler can fail if he leaves too much in the air,” Anneliese said proverbially. “Come. Vasilisa waits.”

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“Good, you’re here,” was the first thing Margravine Sophia said to Argrave and company when they arrived to the Drawnwater estate. She had been waiting for them just out front. “I do hope that you’ve nothing else to do today.”

“Why?” Vasilisa questioned somewhat brusquely, her fatigue catching up to her.

“Because I intend to do much today—the persuasion and the planning both, or at the very least the beginning of it,” the margravine explained, turning on her heel and heading for the door. “We have an undesirable leading us, and he needs to be weeded out. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would,” Argrave answered. “I appreciate your eagerness, Margravine Sophia.”

“Just call me Sophia,” the green-eyed woman answered back with a coy smile.

“Alright, Sophia,” Argrave smiled in turn. “But... let’s make sure we’re as cautious as we are quick.”

The margravine’s back straightened somewhat, making it seem like the elaborate furs she wore puffed up. “But of course. We have a battle to come. And I have some good news, about two new arrivals... Vasilisa might know them, being as they’re colleagues.”

Argrave’s already-wide grin widened further. “Oh? Who might they be?”

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Chapter 303: Elaborate Self Advocacy

Margravine Sophia stepped into a lounge in the Drawnwater estate, leading Vasilisa, Argrave, and his two companions. He’d once again donned the white wig to disguise himself as Silvaden, and thus far things had proceeded without issue.

Margravine Sophia pointed to a pair in the room and said to the Magister, “I believe you may know these two.”

Vera and Hegazar stood there, smiling at the new arrivals. Pavel Drawnwater was just beside them, silent but alert.

Vasilisa shut the door behind them as she said, “I do. Nice to see you two again.”

“This room is warded. We can talk freely.” Margravine Sophia nodded as she placed herself just beside her cousin, Pavel. “I explained everything sufficiently, I hope? You know why they’re here?”

Vasilisa nodded. “They’re supporting Argrave.”

“Not just them,” Sophia shook her head. “The entire Order is likely to, given Tower Master Castro’s predisposition to the idea. And they came here to broach that subject with us.”

“I understand. But... they came here?” Argrave asked, trying his best to act ignorant. “Why?”

“Well, His Majesty is very adept at finding out things,” Vera answered. “He knows well the situation in the north. And his information led him to believe that the margravine might possess not only the disposition, but the influence needed to make a foothold in the north.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes. “That’s... a little suspicious.”

“As I said, His Majesty is very adept,” Vera continued. “He has eyes and ears everywhere. He might as well be in this room right now...” she said coyly, grinning.

Hegazar laughed at her joke but quickly added, “And with us present, King Argrave *is* here, in effect. We have been authorized to handle things on his behalf. Indeed, we’ve been given a document marked with his magic signature.”

Argrave bit his lip, feeling that the Magister was tempting fate with her jokes. “...Vasilisa?”

“I know Elenore,” she said. “I have a connection with her. All things considered... if we can secure the Magisters...” she left her agreement unspoken. Despite her good-nature, Argrave felt the Magister was a decent actor.

“I think it’s in your best interest, Magister Vasilisa,” Hegazar smiled, then looked to Sophia. “His Majesty’s plan was rather simple. He intends to restore House Quadreign to power, and earn their allegiance.”

Sophia’s eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth to say something, then looked to Pavel. Her cousin seemed similarly bothered by this notion, yet they had more tact that to say so in the presence of Vasilisa.

“...House Quadreign has no power here,” Vasilisa said, and the two Drawnwaters nodded eagerly in agreement. “What’s more, our house always reigned as independent queens, not vassals to Vasquer.”

“That’s correct,” Sophia latched on to that eagerly. “House Drawnwater has near a thousand men-at-arms in our employ... and connections to many of the houses in the region. The reason why Margrave Ivan married me was for our house’s influence over the region.”

Vera nodded. “Our liege understands that. As such, His Majesty intends to reward your house appropriately for your aid. However, there is one detail we must consider: if House Drawnwater was made lord of the margrave’s land, that can only be interpreted as a usurpation. If House Quadreign was restored, however, and then swore fealty to Argrave organically... that is a righteous cause that offers just support. Indeed, that Vasilisa is entangled in things was a pleasant surprise, as this is what was always intended. It saves us some trouble.”

“But... their authority over the region...” Pavel began.

“You told me their flame would be returned to them,” Hegazar noted. “Their authority will be unrivalled. Thousands will flock to their banners if the flame is returned. All in the north remember well the power Quadreign wielded with the flame burning, with their clocktower ticking.”

Sophia and Pavel both looked distraught.

“Margrave Ivan is a Magister of the order,” Hegazar reminded them. “Vasilisa... do you think you, alone, can face him?”

“He’s far stronger, and more experienced in battle,” Vasilisa shook her head. “I could not.”

“Then a bloodless coup, as you wish, would be out of the question without our aid,” Vera nodded.

“Indeed... you might not succeed at all.”

“The Drawnwaters have to be amply rewarded,” Argrave insisted, introducing himself in the conversation. “Without them, this endeavor would be impossible.”

At the unexpected support, the two seemed to brighten.

“Hmm...” Hegazar rubbed his chin. “How about... sovereignty over this island, named Counts of First Hope?”

The two Drawnwaters looked between each other. Argrave looked to Anneliese, and she shot him a thumbs down indicating the family’s thoughts.

“That’s not enough,” Argrave declared. “The coastal villages nearest, too, must swear fealty.”

“Silvaden...!” Sophia said, shocked.

Hegazar lowered his hands. “That is asking much.”

Argrave shook his head, acting defiant as he declared, “I think it’s proportional.”

“Proportional to what?” Vera pressed.

“To their contributions to Argrave’s effort,” Anneliese backed him.

Hegazar took a breath and sighed. “Do you agree?” he looked to Sophia.

“We... certainly will not disappoint,” Sophia nodded.

With their support declared, Pavel added, “His Majesty can rest assured.”

“And you, Vasilisa?” Vera looked to her. “This concerns your house’s welfare.”

“I... have no objections,” Vasilisa nodded.

Vera and Hegazar spared a glance, then stepped off to the side to speak in private. They stepped back a moment later and said, “Then it’s decided. The Drawnwaters will be named Counts of First Hope, lording over the whole of this island and its dependent coastal villages on the mainland. In return, we will aid in this coup to return House Quadreign to power. Thereafter, Diana of Quadreign will swear fealty to Argrave as the first Archduchess of Northern Vasquer, passing along the female line as is Quadreign tradition. You can speak for your sister on this matter, I trust?”

“I can,” Vasilisa said without hesitation.

Margravine Sophia smiled broadly. “I am glad to hear of it. As my cousin said, His Majesty will not be disappointed.”

"I should hope not," Vera spared a glance at Argrave. "Well, let's discuss out strategy."

"Yes..." Hegazar nodded. "To begin with, I'm curious how you chose who would come to this meeting."

Margravine Sophia clasped her hands together. "All present have been filtered carefully. They have personal and political dissatisfaction with Margrave Ivan and have expressed so publicly. Ivan detests them. On top of that, they have sway with those that matter."

"That should be helpful," Vera stepped closer. "Still, let's play things out before we move..."

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A good deal of people sat in the dining hall of the Drawnwater estate. They numbered perhaps thirty. All seemed to know each other quite well, as the general temperature of the room was that of a relaxed party. People joked and talked freely, flitting about in conversation like old friends, all. They wore decadent furs, fine silks, and shining rings, necklaces, and earrings as comfortable displays of affluence. They feasted on food every bit as fine as their dress.

A harsh chiming echoed throughout the room, and all faces turned towards Margravine Sophia as she tapped a silver spoon against a crystal-clear glass. Soon, the conversations of the assembled in the room came to a stop.

"Ladies and gentlemen... I'm pleased that you were able to gather here under such short notice," Sophia began once the voices had quieted enough for hers to be heard without question. Her head swiveled as she scanned the crowd, continuing, "I don't think you'll regret being here at all, today."

"Of course not," one man cut in. "With such fine food, we could never be regretful."

A few laughed, but not enough to disrupt the proceedings. The margravine smiled icily, then continued, "There is a very pressing matter looming over all the citizenry and nobility in the north. My husband has not deigned to address this matter. As to why that is... I cannot say."

Margravine Sophia paused, perhaps for dramatic effect.

"Must we speak of politics at all times?" a tired-looking young man spoke up.

Many looked at him, nodding in agreement. His dissent was some sort of social proof that others heeded.

"The war has come to our shores," Sophia declared to kill the dissent in infancy. "If you would like to have the end result of the war culminate in the deaths of your parents and children, you may stuff wool in your ears and walk onwards mindlessly. I, however, believe ignorance and stupidity are sure ways to end up in the gutters. Look at Atrus' fate—they wished for neutrality, and so King Felipe III had them all assassinated."

The tired-looking young man crossed his arms defensively, but said nothing more on the matter.

"I'd like to introduce two other guests," Sophia clasped her hands together, then stepped forward to the table to retrieve a bell. She rung it, and a few moments later, the door opened. A pair walked in—Magisters Vera and Hegazar, both wearing fineries of black and gold. There was a rather peculiar symbol

worn where their heart was. It was a sun, four snakes forming from its sunbeams. A few raised their brows in recognition of the symbol.

“I have the honor of welcoming Magister Vera and Magister Hegazar, both of the Order of the Gray Owl,” Margravine Sophia held one hand out in demonstration, as though she was displaying an exhibit to auctioneers. “Everyone, please treat them courteously—they have come a long way, and we should show them northern hospitality.”

As the greetings came, Hegazar said simply, “Charmed.”

People sat up in their chairs, both out of respect and cognizance of the situation. If people did not recognize the symbol, they did not remain ignorant for long. Soon enough, the meaning of the snake-sun symbol on the Magister’s chest gained meaning: it was the symbol of the claimant, Argrave.

“The Magisters were kind enough to share me their knowledge of the inner circle in the Order of the Gray Owl. Simply put, the Order will declare its support for Argrave’s claim,” Sophia said simply.

If people were already at attention, now they were enraptured by this development.

“I know that I am in the company of friends and the like-minded, so I will speak plainly. The fact is, we of the north were betrayed,” the margravine declared. “Ivan, vassal to House Quadreign, betrayed the queendom and tore out our nation’s heart. After, he forced our house of Drawnwater into a political marriage, then spurned us in the same month.”

Sophia looked around as faces turned to shock, then continued, “But I am not content to let things remain like this. And I invited all of you here, today, because I know you share that sentiment. I have a proposal to share.”

A third person entered into the room—Magister Vasilisa, walking just behind the other two Magisters. They made way for her. And just as the other two... Vasilisa bore a golden sun on her chest, four snake heads biting out of the sunbeams.

“I believe it is time to restore prosperity to the north,” Sophia continued. “And I believe we are the ones to do it. The only way, dear friends... is to restore the proper rulers of the north. We must restore House Quadreign.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 304: Stroke of State

Argrave had déjà vu to something that had occurred not months ago—namely, Margravine Sophia’s campaign to sway the northern nobles rather strongly reminded him of Leopold’s to sway the patricians of Relize. Things were markedly different in the aristocratic circles of the north, yet they remained the same as the patricians in many ways. Instead of wealth and value being the primary concern, it was prestige, lands, and social security dominating their attention.

Argrave had a new, and rather valuable, perspective. He was not operating as King Argrave. Rather, he took up the role of Silvaden, a foreign encroacher and supposed employee of Vasilisa. In effect, he was at the bottom looking up rather than the top looking down. At the same time, he had his hands in the pockets of three of the leading figures—the Magisters present.

Argrave felt like a fish returned to water. Back at Relize, things had been too easy, too safe— he'd achieved his aims, and now he had to sit atop what he'd built and maintain it rather than build it. Here, though, he felt dynamic, alive, and entrepreneurial. And on top of that, he argued for another—House Quadreign. To say the least of things, it was a very personally enriching thing, and Argrave absorbed all that he could.

But the day could not last forever, and eventually many returned to their estates.

"We'll be keeping a close eye on all of them," Pavel Drawnwater promised Vasilisa. "We'll make sure that none of them speak to anyone they shouldn't be speaking to. We'll keep a tight ship."

"...I wasn't expecting things to end up this way," Vasilisa shook her head. "Even still... I hope you know House Quadreign will not soon forget the Drawnwaters. My sister is even more generous than I am."

Margravine Sophia smiled. "I think we will prosper under Argrave—ah, King Argrave, I mustn't forget. I've heard whispers of an institution he intends to establish—a parliament. I believe the king would be willing to give a seat to... well, never mind," she shook her head, perhaps reminded of Vera and Hegazar's presence only then. "I've heard tell that Vasquer loyalists in the center have gained a slight advantage in the stalemate with the south, while Argrave's faction subdues Atrus with a mechanical efficiency. It seems these two are destined to clash. With the Order's support... victory seems preordained for Argrave's side."

Argrave furrowed his brows but said nothing on the matter. This talk of the loyalists beating out the south was concerning... but Argrave would have to speak with Elenore to have any certainty on the matter.

"Soon enough, we'll have a battle of our own," Vera noted. "I think the plan is rather simple. Hegazar and I will go to meet him, under the ordinary circumstances... you'll arrive, Vasilisa, as he wants you to... and then we'll cut off the head. A simple, concise battle."

"It is his home," Argrave reminded them. "He'll have the advantage. His tower was built by the Order of the Gray Owl, and the protective enchantments within more than match those without. Three-on-one isn't necessarily an advantage."

"You're coming too, lest you forget. With surprise and numbers... I'll say it is an advantage," Hegazar rebutted. "But I'll take your concerns in mind... Silvaden."

"On that note... perhaps we ought to plan," Argrave suggested.

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"I have some insider information about the make of the tower Ivan resides in. And, quite frankly, all of us ought to be very concerned." Argrave declared to the three Magisters once they were in a private place—another room in the Drawnwater estate. It seemed to be a guest room and had many exhibits out on display coupled with luxury goods to please guests. The family had generously offered to lodge them, but after this conversation they'd all be leaving in order to minimize some risk.

"Why?" Vera stepped up to a drawer in the room, opening it and pilfering a bottle of perfume hidden within. She quickly stowed it in her pocket.

Argrave looked to Vasilisa, trying to act ignorant of Vera's petty theft. "When you and I went to his tower... you saw that all the walls were covered, right?"

"Yes," Vasilisa nodded, thinking back. "The walls were covered in furs, silks, all that sort of stuff. The room was so stuffy and warm it was hard to breathe."

Argrave pointed at her. "My sources tell me these 'decorations' are hiding rather elaborate enchantments."

Hegazar frowned. "We can try and have the meeting elsewhere," he suggested, examining some of the shelves in the room. He picked up a wooden figurine, twisting it about in his fingers.

"Considering he's meeting not one, not two, but three Magisters..." Argrave trailed off, leaving his disagreement in the air.

"He'd never hold it elsewhere," Vera concluded, shutting the drawer and leaning against the table. "What a rather unsavory man."

"Have you any idea what the hidden enchantments do?" Anneliese asked Argrave, taking a seat on the couch politely.

Argrave sat beside her with a huff. "Enchantment quality has diminished over the years on account of jealous hoarding of precious techniques, and the extinguishment of certain elven civilizations. Order of the Rose stuff, like this..." Argrave raised his arm up and tapped the silver bracer there that stored his vital liquid for blood magic. "Can't be made anymore. I don't know specifics, but let's guess: they're probably protective, perhaps wards. They won't be able to enhance his attack, but they can improve his defense. He might be able to use trap spells woven into the stone. On top of that, if he's sensible, there will be some alarms to notify people of an attack."

Though Argrave knew those facts from the game, he disguised it under the veil of deductive reason to avoid inquiry. He still felt it best to keep the source of his knowledge closely under wrap—it did him no favors if his past spread, both to his legitimacy as king and his respectability in widespread circles. The peasants might decry him as a body-snatcher, and the prominent would possess a weakness they might exploit. He didn't trust Vera and Hegazar to keep the secret close.

"I want to talk to Ivan," Vasilisa said. "I want to ask him some questions... about the 'why' of things."

Argrave sat there, agape. "You want to monologue before the fight? That generally gets people killed, despite what stories might suggest."

"I want to *dialogue*," she crossed her arms. "Haven't I earned this, Silvaden—no, Argrave?"

"Bottle that foolishness up," Galamon cut in brusquely from his spot just behind Argrave. "I won't tolerate a stupid risk because of your unanswered questions. If you talk out of turn, I'll consider that a cue to start the fight. His Majesty's safety is paramount. Even his presence is too great a risk."

Galamon's deep, guttural voice coupled with his firm words had an authority to them that was psychologically difficult to dispel, and all fell silent.

"Galamon's seen more battles than all of us combined, then multiplied by five," Argrave finally broke the silence. "I trust him on this. We go in with a plan, we adapt to any incongruities in this plan, and we

execute it as best we're able." He rose to his feet. "But we have days to plan. It'll take some time for Margravine Sophia's people to prepare to mitigate all of the chaos of Ivan's death."

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Finding the people suitable for the coup was considerably less time-consuming than preparing for the act itself. Even still, time was of the essence, and they all moved quickly.

For her part, Vasilisa met with Ivan and agreed to expose her debt to Vera and Hegazar to reduce some of it. Apparently, the figure wasn't small. Nevertheless, Ivan's supposed generosity did not sway her: Vasilisa was firmly set in her decision.

Argrave was kept abreast of things through Hegazar and Vera. Sophia's people, amply persuaded, set to work in compromising key positions. The captain of the guard was instructed not to interfere. Prominent spellcasters who had taken residence within Ivan's tower were supposed to be 'indisposed' on that day. Administrative positions were either on the side of the Drawnwater family, or ready to be replaced in the same manner. Ivan's vassals would be persuaded both by his death and their quick seizure of First Hope, plus a few other... persuasive measures. A coup was less about securing forces more than it was ensuring no opposition arose in the new regime's infancy.

Vasilisa did make some difficulties on that front—she insisted that no people were killed because of non-compliance. Argrave did agree with her assessment and supported her as best as he was able. It was clearly a point of disagreement between the Drawnwaters and Magister—the margravine had no issues killing the innocent. As compromise, prominent people that did not comply—either from fear of exposure or simple refusal to cooperate—would be imprisoned, to be released once things were settled.

As things were established, the day the act would occur crystallized. So, too, did their method of disposing of Ivan. And now... the day and the method came to them. Consequently, they went.

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Argrave had never truly been afraid of the mystic lifts in the various towers belonging to the Gray Owl, yet as he rode up the center of Margrave Ivan's tower, Vasilisa standing behind him, his trepidation was quite great.

You signed up for this, Argrave reminded himself. You wanted to leave the safety of Relize.

His fear did not have long to build. Soon enough, the stone platform met the inner wall of the tower... and a familiarly decadent room waited beyond, three within its walls. Vera and Hegazar chatted amicably with Margrave Ivan, far from the picture of the ruthless murderers they intended to be.

Ivan looked to them as they stepped within the room. He stayed sitting, as uncordial a host as the first time.

"Vasilisa," he called out. "You got my message. As expected, you're here quickly."

Magister Vera watched them enter the room. Then, she calmly raised her hand in Ivan's direction, whose gaze faced Vasilisa. A mana ripple split the air, signifying a coming high-rank spell. Ivan's head whipped around in surprised shock, and he quickly rose to his feet and tried to step back, shouting, "HAAH!"

By the time his shout left Ivan's lips, Vera's spell completed. Deafening crackling filled the room as thousands of thick ice bolts exploded from her hands in a steady, continuous surge of power. Her A-rank ascension had a special property that imbued each of the ice spells with another element—on this occasion, she chose lightning. The white spikes and icy blue lightning flew towards Ivan's face with unrestrained fury and speed, battering the man's figure in an unrelenting assault. The spell was called simply [Glacial Torrent] and was one of few A-rank spells that could be used in relatively close quarters.

In tandem, golden lights struck out from the walls like lightning of Ivan's own, and sparking yellow fragments danced everywhere as he was warded from the attack. Lights shone brilliantly behind the furs and silks shrouding the walls as the enchantments came to life, strained. As Vera attacked from her spot, Hegazar rose to his feet and stepped to Argrave, a spell of his own whirling.

Argrave was shielded by illusion magic, and so stepped to a corner of the room discretely. He held his hand out and cast [Bloodfeud Bow]. For the first time, he felt no pain—instead, the spell took from the bracer in his arm, the arrow growing larger and larger in preparation for a deadly attack.

Vera's spell came to an end, and Ivan rushed away to one corner of the room. Despite that deadly attack from Vera, his forehead was only barely bleeding. The intense glow of the enchantments in the room faded as Vasilisa, Vera, and Hegazar took their places opposite him. Galamon and Anneliese waited just behind, taking no risks.

"Time to die, thief," Vasilisa declared.

Ivan healed the wound on his head and straightened. "You're in my tower."

He pulled back some of the fabric on the wall and touched the stone. At once, all of the fabric was burnt away in a burst of flame. Complex enchantments wound from the ceiling, the walls, and the floor.

"I'll demonstrate what that means," Ivan continued.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 305: The Gang Floors It

Argrave seemed to have a penchant for fighting powerful people in high towers with the intent of subverting their governance. This was the second time—not a lot by any measure, but even still, it was strange that it had happened twice. This time, Argrave had a lot more at his disposal than a bag of Ebonice arrowheads and a gutful of spite.

Magister Vera held both of her hands out, palms whirling with spell matrixes as she contested Ivan with her magic. The margrave became aglow with golden sparks as he took blow after blow as though they were nothing. Bolts of lightning exploded into pillars of frost, flames soared out like gusts of wind... yet still he resisted, taking them all with the aid of the enchantments inscribed along the wall, the floors, and the ceiling.

Vera's A-rank ascension, [Two-Faced], imbued all of her elemental spells with another element of her choosing. It defied the conventional logic of all the elements, yet its effect was undeniably powerful. She could send lightning-fast projectiles that exploded into ice or send fire through the air with the structure and force of wind magic.

Margrave Ivan, her target, was far from a static target. He stepped about the room, commanding the spells writ into the stone in magic to assault them at no expenditure to himself. Spears of ice came from the walls in relentless waves, lightning rained down from above, jaws of fire bit from below like wolves nipping at the heels...

But then, Vera was not alone.

Closely bunched with the others, Vasilisa handled all attacks with the grace of a figure skater. With a snap of her finger, a stomp of her foot, a clench of her fist, a whistle from her mouth, or even a turn of her head, wards rose to confront each and every attack like the woman had an enchanted array just like Ivan's hidden out of sight. Hegazar and Anneliese's magic defense, though robust, seemed lacking sorely beside hers.

Vasilisa's ascension was singular in effect and somewhat underwhelming by simple observation. She needed no spell matrix to cast magic. She needed only vague gesture and clear intent: as such, her ascension bore the name [Matrix of the Body].

Even then, Hegazar, Vera, and Anneliese together were not enough to resist Ivan's relentless barrage. Galamon was the only able to deal with the faster magics—with one Giantkiller held in his right hand to ward lightning and the left hand occupied with his Ebonice axe, his weapons soared through the air as though he fought ghosts. Their position was so unfavorable even the four of them could not block all attacks, and the wounds mounted—slight, yet building.

"You won't outlast me. It was over the moment you attacked me in my tower," Ivan declared in a moment of quietude.

Then, the margrave's assault resumed. Powerful gusts of wind dominated the room, sending flames and ash billowing about in every direction. Lightning rained down once again, redoubled in intensity—Galamon had to drop his Ebonice axe and retrieve the other Giantkiller to receive the sparking assault. Anneliese, once idle, had to join in the defense. Vera's attacks cut through this storm of chaos like a sword, yet Ivan's wards defended him effortlessly.

Ivan was doing his best to win. His foes were hard-pressed to defend, and his reserves of enchantments within the tower were without an end. With so many variables in this battle, though... it was forgivable to forget a few. And Argrave had been counting on that.

Argrave stood in the corner of the room, keeping a low profile to avoid stray attacks. He was concealed by Hegazar's magic. Maybe if Ivan hadn't been trying to end three Magisters, he would've seen through the illusion quite easily. But locked in mortal combat as he was... he could hardly be pressed to acknowledge the B-rank mage in the corner, preparing only one spell.

With an eerie calm over him, Argrave watched as the silver bracer on his arm slowly lost the essence within it—not blood in its liquid form, but rather the core mystical constitution of blood magic. This essence had been gathering for well over a month. He poured all of it within the [Bloodfeud Bow], its power growing and growing. It was starting to distort the air near Argrave with a reddish-black mist, and the illusion spell wavered slightly.

Finally, though, biting pain started to course through his wrist, and Argrave winced. The bracer was drained. Even still, he held. Argrave rose from his crouching position and walked as the spell tore at his

vitality. Hegazar's illusion magic shattered from the intensity of the spell, revealing Argrave in earnest. Ivan's gaze rushed to Argrave, his recognition slowing turning to caution as he witnessed the prepared spell distorting the very air around him.

Ivan eyed Argrave, prepared to move any direction as he concurrently redirected attack efforts towards him. It was only one attack—if Argrave were to fire it, the man would have to dodge or defend and then it would be nullified. One shot, one opportunity... if the Magisters restrained him long enough to get an attack off, it would be over. But Argrave remembered well nearly missing his target the first time he'd use [Bloodfeud Bow] all those months ago in the wetlands. Ivan was far smaller than the giant ape in that foul place, and smarter as well. Argrave preferred a surer target.

Argrave craned his back forward, shifting on his feet back. He took aim... and released the arrow towards the floor below.

The maroon bolt of pure destructive power tore through all below them with speed far beyond any other times Argrave had ever used it. To describe it simply... the first few floors beneath them merely vanished as soon as the arrow left Argrave's bow. Far below, the other floors folded inwards, a gaping hole punched straight through the center.

When facing a foe with an undeniable advantage... Argrave didn't believe it was prudent to engage in a slugging match. Instead, he'd rather strip them of their advantage.

The sudden lack of anything beneath his body subjected Argrave to the whims of gravity. The sound was so deafening his hearing vanished in wake of a simple ringing. He looked back up, dazed and full of adrenaline, to witness the utter shock and dismay on Ivan's face as he saw his tower gutted. His reliance on the tower's enchantments left him out of his element and unprepared to call upon his own magic.

His adversaries were not so off-balance.

Vera conjured a familiar spell of transportation, and a bird of wind took shape beneath them. It slammed into Ivan with all the speed of a car, pinning him to the still-stable wall while suspending everyone except Argrave in the air. The complete destruction of all the tower's floors weakened the protective enchantments, but did not diminish them totally—still, Ivan coughed up blood from the blow, displaying his weakness plainly. As Argrave fell down, he witnessed Galamon jam both Giantkillers into Ivan's chest. The tower's enchantments still worked to defend him as brilliant blue lightning exploded in all directions... yet then Vasilisa joined the attack, and Hegazar next, contributing spells of their own.

Argrave fell too far to see what happened after. As he tumbled through the air without purchase, he briefly wondered if he should be concerned about the rapidly approaching floors below. Above, he spotted someone diving towards him. Anneliese caught Argrave, maneuvering with her wind-enchanted boots through the air. She couldn't stop their fall, but she could slow it, and so they descended downwards ever so slowly.

While gathering his bearings and straining to get into a more accommodating position, Argrave's ears slowly stopped ringing. The most comfortable position was still awkward—he stood atop her feet, hands holding her shoulders for balance. Even with the wind enchantment, their descent was quite rapid from the weight of the two of them.

“The tower walls are holding. Now, it’s just like a big chimney,” he said, barely able to hear his own voice over the fading tinnitus. “Thanks for the save, Mary Poppins,” he commended, adrenaline manifesting as triumphant exuberance.

Anneliese was not so quick to speak, clearly still locked in the battle. She stared at the scene above. After a few seconds... something started to fall down, liquid draining from it as it fell. A touch of warmth splashed on Argrave’s cheek, and Ivan’s body fell just after... down, down, and down, accompanied by a small shower of blood.

“The walls were always sturdier than the floor,” Anneliese said after the body had passed, looking down at Argrave. “Castro let me study the make of the Tower of the Gray Owl somewhat. I am glad the knowledge was useful.”

Argrave looked down, feeling some anxiety as the adrenaline washed away. Great clouds of debris dominated far below, rising upwards even still from the momentum of the crash.

“The flame will be down there,” Argrave noted, turning his eyes back up to study Anneliese’s face. “And potentially... the key to your A-rank ascension.”

Anneliese had been looking down and raised her head back up to stare at Argrave. Her amber eyes filled with hesitant anticipation as they descended ever lower.