

Their party of six stood at the bottom of the now-useless tower amidst the rubble spawned by destroying all its floors. Vasilisa kneeled over a body: Margrave Ivan's. Or... just Ivan, now. In death he lost all, even his title. He was covered and dust and debris and mutilated half a dozen times but remained recognizable enough.

"That sort of power isn't normal," Vera said, staring at Argrave with her arms crossed. "To do this much damage? To destroy a tower made to code by the Order of the Gray Owl?"

"What does it matter?" Argrave replied. "We're in this together. The job is done," he emphasized, using the term 'we' to build a sense of unity. "I think you could do the same thing if you went all out."

Vera shifted on her feet. "...no, I couldn't."

Argrave forget what he going to say, genuinely surprised by that confession. Vera wasn't the strongest spellcaster, not by a long shot... but she was an S-rank spellcaster. Argrave had sought out blood magic because he knew it could be powerful if used in tandem with his other boons, and he needed this sort of destructive potential for the fights ahead.

You're black blooded, true enough, but you used near a month of accruelement from your bloodsucking bracer, Argrave reminded himself. *Don't get a big head.*

"This sort of power is what you reaped from the living fortress, is it?" Hegazar chimed in.

Argrave held his hand out. "Not at all," he assured.

"Maybe we're owed a little more than what we got," Vera continued. "Maybe..."

Vasilisa rose to her feet. "I'm more concerned with the flame. We'll have to dig through some of this debris. And we still have an unsettled matter—the margravine needs to be informed of the result of our actions."

"You two are good with people," Argrave pointed to the Magisters, flattering. "I can trust you to get this news to them," he said, stating rather than asking so as to brook no room for disagreement. "I'll help Vasilisa clear a path to the flame. I'm rather unspent, after all."

"Well..." Hegazar slowly nodded. "I know what you're doing here by saying that, but... alright."

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Argrave had a rather difficult time helping with removing enough debris to clear a path. He never learned any earth magic, as its primary uses manifested in architecture, siege, or the higher ranks of magic. As such, he awkwardly used his hands, wind magic, and grit. Perhaps staying in the comfort of Relize for a month had stripped him of some of his grit, because Galamon worked far faster than he did without the boon of magic.

Still, with many working in tandem, a path was cleared to the unbroken lower levels of the tower, and thereafter to a set of stairs that headed deeper. Just as Margravine Sophia described—and just as Argrave remembered—the path took them to a room. Rather unlike Argrave remembered, it smelled faintly of vinegar. And deeper in... they saw the Flame of the Tenebrous Star.

The black flame was held in a great pit of dark metallic rock, almost like a cauldron of fire burrowed into the earth. A stairway led into this pit, winding along the edges of the rock. Crude runes had been etched into its surface. They seemed to have some effect on the flame that kept it bound. Four other fires burned in the corners of the room, drifting towards the larger flame as though feeding it.

When Vasilisa stepped to the edge of the pit and stared at the flame, one of her knees gave out and she knelt there, shaking slightly. Argrave knew there must've been a lot going through her head. She'd found a cure for her sister's ostensibly terminal disease—it'd be stranger if she didn't get emotional.

Argrave grabbed her shoulder and said, "Looks like your sister will be fine."

"Don't say things like that," she shot back at once. Argrave looked down at her, perplexed at how he had erred. She continued, "The last person I want to cry in front of is you."

Argrave laughed, then stepped forward. He put one foot on the black rock and leaned in, looking at it. Galamon grabbed his shoulder to prevent him from falling, but Argrave waved him away. As he stared at the waving black flame, an unpleasant memory surfaced. It was a dream he'd had long ago. He had been on a chair suspended by a chain above a fire. *I guess I must be having fun*, it whispered at him.

"I suppose you'll be trying to cure Galamon, now?" Vasilisa asked, rising back to her feet with composure already returned.

Argrave turned his head, but his mind was still occupied by that dream. "No," he said, almost by instinct.

Vasilisa narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean..." Argrave trailed off.

"Now is an unideal time," Anneliese contributed, covering for him.

Argrave nodded, turning his back to the flame. "That's right."

Vasilisa crossed her arms and took some steps closer, eyes peering down into the fiery pit. "How is now not the time? Isn't that why you did this?"

Argrave had his mental balance at this point, and so said quickly, "Why would I ever do something so foolish? This flame is still a flame—it burns away. If it burns away the beast in Galamon and he dies as a consequence, could you take responsibility for that haste?"

Slowly, her gaze wrenched away from the fire and up to Argrave. "No... you're right," she admitted. "But my niece is unrepentant in her support of the vampire hunter Ganbaatar, and I have compromised my principles more than I am usually willing. I won't forget your help, but..."

Vasilisa said nothing, yet everything—this matter with Galamon was coming to a head. It was only so much longer that things could be delayed. To them, a vampire was still a vampire.

"Let's check on the flame, then work on how we get it out of here," Argrave decided, stepping towards the stairway winding down. He offered his hand to Anneliese, and they descended together.

"Argrave..." Galamon called out.

"Don't worry," he answered at once, taking the first step downwards. "I know that this is safe."

There was no heat from this flame, and that did not change as they grew nearer. The flame had no fuel, and so did not crackle or pop or make any sound at all. The smell of vinegar was strangely pleasant where they had been before, but as they descended lower it grew intense and overpowering. The potent, vaguely chemical smell was enough to make Argrave's face contort into a grimace.

Prevailing over the smell, though, another sensation surfaced. As Argrave had already noticed, the flame emanated no heat. As he neared, though, he felt a strange happening to the forces within him. The almost gaseous pocket of magic within him... it was usually so inactive and stagnant, yet now it *moved* within his body like a pool disturbed by a gust of wind.

Argrave spared a glance at Anneliese, hoping that this would be beneficial to her understanding of the A-rank ascension he'd gotten her. Her amber eyes were wide, and she was utterly fascinated by the flame that came ever nearer the further they descended. He smiled with nervous excitement as they pressed on. Before long, the magic roiling within him became so difficult to ignore Argrave entirely forget about the smell of vinegar.

The two of them came near the end of the stairs. The bizarre juxtaposition between the wild and unkempt flame and the lack of heat around it was extremely jarring. This experience could not be likened to gazing upon a candle held close to one's face—it was like having one's head buried in the ashes of a fire, looking up upon it as it roared and twisted.

Anneliese released Argrave's hand and stepped within. Argrave watched her, and called out uncertainly, "Anne."

She paused, flashed a smile, and then proceeded once again when Argrave gave her a nod. As she was enveloped by the flame, Argrave swallowed nervously... but the elven woman remained standing there, completely fine.

"My word," Anneliese exhaled until she was out of breath. "I... my head... I have never felt anything like this, Argrave! I feel... I feel so strange. My magic, my stress... I feel as though aches I never knew I had are vanishing," she said in abject wonder.

"It's House Quadreign's flame, after all," Vasilisa declared from behind, and Argrave jumped slightly. The Magister held her hand up to the flame as though she held her fingers to an old beast that had faithfully served her.

Argrave looked back to the flame. He realized his palms were a bit sweaty despite the lack of heat. Nevertheless, curiosity drove his feet forward. It was against all instinct to step into a flame as he did, but he did it... and the flame seeped into his being.

His magic shied away intensely, yet once it was caught, it was like fuel for a fire started within his body. It burned away so much, so quickly. The mounting stress, anxiety, doubt, and insecurities of his journey here faded into nothingness, leaving his head with a satisfying emptiness that gave his thoughts ample

room to stretch. His mind felt pure, as though a haze was lifted. He felt no thought beyond him, no challenge above him.

Yet then... the flame reached a certain point in his body, and Argrave opened his eyes wide.

All sounds died. Taking their place was a *presence*. Argrave's head shot about wildly in panic, feeling as though there was something hostile to him at every point in the room. Vasilisa, Anneliese, and Galamon felt it, too—their mouths opened and closed, yet no sound came out. Argrave stepped away from the flame in shock, yet embers still persisted within him.

A great wave passed throughout Argrave's body, extinguishing all of the Flame of the Tenebrous Star that had permeated his being. And then... something new surfaced in his mind. It was a thought not entirely his own.

Erlebnis didn't like that.

All sound returned, and Argrave sat on the stairs winding around the outside of the pit. Vasilisa let out a shout, almost as though to test her own voice.

"What the hell was that? A trap?" Vasilisa questioned the moment she was certain her voice returned, stepping to Argrave. "Are you alright?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Argrave answered, actually entirely sure. "But it's gone now, whatever it was. We'd best thank it."

"Argrave..." Anneliese stepped up to him and kneeled down, scanning his face and holding him steady. "Take your time."

"I'm fine," he answered back with a half-hearted smile. "Little heart failure, that's all."

Anneliese's gaze grew distant, and she kept both hands on Argrave's knee. Argrave had been around her enough to catch what her expression meant, so he pressed, "What?"

"Nothing," she shook her head.

"What?" Argrave demanded.

"That... no, forget it," she insisted.

"Please, just tell," Argrave sighed.

Anneliese looked torn, and Vasilisa looked curious as she stared upon the two of them. Anneliese eventually sighed. "Promise to do nothing," she said.

"Can't promise that. I have to breathe to live, and that's something," he argued jokingly.

"Promise to do nothing with this information," Anneliese insisted.

"Alright, I promise," Argrave nodded.

"That presence..." Anneliese trailed off. "It felt exactly as Master Llewellen described." She looked back at the roaring black flame. "It was exactly the sort of thing that helped him reach A-rank with his special method."

Argrave stared at her white hair blankly until she turned back, and then he still stared at her amber eyes for another long while.

Ever so slowly, Argrave took a deep breath and whispered, “God damn it.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 307: Run Back Home, Boy

“Are you... sure this won’t do anything unwanted?” Vasilisa asked. She knelt just before one of the runes on the walls of the pit containing the Flame of the Tenebrous Star.

Argrave crossed his arms as he looked over her. His mind was still on the unexpected and unwanted disturbance from Erlebnis, and so he answered crassly, “Of course I’m sure. Just do it, yeah? We don’t have all the time to be lingering about.”

Vasilisa cast a glance at him, then back at the rune. Then, she snapped her finger. A simple pick of ice dug into the stone, wearing away the rune. Something shifted in the wind almost palpably, and the both of them looked up. The flame, as though freed of a bubble, rose up into the air and through the stone. The Magister rose to her feet, concerned.

“Take it easy,” Argrave assured her. “It’s returning to Quadreign. When we go back—ideally soon—it’ll be there.”

And I’ve got until then to deal with so much. The player character, Ganbaatar, turned vampire hunter... the coup here, and gathering together the spellcasters... and the more secular side of things, with Margravine Sophia and the Drawnwaters. And as for the mystical side...

Argrave was utterly certain Erlebnis was the one that extinguished the flame inside of him. Evidently, he greatly disliked the flame touching the Blessing of Supersession—he disliked it enough to purge it from Argrave’s body and make his displeasure known personally. And Erlebnis’ presence here had been precisely what Anneliese had been looking for to help with her A-rank ascension.

God damn it, Argrave repeated in his head. Well... he didn’t say I couldn’t do it again, he just said he didn’t like it, he coped, wanting to help Anneliese but also grappling with the notion of angering one of the most powerful gods. Most lesser gods were incapable of manifesting or providing blessings. The ‘gods’ of Vasquer had only managed to bless one person—Orion. He was their only gambit.

Erlebnis, though... Argrave knew of many humans and elves besides himself blessed, though admittedly not to the same degree as he was. Those blessed by him were the scholarly and secluded type, fortunately. Even barring the blessing, most gods couldn’t spontaneously manifest their power anywhere as Erlebnis just had. Perhaps Argrave’s Blessing of Supersession had been a conduit. That might’ve been the scariest idea—it meant he was a conduit for an ancient god.

“Argrave,” Anneliese’s voice drew him from his stupor. “We must devote time to think and discuss this *later*. For now, order must be restored.”

Argrave scratched his chin and was about to nod, but Vasilisa cut in, asking, “You know something about what happened? That soundlessness, that presence? I don’t think anything changed, but it still made me uneasy.”

Argrave bided his time as he thought of his answer, then answered honestly, "Yes. It's nothing to do with the flame—it's something to do with me. A certain... protection, I suppose, nullified the flame. It was unexpected, but not harmful to me or the flame."

Vasilisa only tilted her head as she stared. "More secrets?"

"I can tell you," Argrave shrugged as though it was no big deal. "It's a god's blessing. I don't share because I like to keep my cards close to my chest... but I think we're to be allies for a long while, so I don't see the harm in letting you know."

The Magister hesitated half a heartbeat, then nodded. "Whatever. I'm going straight back to Quadreign as soon as things are finished up here... maybe even before." She sighed, then walked towards the stairs. Before she set her foot upon them, she stalled. "Argrave... no, Your Majesty."

Argrave's face grew sterner at the formality.

"You're a crazy mutt," she declared, letting the words hang. Argrave stared at her, puzzled. "I don't know how you'll do as king. And honestly, I don't know if my sister will agree with what I've done..." she shook her head. "But from what I see... I extended my trust, and you didn't leave me to rot. Might be that'll change. But every other time I've taken a risk like this, I get used and abused. I keep doing it even still, holding out hope that someone decent will come along."

Vasilisa stopped talking, then put her hand over her face like she was embarrassed. "What in the world am I saying..." she sighed. "I don't know. Thanks. Thank you. You could be a terrible king, but I think you're a decent person."

Argrave chuckled a little. "I hope you're wrong about the king part. And I didn't exactly do this selflessly. I practically forced you into a conspiracy against Ivan."

"I know," she nodded. "I'm... a simple woman. Before Vasquer conquered Quadreign... I just let my mother decide what I do. After, I let Diana decide. I've got a tendency of following, even if I am supposedly a trailblazer on the path of magic. It's why I get screwed often, I think." Her gaze narrowed. "Diana's not like me, though. She's one of the shrewdest people I've ever met. Keep that in mind."

Argrave smiled. "I think she'll be pleased at the prudent choices you made on behalf of your house, then. And I look forward to her recovery, as well."

Vasilisa's eyes brightened visibly at those words, then she looked away. "Yeah." She started walking up the stairs, leaving behind the whispered words, "So do I..."

Her kind but clumsy words struck a chord in Argrave. He'd learned a lot vis-à-vis interpersonal relationships, and instinct was screaming at him that this was an opportunity.

"Hold on," Argrave called out.

Vasilisa stopped, staring down at Argrave. "Something else?"

"I..." Argrave began, then took a deep breath. "I think I ought to mention something. It's about your niece... but primarily, that vampire hunter."

#####

When Argrave finally left the tower with everyone else in tow, they were greeted by a rather gruesome sight. Ivan had been strung up by a pole before the tower. The string was attached to a nail embedded in his head, and gravity wore at his body. Already, the news was spreading of the theft of the flame of Quadreign, and the re-establishment of House Quadreign as the supreme power.

In front of everyone, Vasilisa cut down the pole that held Ivan, and reprimanded the people for their disrespect of the dead—namely, the former margravine, Sophia, who they discovered had been behind this act. Argrave made a strong mental note of this fact. Argrave knew Diana to be shrewd—naturally, the player could cure her in the original game. Argrave had used decidedly different methods, but the point stood. He'd have to make Diana aware of the Drawnwater's capacity for both treachery and cruelty.

What came after the battle felt infinitely more taxing and long than the fight had been. People were called upon to accept the authority of the Drawnwater family. It was a mundane, but vital, task. Ivan's administration had been rather lax, so things were facilitated quite easily. It was a difficult thing to spot true dissent in a realm, though, and only time would tell if loyalty persisted to House Quadreign. Diana's skill as a ruler would be tested. She never became Archduchess of Northern Vasquer in Heroes of Berendar—only time would tell if she was up to the task. For what it was worth, Argrave had faith in her.

Things seemed stacked against them. But Vera and Hegazar... they hadn't been idle. Argrave had them focus on the magic users. The north had many powerful spellcasters, that was true. Argrave had come here for that very reason. They were powerful because they were the ones that had benefited from the flame of House Quadreign in the past. But now time had passed, and they were looking to start families of their own. The promise of House Quadreign's resurgence would be ample persuasion to get them in line.

The north would surely become a complex place, politically. But Argrave felt he'd established steadfast proponents here in House Quadreign, and between Diana and Vasilisa, he felt they had ample capability to restore order. On top of that, Gerechtigkeits quickly approaching advent would be a cohesive force.

With things settled, Vasilisa intended to return to Quadreign at once to see the flame. Vera and Hegazar would stay put to keep the Drawnwaters in line, while also marshalling spellcasters to swear fealty to the new House Quadreign. Argrave intended to travel with Vasilisa to personally witness Diana's cure... and potentially do something more with the flame.

But before that... there was something else to do.

Argrave stepped up a flight of decrepit wooden stairs gingerly. They squeaked beneath his and Anneliese's weight, and then soon after for Vasilisa just behind them. Once there, they stepped past several other doors, heading for one in the back. Once there, Argrave raised his hand and rapped his knuckles against the door thrice.

After a few seconds, the wooden door peeked open. A set of blue eyes peered up at him, surprised by his height.

"Svetlana," Argrave greeted. "We meet again, but speak for the first time."

Her eyes widened with recognition, then calmed once she noticed Vasilisa.

"I'd like to speak with you about Ganbaatar, and the... minor disagreement he's had with a friend of mine." Argrave said.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 308: Four Horsemen of the Protagonists

Elenore, Durran, Melanie, and some assortment of Argrave's royal guards surrounded a table in a tent. Durran and Melanie were both fully armored, just as the royal knights. Elenore pointed to a crude map of the region—it depicted no terrain, but did roughly sketch what looked to be a choke point in a valley.

"These are the main structures staying our advance," Elenore's index and middle finger straddled between two marked points. "They're located within the edges of the valley and surrounded by high mountains on three of four sides. Thus far, it has been entirely impossible to even begin the process of sieging them. They have old tunnels leading to the other side of the mountains that form uninterrupted supply lines. Unlike the rest of Atrus, the Unhanded Coalition has dealt with the other impediments to the regions past the valley—bandits, claimant lords, et cetera. The lords can afford to supply and replenish the garrison as needed. We don't have the spellcasters for a proper assault—to attack directly would be to spend thousands of lives."

Elenore's finger travelled further up the choke point where a larger marking prevented passage. "This structure, here, is Castle Cookpot. Despite its humble name, we can't take it before these two fortresses, either. To be pinned here..." she added her other hand to the equation, then formed a triangle. "Any army sieging this place would be pinned on all side. It's a zone of certain death."

"So, we go around the mountains, move elsewhere," Melanie suggested.

"We could. But then we'd starve," Durran answered before Elenore could say anything, and the princess nodded.

"Precisely so. Without seizing Castle Cookpot, we cannot supply further north. The mountains make the journey difficult. This valley is a very necessary shortcut." Elenore lifted her head up, eyeless sockets falling upon Melanie. "And that's where you come in. Durran is already privy to the details, so I'll spare you the in-depth analysis. But your role is to take a small party around the mountain to disrupt the supply line... and, depending on the situation, perhaps you might even seize the two minor forts through their supply tunnel. From my reports, that side is poorly defended." Elenore's back straightened as she stepped away from the diagram. "But primarily... Durran hopes to lure out the Unhanded Coalition so that we might work at ending them."

Melanie ran a hand through her long red hair, her thumb tracing a scar across her right temple. "I see how it is. You invest what you're willing to lose, eh? Better a small party than an army. We're only ten, you said—fewer people that'll miss us, and fewer complaints lodged to the regent."

Elenore frowned briefly, but her stoicism quickly took over. "You'll be travelling with Argrave's personal guard, eight of them—far from common soldiers."

"Yet they're here, not protecting His Majesty," Melanie rebutted. "How useful can they be?"

Durran suggested, "Fight them yourself, if you want. Test their mettle." He waved his hand. "They're standing right there. You're willing, aren't you?"

Melanie stared at Argrave's royal knights as they expressed their willingness. "A fine idea. I think I'll take them up on that when this is over. But we won't be fighting them," Melanie pointed out. "We'll be fighting the Unhanded Coalition, apparently, who've been chipping away at our numbers rather adeptly."

"I assume you're wanting ample compensation," Elenore guessed. "This mission is to be highly publicized in order to weed out informants. You'll get plenty of prestige. With prestige, no one could complain if you were rewarded in kind. When we conquer Castle Cookpot, I plan on levying the same resistance debt, and you're welcome to—"

Melanie held up a hand to interrupt and said, "Forget that. I'm not blind to the way things are trending, princess. Durran's getting a lot of the responsibilities I used to have. I'm losing my position, here. Things are being structured around His Majesty more and more. I didn't think you'd ever work for someone else's benefit. I bet wrong, and so I'm being pushed out."

Durran raised a brow. "You joke around a lot, but I guess you've got a head in there after all."

"Maybe you'd have noticed that sooner if you spent less time staring at me and more listening to me," she said with a joking arrogance, then gave a wink.

Durran raised a brow at her blatant flirting, but Elenore crossed her arms and said in a harsh tone, "Durran doesn't have time to listen to you, because he's listening to me." She stepped a little closer then demanded, "Just say what you want, Melanie."

"A parliament seat," she turned her head. "And to work directly under His Majesty Argrave."

Elenore tapped her finger against her elbow and then said bluntly, "I can't decide that."

"Can't you?" Melanie tilted her head, her red hair falling over her blue eyes. "I think if you wanted that to happen, you could make it happen. What brother would refuse the earnest pleading of his favorite sister?"

The princess turned her head to the side, her rhythmic tapping of her finger almost audible in the silence between them. Elenore looked like she swallowed a bitter draught as she finally mustered the word, "That is fair."

Melanie beamed, her blue eyes veritably shining. "Well, that's great. I always work harder with the right incentive."

"Durran can give you the details of the travel, as I said," Elenore said. She seemed to pause on those words, mulling over them like something was amiss in what she said. "Ideally, you'll leave by morning tomorrow. Plenty of time."

"Fine by me," Melanie nodded. Her gaze wandered over to the royal knights, still guarding diligently. "But first... I think I made a date with these gentlemen, something about 'testing their mettle.'" She took light strides to the corner of the tent, then retrieved her gargantuan zweihander. "Shall we go?"

Melanie and the knights walked away, seeming eager at the proposition. The knights and Melanie traded a bawdy joke. Durran started to step away, and Elenore said, "Where are you going?"

"Watching the fight," he pointed with his thumb.

"You want to watch her?" Elenore's brows furrowed.

"If I'm going to be fighting alongside her, it's prudent," Durran answered at once.

"I see," Elenore said. "I... maybe I'll come."

Durran's face started to shift peculiarly, ending on a smile before he wiped his face with his hand as though to disguise his expression. He shifted his body towards her and stepped closer. "Why did you ask? What were you thinking about my intentions?"

"Nothing," Elenore shook her head. "I was thinking about another matter I needed you for, but this operation is more important."

"Right," Durran nodded. "Well... I'm going. Are you coming?"

"I..." Elenore sighed. "No. I have some letters I need to send out."

Durran looked vaguely disappointed but turned and walked away. Elenore looked at the diagram, then muttered, "...willing to lose?"

#####

"Gina," a man called out, stepping into a simple log cabin well-concealed by shrubbery.

A brunette woman sitting at a wooden table looked up, a spell of light swirling above a book she held in her hands. She sat in a rather polite, dignified, almost aristocratic way, in harsh contrast to the simple and lightly armored leather she wore. She rose to her feet, going from dignified to statuesque in a few moments. Hers was a beauty difficult to hide, and the man stared for half a second before raising his eyes to her face.

"Georgina," she corrected him, placing a leaf in her book as a makeshift bookmark. "What news do you bring?"

"Apparently, some big happening. A small group of elites is travelling around the mountain, looking to disrupt supply for the subsidiaries to Castle Cookpot," the man said, holding out a scroll. "The informant reported who was going."

Georgina took the scroll and turned her back to the man, striding away until she placed the table between herself and him. She turned her head and questioned, "Durran and Melanie... who are these?"

"I know them," a voice came from down below. In the corner of the room, someone stepped up. He wiped blood free of his hand. "Durran was one of Argrave's men, though I know this only in hindsight. I've crossed paths with him once before and fought him when we did. Melanie was Elenore's woman, though. I can't speak much about her."

A dark-haired man with white eyes emerged from the basement. He had a beard that had not been trimmed for a while, and a heavy brow that made him appear quite angry.

"You've fought him, Ruleo?" Georgina pressed.

"I have," he nodded. "Remarkably tough fellow. A spellcaster. Much as I hate to admit it... he had the upper hand on me." Ruleo set down the cloth he held, examining his hands to be sure they were clean.

“On top of that, if Elenore is coming, she’s going to be implanting her new favorite toy—druidic magic. Anywhere they go, the birds will be watching our every move. Even if we do ambush them, they’ll get a bead on where we are.”

“We’re highly mobile,” Georgina shook her head. “We’ll be ready for that.”

“So are birds, and doubly so when controlled directly by men,” Ruleo counseled. “This is quite the thorn, all things considered.”

“They’re only ten,” Georgina’s eyes fell to the paper once again.

“That should inspire caution,” Ruleo noted. “Would you care to have a go with ten people that can fight with me?”

Georgina looked up, then bit her lip. “Then... your project. Is it ready?”

Ruleo looked back to the basement. “If it was, I’d be a lot happier,” he chuckled briefly. “No, my main project isn’t ready. But I have a lot of little unused parts of the greater whole lying about... and attrition is especially effective on the living.”

Georgina took a deep breath. “That is an excellent point,” she admitted. “Why are you so willing to commit so much resources to this?”

“This?” Ruleo repeated, not following.

“You worked with Elenore,” Georgina stepped towards him. “Now you’re hindering her. And I don’t see how you benefit from this.”

Ruleo pursed his lips. “Let’s say your idea of abolishing the monarchy appealed to me. Or... we could say that I hate Argrave enough to work for free.”

“You and I both know that’s not true,” Georgina shook her head.

“Well... you won’t tell me about your project,” Ruleo pointed out. “I recently found out some new information. And I’ve come to realize there’s some bigger stakes in this world. As such, the stars have aligned, and we work together. Don’t press further.”

She smiled, yet her eyes remained serious as she said, “That’s fair.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 309: Tree Hugger Armistice

When Svetlana of Quadreign opened the door and Argrave’s gaze fell upon Ganbaatar, memories came rushing back just alongside his plan for how to deal with this situation.

Ganbaatar—a fairly tall individual with golden hair, pure red eyes, and sharp ears—was the only elven playable character in the game, so he naturally had a large constituent of loyal fans that hoped to betray humanity and instead hug trees. The elven rogue-warrior protagonist hailed from what the humans in Vasquer called the Bloodwoods.

The Bloodwoods was one of the most dangerous places in the continent—a fitting fate for tree-huggers. Not that Argrave was in any place to criticize; he had wavered between liking and disliking the woodland

elves quite frequently himself. He'd always liked the Veidimen, and the ancient, now largely extinct elves were even cooler.

In the redwood forests the woodland elves called their homes, even the smallest of their big trees rivaled skyscrapers. The danger of the place came from the fact there was another species competing for dominance, one Argrave and company had encountered before: centaurs. The centaurs and the elves were natural enemies after generations of feuds. The elves had been winning for a long while, yet Vasquer's invasion hurt their numbers terribly and gave the centaurs an opportunity for resurgence.

Why was this history relevant to the conversation? Because Ganbaatar wasn't from a human culture, and therefore had far fewer traditionally human values. Argrave had come to Veiden relying on their adherence to their forefathers prophecies of old, and it had worked splendidly. In convincing the elf turned vampire hunter, he couldn't use the same tactics that had carried him in Relize and elsewhere.

Yet extreme cultures were the easiest to play.

"Vasilisa..." Argrave looked back and lightly commanded, "Get the door."

The Magister stepped within, cast Argrave a perplexed glance, then shut the door. Argrave had yet to say a word to Ganbaatar, and nor had the vampire hunter said anything to him. They both just stared. Anneliese stood just behind him in steadfast support.

As soon as Argrave heard the door shut, he reached at his head and pulled off the white wig, dropping it to the floor. Svetlana raised a perplexed brow, and even Ganbaatar could not help but show some surprise.

"I am King Argrave," he declared at once. "I reign over the lands of Relize and have an army of twenty thousand swords willing to fight for me."

Svetlana's face twisted at those words. She looked to Vasilisa, yet when she saw her aunt was deadly serious, what had been humor twisted to shock.

"I am Ganbaatar," the elf replied, conditioned by years of service to answer. "I fought in the Holy Army of the Wind, and now travel as a lone vampire hunter taught by the Sunscourge Monastery."

At once, Argrave was pleased with the dynamic established in this conversation. The elves of the woods had a militaristic society. Hierarchy and rank were important to them. Leaders were to be obeyed without question and revered both on and off the battlefield.

"I have a grievance. You attacked my knight-commander without provocation," Argrave spoke quickly and strongly.

Vasilisa stepped into Argrave's line of sight and started, "Argrave, what are you—"

"He is a vampire," Ganbaatar interrupted. "That is provocation against all life."

Silence set in between the two of them. Ganbaatar had a wariness in his red eyes, and all of his attention was devoted to Argrave. Doubtless he was wondering why and how Argrave was using speech customary in his people's armies. While they stared, Anneliese stepped to Vasilisa and explained what Argrave was doing.

"Is that your defense? Will we bring this to your superior?" Argrave pressed in the same tone.

"...I have no superior," Ganbaatar said after a time. "As I said, I am alone here."

"And as king, I have no superior," Argrave followed up, keeping his arms rigidly at his side. "As such, it is within my right to suggest a resolution to this dispute."

"...what game are you playing?" Ganbaatar said, finally breaking free of the rigid guidelines of their conversation. "Are you toying with my people's customs?"

"Far from it," Argrave shook his head. "I'm employing them to end this in a way that can satisfy everyone. Your people resolve disputes by escalating the matter to a superior so that any disputes that arise are resolved without adversely impacting both groups. These resolutions are meant for preservation of the species."

"That is because we, as elves, have a common interest," Ganbaatar refuted. "That doesn't exist here. You are a man—he is an offshoot of the pure branch."

"We don't have common interests?" Argrave raised a brow. "I think we do. You want to eliminate vampirism. I do, too."

Ganbaatar's eyes briefly glanced at Vasilisa, who had settled to watch this exchange after Anneliese's explanation. Presumably, she had told Ganbaatar why Argrave had been seeking the flame: to cure Galamon's vampirism. Allegedly.

"You're in possession of a glass eye that locates vampires that meet certain specifications," Argrave claimed.

Ganbaatar's defensiveness increased a fair bit, and his gaze remained unflinching so as not to betray anything. Both served to completely clarify that Argrave was right, ironically.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ganbaatar played ignorant.

"I think you do," Argrave shook his head. "And I think it'll match well with these two items."

Argrave reached into his coat and retrieved the unnamed black bowl with strange red runes, then the knife called Althazar that had much the same appearance. While resting the bowl in the palm of his hand, Argrave placed the knife atop it.

"If you've been hunting vampires, these will be familiar in appearance," Argrave said.

"Vacant vampiric relics," Ganbaatar stared at him, then raised his gaze back up.

Argrave wagged his finger. "Not vacant. These artifacts still work. And I'm certain these two are responsible for helping Galamon show up on the eye."

Ganbaatar shifted on his feet and crossed his arms. "Is this... true?"

"It is," Argrave nodded. "You killed a vampire to gain possession of that glass eye, didn't you? A wandering bard, who carried an instrument strung with his victims' hair."

Ganbaatar's caution rose to a new peak, but he did eventually admit, "I... did."

"Just as you've been seeking vampires to kill, we've been seeking that glass eye," Argrave explained. "The eye... it helped him project himself, didn't it? He didn't even need to touch someone to feed from them. And it led him to the victims with the richest blood."

Ganbaatar took a deep breath of shock. Meanwhile, Svetlana cut in, saying, "Auntie, what's...? What is this?"

"...just let them speak," Vasilisa urged quietly, putting her hand on her niece's shoulder. "Trust in this."

"Now that all the variables are established, I believe we can come to a resolution," Argrave declared. "These artifacts—the glass eye, the knife, and the bowl... they all serve to actualize the vampiric beast within the vampire. Rather than some dread instinct, it can make them *more* than that. It can make them *tangible*. And what is tangible... can be stripped away and killed."

"You're mad," Ganbaatar said, eyes widening.

"Not yet," Argrave shook his head. "This idea of mine is backed by thousands of hours of cold, hard research. I'm confident enough to promise you this: you can keep my neck wrapped in one of those wires of yours while we do this. If I'm wrong, take my head."

Vasilisa stepped forward and said, "Hold a minute. What?"

"You heard me," Argrave looked to her. "I'll stake my head on this."

"But you...!" she began, then trailed off. "You're *king*, Argrave. You cannot make promises like that."

"Galamon is my subordinate," Argrave stared steadfastly. "A commander should stake his life on his decisions, just as his men have their lives staked on his decisions."

Vasilisa raised her hands and said, "The people—"

"You may relax, Vasilisa," Ganbaatar interrupted. "I have no intention of holding someone unrelated hostage." His red eyes fixed on Argrave. "I would hold only the vampire hostage."

Generally, Argrave would delegate the decision to Galamon, personally. He didn't have any right to volunteer the man's life. And... he had. Long before this meeting, he broached the idea with the elven vampire. His response?

"You can do so," Argrave nodded.

The woodland elves didn't respect individual choices—most matters were delegated to the leaders. Argrave could only earn respect from Ganbaatar by acting in this manner. He didn't need the man's respect, only his cooperation... but respect would be amply useful nonetheless.

Ganbaatar took a deep breath and stepped away until he stared out the window. Svetlana walked up to him.

"If my aunt would speak for him..." Svetlana began to counsel.

"Say nothing," Ganbaatar interrupted her. "Let me think."

Time stretched out. Argrave looked to Anneliese, hoping to get her input. Instead, he met Vasilisa's cold, blue eyes, obviously greatly displeased by this development. Argrave was sure her anger would fade with time.

Ganbaatar turned back. "This is a suitable resolution that serves our common interests."

Argrave nodded. "I think so, too."

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"Galamon..." Argrave looked up at his knight-commander. "Are you sure about this? I mean, really sure?"

"Yes," the vampire responded, taking off the last of his armor—his helmet. He wore simple brown clothes beneath, little more than rags.

"If you want to call it off... I'll do it," Argrave continued despite Galamon's assurances. "It's your head at risk, not mine. If he's not true to his word like I think he is... the moment that wire's around your neck..."

"I'm sure," Galamon nodded, stepping away to set down his helmet. "If he beheads me once the wire is in place, his life would be forfeit. It's against common sense." He looked back. "And I trust your judgement."

"I trust my judgement, too, but I might balk at the whole hostage idea..." Argrave put his hands on his waist, distraught.

"Just do it," Galamon closed his eyes, his voice shaking for the first time Argrave had ever heard. "I... want finality. I have come long enough."

Argrave looked at him. The idea crossed through his head, very briefly, that Galamon might not care one way or the other whether he was cured or killed. All doubts vanished in that moment, and Argrave's face hardened. "You're not going to be a vampire anymore, Galamon. If you have any final meals you want, I'm willing to do a blood drive."

Galamon stepped away and out the door. Argrave bit his lips, frustrated at himself that he'd chosen to joke instead of comfort. With no other option, he followed just after.

They were far on the outskirts of First Hope, in a simple abandoned ranch house. Ganbaatar stood with Svetlana and Vasilisa. Anneliese was waiting just outside the house, and smiled at the two of them as she joined them in stride.

"The eye?" Argrave asked.

Ganbaatar stared at only Galamon. "You'll get it when the wire's around his neck."

Galamon needed no more words to step forward. He knelt down. After hesitating a beat, Ganbaatar twirled his fingers adroitly, his two wires glimmering in the moonlight. He wrapped them around Galamon's neck ever so slowly, then pulled them until they pushed against the vampire's pale skin. He saw the flesh bulge over the top and bottom, and felt his own neck grow uncomfortable.

Then, Svetlana stepped forward. She handed Argrave the glass eye. Off its shrine, it looked more like an obsidian eye, with its strange runes glowing red.

“Alright,” Argrave nodded, looking up. Doubt overcame him for a moment, and so he hastened to do as he remembered. He reached into his pocket, retrieving the black bowl. Anneliese handed him the knife—once it was out, Galamon’s body tensed, the beast stirring within him.

Argrave put the tip of the knife against the now-inanimate eye’s iris. Then, after taking a deep breath, he handed the bowl to Anneliese. She held it beneath as he ran the eye through.

Black mist seeped out of the eye. Ganbaatar watched this ordeal, hands tight against the wire. Slowly, a bloodlike liquid started to condense out of the eye, filling the bowl beneath. It went from a trickle to a stream, then back to a trickle before it trailed off as drops. Anneliese held the bowl with steady hands. When Argrave took it from her, he realized his were shaking.

Argrave turned to Galamon, knelt, and held the bowl to him. The elven vampire received it, staring at his reflection in the bloodlike substance. Then, like downing medicine, he raised it up and drank deep. Down and down it drained, until nothing remained.

Galamon lowered it, white eyes staring ahead. Then his breathing quickened breath by breath. By the tenth, red mist started to come from his nose. His body seized up, and blood started to drip from his mouth as his teeth dug deep into his lips.

“What’s happening?” Svetlana asked, panicked.

Galamon opened his eyes... but the whites were gone, and instead glowed red. Argrave, alert and knowledgeable, watched this mist coming from Galamon’s nose with steady caution. Though formless at first... it was slowly taking shape.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 310: Piercing Thoughts

Argrave stared at Galamon as red mist poured out of his body. He was running things through his head in a panic, yet held out his hands to follow his course of action.

“Remember what we talked about, Galamon,” Argrave called out. “Stay conscious. All your years of experience in fighting this thing—use it. You are stronger than the beast.”

A spell matrix whirled in Argrave’s hand—one of C-rank. Then, his black blood started to come free of his hand, bringing the pain that came with blood magic all too familiar to Argrave. He used the spell [Putrid Paramerion], summoning a potent weapon of blood that took the form of the curved sword from which the spell took its name.

The red mist responded to this spell like piranhas smelling blood in the water. It started to flow towards Argrave, coalescing into biting fangs that threatened to chip away at the impeccable surface of the bloody blade.

“Muriem, Rhomaden,” Argrave repeated. “What do those names mean to you?”

Looking at Galamon, whose eyes had been completely obscured by the glowing red mist pouring out of his orifices, it was difficult to feel as though he was talking to a person.

“How did you meet Muriem?” Argrave asked, expecting no answer. He pulled the blade close to him and knelt until his face was level with Galamon’s. “And how did that lead to that little boy you named Rhomaden? I don’t need the details, just think about it.”

No noise came from Galamon, either way. The people nearby stared at Argrave strangely... all except Anneliese. In his free hand, Argrave cast another spell—a druidic spell. His Brumesingers scampered out of his clothing, surprising both Svetlana and Ganbaatar. The elf, who still held his wire around Galamon’s neck, had the forbearance to refrain from anything stupid. The small fox creatures hated the cold, yet they obeyed Argrave’s order nonetheless. Their mist spread out around them, prepared for combat.

“Keep him steady,” Argrave commanded all nearby. Then, he plunged the blade forth.

The curved sword of blood pierced Galamon’s abdomen, and the snow elf naturally writhed for a moment. The mist pouring from Galamon started to coalesce—not around the blade, but back into Galamon.

“Fight it!” Argrave shouted. “*You* don’t want this blood. The beast wants the blood. Let the beast have it—let the beast take it! But Galamon, you must refrain, because that’s not what you want,” Argrave said through clenched teeth, fighting past the enormity of his instincts that screamed at him not to hurt his companion.

Galamon’s body was contracting. His hands, rigid by his side, clenched and gripped and spasmed in so many ways. Yet then... Argrave started to notice something else beyond his movements. There was something else... a red echo, so faint it was almost indiscernible. Yet as the time passed, it became so obvious anyone could observe it.

To call the redness emanating from Galamon’s body an echo was not quite right. It did not merely follow what he did... indeed, it had different desires. It wanted the blood, the valuable black blood, placed right directly through it. And Argrave seized on that.

“Yes!” Argrave shouted. “Galamon, think of it! Think of food, of breathing, of drinking water again! Think of setting foot upon the frozen shores of Veiden! Think of stepping past the great ice wall, and setting foot in your home once again!”

The more Argrave spoke, the more this redness started to differ from what Galamon was doing. As though craning against invisible bindings, it reached, pulling against the force, trying to bring its hands inward to grasp the blade of blood plunged into its stomach. The surface of the blade started to chip away, and Argrave could only supply more blood to sustain it.

“What put death in your mind?” Argrave shouted at him. “Your end’s not in sight. Not until you’ve done what the world needs you to do. Your family, your friends... Damn you, you’re going to do what I need you to do. I got a big burden, and I ain’t so tough...” Argrave rose to his feet and put his boot on Galamon’s shoulder. “But you’ve got enough grit for the both of us. Blame fate, blame Veid... but you’re coming with me, Galamon.”

Argrave pushed down with his boot and pulled with both arms. Unlike how it entered, the paramerion fought dreadfully to stay stuck, and Argrave knew he’d hooked the fish he’d been baiting. All watched Argrave with shock and awe... then, the blade shot out, and Argrave staggered back. Galamon slumped over, no strength left in him, and Ganbaatar knelt as he fell so as not to cut his head off.

When Argrave finally gained his footing... he abruptly realized he wasn't the only one holding onto the blade of blood that he'd conjured. There was another, and they were larger than even him. With indiscriminate red features, Galamon's vampiric beast looked at Argrave. And the red construct was most definitely alive. Anneliese had a spell matrix prepared, but obviously feared to cast when the beast was so closely entangled with Argrave.

Argrave barely processed this before the blade in his grip shattered beneath its intense strength. It lunged at Argrave, both hands rushing for his stomach. Argrave tried to retreat to the defense of his Brumesingers as was planned, but it was far faster. One of its hands pierced Argrave's stomach. Extreme pain exploded from his gut. The other hand...

A southron elf warrior stabbed the vampiric beast through the arm... or rather, a mist warrior conjured by the Brumesingers had. Their chiming howls echoed and their mist spread out, and before long five spears held by five warriors thrust towards the vampiric beast. Recognizing the situation, it disentangled and leapt away with supernatural speed.

Argrave was no stranger to pain and kept his wits about him as he kept his eye on the vampiric beast that was Galamon's double. As he healed the dreadful wound, Argrave was protected by the Brumesingers. The beast changed targets to Anneliese. The thing moved so ridiculously quickly that the only thing she could do was conjure a ward with her enchanted ring. The humanoid beast slammed against it, then gained its bearings and kicked off towards Vasilisa.

Vasilisa, even with her A-rank ascension [Matrix of the Body], could not react in time to its speed. She, too, barely managed to get a ward up. The creature learned from its brief encounter with Anneliese and was prepared to dart away, using both its legs and arms for tremendous speed. It made no sounds and left no trace, and that made it only more terrifying.

As it changed targets to Svetlana, Argrave was ruing underestimating the beast itself. It was a relatively weak, if speedy, construct that he assumed would be dispatched the moment people saw it. Even Anneliese, who had been informed beforehand, could not act fast enough. He neglected to make the proper preparations. As it neared Svetlana, Galamon, and Ganbaatar... he feared for the worst.

Anneliese felt comfortable to release her spell by this point and cast the B-rank [Cloudborn Chain]. It was a bolt of lightning that manifested as a quick moving chain. It struck the vampiric beast, and though a great bit of it was blown away, it reformed just as quickly. The lightning from the spell spread out along the ground, conducting through and shocking Svetlana. She staggered to the ground, yet managed to cast her own spell—a wave of fire.

The beast reeled away from the flames. Its head darted around quickly... yet then, seeing opposition from nearly every direction, made the most unexpected choice. It started to run away, heading away from the abandoned ranch house and towards the city. Anneliese cast more lightning spells, and Vasilisa joined in as well—the thing was so fast it could barely be tracked, let alone hit.

"Damn it," Argrave cursed, his wound finally healed. He started conjuring [Electric Eels], yet already the creature was getting away. He feared some damage being done to anyone nearby.

A brief explosion of dirt puffed near the creature, and it rolled away. Argrave spotted a glint in the air, and realized Ganbaatar was standing... and his wires were free of Galamon's throat. He threw out his

left hand, and another knife flew through the air. The creature dodged again, and then made to keep running. Ganbaatar manipulated his hands, and the wires closed in. In not a second, the manifestation of the vampiric beast was cut in half.

Argrave, still fearing the worst, ran up beside Ganbaatar. The creature, utterly severed in half, persisted in solid shape as the two of them walked towards it. Its lower half was regenerating ever so slowly. Argrave felt like he was staring at an echo of Galamon. He was reminded of the time he'd seen the man frenzied by intense blood loss... this creature had fought much like him, then. It crawled away with its arms yet was not even half as fast as it had been.

"You undid your wires," Argrave noted, breathing slightly heavily. He put his boot on the back of the creature, ceasing to conjure [Electric Eels].

"I felt his heartbeat," Ganbaatar returned. The creature tried to reach at Argrave's foot yet could not.

Argrave nodded. "I made a mistake. Didn't realize this would cause us problems."

"This is new ground. You couldn't be expected to know," Ganbaatar returned.

The vampire hunter retrieved his daggers with the wires attached, then knelt. He wrapped one wire around the vampiric beast's neck and pulled it tight. Its head fell off... and then, exploded into mist. As he watched the elf, Argrave left out the part where he did, as a matter of fact, know this was coming. That lack of precaution nearly cost lives. If his allies had been less competent, it would have.

Ganbaatar looked back. "What'll happen to him?"

Argrave also looked back, where he spotted Anneliese and Svetlana both running to catch up with them. Staring at Galamon, he only answered, "I'm not fully sure."

Argrave knew numbers—the regeneration buff, the strength buff, et cetera... but those numbers were gone, now. This was reality. Argrave truly couldn't say what would change of Galamon. All he knew was that his vampirism was gone.

Ganbaatar stepped away. "He must be exposed to the sun. Only then... will I be sure."

Argrave nodded distantly as Anneliese caught up to Argrave. "I apologize," she said at once. "You told me to be ready to kill it, and yet I was not. I feared hitting you..."

"It was my fault," Argrave returned. "Didn't retreat fast enough to give you that opportunity. It poked through my armor like cardboard."

"I cannot say how my heart dropped... are you okay?" she questioned, looking down at his stomach.

"You know..." Argrave mused, feeling disconnected with reality as the adrenaline in him slowly faded.

"Maybe this is the wrong time for inspiration..." he looked at her. "But I think I know how I'm going to ascend to A-rank."