

Jackal 311

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 311: Blood Bender Hangover

Galamon blinked open his eyes and turned his head. Sunlight fell upon him, and instinct spurred him to move quickly. His hands reached for where he kept his flasks of blood, but then cognition returned to him as unconsciousness released its hold. He remembered what had happened to put him on the ground here.

“Good morning,” Argrave, to Galamon’s left, greeted. He had a stack of papers pinned atop a simple wooden slab and had clearly been writing diligently not moments before. “How do you feel? Enjoying the sense of the sun, the beating of your heart?”

At Argrave’s words, Galamon put his hand to his chest. Indeed... the beat came and came again. Galamon’s breathing quickened—another autonomic function that was vital once more. Recalling last night’s events, Galamon touched at his stomach, but the wound was gone.

“How does it feel to be alive again?” Argrave pressed.

As Galamon processed things, he noticed more around him—Anneliese near Argrave, or Ganbaatar and Svetlana to his right. The Magister Vasilisa was far off, sitting on a rock and watching all of them. And... Galamon looked straight at the sun, then lowered his eyes so as not to blind himself. He had always felt some aversion to the light. Even if drinking blood suppressed the potent reaction vampires endured, it felt like cold steel against his skin.

Yet now... in this cold, northern land, the sun was only warm. What did Galamon feel, now?

“I’m...” Galamon paused. “I want... to eat,” he said it only as he recognized what this was.

Argrave laughed, perhaps not expecting that response. “Well, I think we can certainly arrange that! I think we can all enjoy a gargantuan breakfast before we head back to Quadreign. Everyone’s fine with that, right?” As people answered in the affirmative, Argrave rose to his feet. “Then, let’s. Tell me... what do you want as your first meal after your long fast? Probably not a rare steak,” he quipped as he offered his hand to help Galamon up.

Galamon stared at Argrave’s hand, still somewhat in shock.

“Did you think you weren’t going to wake up?” Argrave asked. “You must’ve forgotten what I told you. No rest for the wicked, Galamon.”

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Galamon took a long while to choose what his first meal would be, and in the end Argrave chose for him: rye bread, eggs, and some soup. Food was scarce this far north, so Argrave could not treat him to anything better without heading deep into the city. That said... the snow elf had an appetite. He probably ate three pounds of eggs alone.

Even despite the massive and sudden change in Galamon’s life, the former vampire remained incredibly stoic. He wasn’t shy about expressing his gratitude, certainly—his earnest appreciation was somewhat overwhelming, even—but in eating food once again, breathing as a necessity rather than a habit, and

generally being *alive*... well, not even a tear was shed. He did things slowly and deliberately as though it was unfamiliar, but he did them without raising a fuss whatsoever.

Ganbaatar, who had been skeptical of the change, gradually accepted that the vampirism had truly been cast out. He still insisted on following to be sure that remained the case, even if only briefly. Still, the vampire hunter could not deny the facts: whether it was the desire for blood, the general rejection of sunlight, or the beast within that urged to hunt and consume... these traits were gone in Galamon. Other aspects of the curse remained, all generally in line with Argrave's expectations.

Through some testing and observation, Argrave confirmed two things. One: Galamon retained his prowess, be it his senses or his strength. Two: Galamon retained his regeneration. Argrave had expected another mechanistic principle to take its place—perhaps Galamon would need to eat food to regenerate, or perhaps his body would self-cannibalize other parts of the body to heal itself.

None were true. Galamon regenerated his body seemingly without a cost.

It was a mind-boggling discovery that truly confounded Argrave. But then, he reasoned, maybe it wasn't that there was no source... only that Argrave couldn't perceive the source. Perhaps whatever brought on the vampirism was being drawn on without necessarily paying the tithe of blood vampires paid. If so... Argrave was amply pleased to be scamming whatever force had brought vampirism to the world. The thought he might be conning something that had created vampires conversely worried him greatly, granted.

After their meal, they prepared to travel. Once Argrave was satisfied that Galamon was whole and hearty, he was content to leave him be and delve into a task that demanded his attention—namely, writing down his inspiration for his own A-rank ascension. They would depart on foot shortly, leaving Magisters Hegazar and Vera to handle things with the Drawnwaters and the aftermath of Ivan's death.

Vasilisa had obviously complex feelings about the whole situation. Though Argrave had not confirmed it with a question, he thought she felt as though he'd misled her about the reason for speaking to her niece and Ganbaatar. She was right... but then, things worked out as she wanted them to. Galamon was no longer afflicted with vampirism. Argrave hoped on making sure that everything was mended between them on the journey back to Quadreign. After all, he hoped for her advice on his theory of A-rank ascension.

Still, Argrave felt one more thing needed tending to.

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The room their party of three had stayed at in the inn was empty, now. Galamon had removed his armor for the ritual, yet now it was back on. He was ready to set on the road again like nothing had really happened. Instead of hauling blood, he hauled normal things—rations for the road, water to drink. He sat on one of the beds and stared at his hands, his gauntlets unworn just beside him.

The Veidimen turned his head moments before someone entered the room. Anneliese looked around, then settled her eyes upon Galamon.

"Having trouble accepting things?" she questioned, stepping up to where he sat.

Galamon grabbed his gauntlets, saying nothing in response to her question. He slowly slipped the first on, tightening and clasp the straps.

Anneliese stepped around the bed until she stood just in front of him. "You think that, because you retain the benefits of vampirism, people might not think you free of the curse. And by people... I mean the people of Veiden."

At her words, Galamon stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "...I know there's no point denying it. Not to you."

"It was merely a guess of mine. You seemed to doubt all that Argrave was saying," Anneliese noted. "That consistent skepticism led me to that conclusion."

His white eyes fixed on her face. "Should my cure come so easy? Should it be so beneficial?"

"Easy?" Anneliese raised her brow, then went to sit on another bed a fair bit away. "Do you think any but Argrave could have made this happen? I certainly cannot imagine so. I think you forget what a tremendous boon his knowledge is."

Galamon lowered his head and picked up his other gauntlet, putting it over the other hand.

"You will learn what you truly want to know in time, I think," Anneliese continued. "We have to return to Veiden soon enough... and our tribesmen can confirm your cure." Anneliese's amber eyes were unshaking as she continued, "And when the boundary between realms weakens, Veid Herself can judge if you are truly a sinner even still."

Galamon closed his eyes, looking distraught.

"So, fret not. You will have an objective measure soon enough," she consoled.

Galamon stewed in silence. Content to leave him with that, Anneliese rose to her feet and walked for the door.

"Wait," Galamon turned his head.

"Yes?" Anneliese looked back, stopping at the door's threshold.

Galamon stared at her, narrowed his eyes, then started to laugh out his guttural, haunting chuckle.

Anneliese stepped back within the room and inquired, "What amuses you so?"

"He's come to trust and rely on you far more than me," the elven knight-commander reflected. "It's funny, that's all. Now that I see it, I'm a little relieved. To think I was admonishing you not to question him all those months ago, when you first joined..."

"I... do not follow," she tilted her head.

"Argrave told you to come talk to me, didn't he?" Galamon raised a brow. "Well... hah."

Anneliese crossed her arms defensively. "He... did, yes. And I agreed with him on this," she added in defense of Argrave. "I do not think you realize just how much he admires you. He respects you so much that he thinks himself incapable of giving you worthwhile advice."

Galamon's mirth died. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," Anneliese held her arms out in a shrug. "Argrave respects you more than anyone. He wishes he was more like you."

"No, he doesn't," Galamon disagreed with a strong frown.

Anneliese laughed this time. "I thought you knew better than to deny it."

Galamon opened his mouth, then closed it without a response. With a smile, Anneliese turned and walked out of the room. Galamon looked back at his now-gauntleted hands, staring at the dark gray steel. Then, he rose to his feet, retrieving his weaponry. He hung them where they belonged one after another. Then, with a deep and rich breath, he walked towards the door with steady steps.

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"Think of it," Argrave spoke to Vasilisa as they walked the mountain path, his breathing slightly thin. "I do agree it was wrong, but at the end of the day, it led to reclaiming your house's flame and curing your sister. I was a bit deceptive, and the more I come to know you the more it makes me guilty," Argrave admitted, pausing as he stepped up a particularly tall incline. "But... that's no more. I can disclose anything you want to know, without any holds barred," he said, holding his arms wide as though to proclaim his innocence.

Vasilisa came to stand beside him, her breathing a little bit heavier than his. "I want to know..." she paused, retrieving a canteen to take a drink. "I want to know what you want from me now."

"Beyond the whole 'northern spellcaster army' thing?" Argrave pursed his lips, slowly regaining his breath. "I just want your thoughts on a theory of A-rank ascension."

"I thought you were A-rank," Vasilisa raised a brow as she looked up at his face.

"No. I just have a lot of magic," Argrave shrugged.

Vasilisa fixed her blonde hair as Anneliese caught up to them. "Alright. Talk."

"I have an undying soul," Argrave said at once.

"What?" Vasilisa said scornfully at once. "Nonsense. That's impossibly rare. How would you even know?"

"Vasquer. The snake, that is," Argrave clapped his hands together. "Anyway... I saw Galamon's vampiric beast, and it struck me with inspiration. That, Hegazar's illusory projection, and this," Argrave raised his arm up, pointing to his silver bracer. "What if I can use my undying soul as an anchor for magical constructs spawned of blood magic? Barring the multitude of uses I might get from such constructs... what if I can use the dormant magic in my black blood to replicate spells I cast?"

"Vasquer? Dormant magic in your black blood...?" Vasilisa started, utterly confused.

Argrave clenched his hands together tightly, then pointed ahead. "Come, it's a long road. Let's walk and talk..."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 312: No Pain, Only Gain

Argrave planted his foot down and crested over the top of a hill he'd travelled once before. The snow had melted a little more on their return, and the pine trees seemed a little more robust. Another detail was far more striking—namely, the moving hands of the clocktower overlooking the palace in Quadreign.

Vasilisa caught up with Argrave. The moment her eyes fell where his did, her brain worked to compute the implications. To cement her realization, Argrave commented, "Seems the flame is already doing its work. The people must be pleased."

The Magister muttered something incomprehensible, words mashed together in her excitement, and then she took off towards the city isolated in the valley.

As Anneliese crested the hill next, she called out to Vasilisa in concern, "Watch your footing."

Svetlana was the next to come, then Ganbaatar. Svetlana, another member of House Quadreign, had much the same reaction as her aunt, and set off back towards the city with the same disbelieving haste. They were both like treasure hunters that had finally found what they'd been hunting for all these years.

Galamon was the last to come—not because he was the slowest, but because he generally held the back of the line. Argrave stared at him as he came to stand. He was no expert on emotions as Anneliese was, but the man seemed to be in a strange state. Forget jubilation, relief—Galamon appeared to be in a state of frozen grief, of emptiness. It deeply worried Argrave.

"Anne," Argrave called out, turning his head back to the city. "Diana of Quadreign is going to be cured. Unlike her sister... I think she'll want more concrete terms of vassalage. We ought to talk about that, among other important things. I learned a lot from the Magister... I hope you did, too. We ought to discuss our findings."

Anneliese glanced at Argrave as he looked over the valley city, then gave a knowing nod. "That is prudent."

"Good. Let's head down, get settled." Argrave looked at Ganbaatar and inquired, "What's your plan?"

"To remain with the..." Ganbaatar trailed off, realizing he couldn't call him a vampire anymore. "To observe Galamon a while longer. I think Svetlana will accommodate me."

"I hope so," Argrave nodded, then set off down into the valley. "Even if she doesn't... sleeping on the streets might not be so bad anymore. The heat's back on."

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Vasilisa tossed open the poorly maintained iron gates of the palace of Quadreign and stormed inside. The steward Ferrel stood in the courtyard as he did last time, but stepped towards the returning Magister with an urgency to him.

"The flame," Vasilisa called out. "Is it there?"

The old Ferrel nodded intently to his words as he said, "Yes it is, lady Vasilisa. It reappeared one morning, like a trail of fire across the sky... I thought it was some sort of rift in the world itself, yet it flowed back into the old fire basin! Does this mean...?" he looked nervous and excited in equal measure. "I... everyone was cheering, but I feared to act... I feared..." his words faltered as though he had so many fears he did not know where to begin.

Vasilisa took a deep breath of exuberant triumph and exhaled. "Fear no longer. Get Diana at once, lead her down. I will go ahead and confirm things... and then... Ferrel..." she closed her eyes. "And then, House Quadreign can repay everyone's steadfastness."

The old steward's eyes lit up with a fire of his own, and he gave a steady, certain nod. "I will speak to the baroness."

Vasilisa sprinted inwards, heading for the path that led deeper within. As he walked into the confines of the tunnel heading deep within the earth, she slowed her pace slightly to breathe through her nose. And she smelled the sour-sweet tang of vinegar just as had been before.

Vasilisa glanced back, worried her sister wouldn't be able to make it down that descent. She went very deep until the decades-empty chamber that once housed the flame entered her vision. It was empty no longer. The flame, more vibrant than she could ever remember it being, persisted defiantly deep in this chamber. All of the runes inscribed in the stone worked to sustain it, worked to grow it, and worked to fuel the entirety of the city of Quadreign.

The Magister stepped forward, holding her hand out to the flame. Her heart was beating quickly as she recognized it remained exactly as it had. Something scraped behind her, and she looked back to see Ferrel escorting Diana down. She leaned upon him heavily, yet both the wizened steward and her near-incapable sister walked with steady steps.

Once Diana's eyes laid upon the flame, her blue eyes lit up like the midday sky and she tried to step away from Ferrel's aid. Vasilisa stepped out to meet her.

"I had... forgotten what this looked like," Diana said in wonder.

As the baroness left Ferrel's assistance, she stumbled—by then, Vasilisa was nearby to catch her. "Easy," the Magister cautioned her, holding her by her arms. "Ferrel... I can handle things from here. There are guests you might have to greet." She turned her head. "The ones who restored the flame."

"I'm sorry..." Diana apologized as Ferrel moved to obey. "You catch me... at a bad time. I'm just... quite dizzy. And my legs..."

"It's the last bad time," Vasilisa said, helping her older sister walk forward. "Come. We must burn this all away."

Diana and Vasilisa walked into the flame, the younger supporting the older. Though the flame seemed to do nothing... after a time, it was as though the black flame had found both kindling and fuel within their bodies. The flame within burned brightly, devouring whatever fuel it could find. Vasilisa held her sister steadfastly, yet Diana's change was more drastic.

The baroness let out a groan that trailed off into a wince as the fire burning within her rose ever higher. Her fingers clenched tightly around Vasilisa's arms as she put more and more of her weight upon her.

She seemed to become a bright ball of the black flame far exceeding her sister's. At its apex, Diana's fingers clenched tightly... then relaxed all at once. Diana fell limp.

Vasilisa caught her sister, and the two of them slowly lowered to the floor. Despite the sudden event, the Magister merely held Diana, a relaxed and eased smile on her face. Though the flame was said to burn through stress and anxiety, Vasilisa questioned if that could truly be the sole source of the sense of peace she felt. The bright flame burning out of Diana not moments ago persisted like a dying fire running through the last of its wood.

Another set of footsteps resounded throughout the old fire basin. Vasilisa looked up for a new entry—Svetlana.

"Auntie? Mom?" the young mage called out, short of breath.

"You're here. Good," Vasilisa answered back. "I'm afraid I cannot carry your mother alone. I think it will be some hours before she wakes up..."

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"If you're well and content with the accommodations... I would most like to return to the baroness," the steward, Ferrel, bowed to Argrave.

"Please," Argrave waved his hand. "Do so at once. We can settle in here."

Ferrel needed no further encouragement to leave. Once he did, Argrave looked around at the familiar guest house they'd stayed in when they first arrived at this city of Quadreign. Someone new was with them—Ganbaatar.

Argrave grabbed Anneliese's elbow and gently moved her deeper in the room. "Let's take the chance to talk. I imagine it'll be some hours before things are settled with them..."

Soon enough, the two of them were enclosed within a ward. While staring at the wall, Argrave inquired, "Am I out of my depth, or is Galamon not really improving?"

Anneliese stared at him steadily. "You say that like he is dysfunctional."

"Well... of course not. But I was thinking... I don't know. It's like nothing has really changed for him." Argrave rubbed his chin. "I wanted to help him while keeping his edge over our foes, but did I... make a mistake, pursuing this line of cure?"

"I cannot imagine so," Anneliese counseled. "I think he merely needs time. Day after day of living cured will change his mentality. And perhaps... a jolt, when the time comes—and it will, considering we need to enlist Veiden's aid eventually. Galamon is not the sort of person to change his disposition so quickly. He is too strong to bend, if that makes any sense."

"Things that can't bend are often brittle," Argrave pointed out. "And they break because of that."

Anneliese put one hand on her hip. "Should we make him a vampire again, try another method?" Her snide comment broke the tension and Argrave chuckled. As he did, Anneliese continued, "We stay the course, and we help him where we see the opportunity. That would be the case even if he had turned jubilant, I think."

Argrave scratched at his cheek, understanding her point about the futility of his train of thought. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right," he admitted, taking a moment to recompose himself. "But on another note... I don't think what I said back at the hill was wrong."

"About Diana, the vassalage?" Anneliese grew serious.

"Precisely so," Argrave nodded. "Diana... she doesn't know us as Vasilisa does, and she'll be able to think clearly about the situation. Objectively."

"Yet we still healed her," Anneliese pointed out.

Argrave looked back to the door of the guest house. "She's fiercely shrewd, and she'll definitely want the best for the people of the north. She'll know that Vasilisa helped us as much as we helped Quadreign." Argrave rolled his shoulders and stretched. "I do wonder what Vasilisa is saying..."

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"So, our future king did all that, did he?" Diana asked.

The baroness rested in bed, a heavy blanket atop her. Her daughter, Svetlana, lay just beside her and hugged her fiercely with little regard for anything else besides the joy that her mother was better. Vasilisa sat in a chair off to the side, lounging idly with a drink in hand. An observer might think the three of them were all sisters, considering how young they looked.

"Among other things," Vasilisa confirmed, perhaps not catching the undertone Diana put out.

"That's a very interesting tale, Vasilisa," Diana confirmed, her voice quicker and sharper than it had been not hours ago.

"Please, mother..." Svetlana urged, voice muffled beneath the blanket. "Let us just enjoy things. I never thought this day would ever come..."

Diana did soften for a brief moment, and her thin hand rested atop her daughter's head. "Vasilisa tells me you've grown a lot. Already a B-rank mage, yes? And even without the flame..."

Svetlana looked up. "Well... yes," she admitted shyly.

"Then you take after her," Diana's eyes turned to Vasilisa. "My sister's magic pool grew faster than mine. And even as my magic size continued to grow, I could never breach into A-rank. I lacked the talent." She sighed deeply. "I'm proud of you. I'm sure your father would be, too. But I regret... missing so much."

Svetlana hugged her mother tighter. "You're better, now. Think of that, instead. It's much happier."

"Yes. I am better, now." Diana's eyes grew focused. "Archduchess of the North... he'd give me that? It's because he expects the people to fall in line with Quadreign rule once again. Vasilisa," she called out.

"Yes?" the Magister answered at once, almost as though conditioned.

"There are thousands of spellcasters just like me in the north. People that benefited from the flame of House Quadreign, but lacked the talent to breach beyond B-rank. It is the great limiter, the great divide. Yet that force of B-rank spellcasters that make their home in the north is so substantial as to draw a king

here, personally,” Diana pointed out quickly. “It is an army so potent that the only thing that brought our loss was betrayal.”

“That’s true,” Vasilisa nodded in agreement.

“If people do rally under the banner of Quadreign once again... if indeed they would accept me as Archduchess...” Diana looked to the door. “I will repay that loyalty. I must. And to that end... I must ensure we live well.”

“Well... Diana...” Vasilisa began. “What he did for us...”

“I know. I know,” Diana nodded. “But the north is cold in weather and spirit, and people live short, hard lives. Think, too, of that.” She grabbed the blanket and threw it off, turning her body. “I don’t think I’ve been more excited about the prospect of seeing a Vasquer in my entire life. And now... I need a plan of action. I won’t go into negotiations empty-headed.”

“Mom...!” Svetlana called out, yet Diana was already moving off the bed with a renewed vigor.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 313: Used Kingdom Salesman

Argrave stared up at a gargantuan moving gear that clicked every second. One might think the clocktower of Quadreign would be rather elaborate on the interior, but no—it was one large gear with a much smaller one at its center. The smaller received the directed power of the Flame of the Tenebrous Star. Anneliese watched right alongside him, both showing their curiosity openly. Argrave knew this place by design, but neither of them knew how the flame made the clock count the seconds.

Footsteps echoed into the room, and Argrave turned his head. The top of the clocktower was more a living area than a lookout. There was only one window from which to see all of Quadreign below, and the room itself was occupied with homey wooden furniture—a rocking chair by the window, a small table in the center, and a small library nestled in a corner. It looked a private and informal place. Argrave was very curious why Diana had requested to meet here.

Baroness Diana of Quadreign stepped up the stairway and into the clocktower’s highest point. She paused for a moment, examining their party—Argrave, Galamon, and Anneliese—and then stepped in.

“We meet again, ‘Silvaden,’” she called out. Diana had a rich voice and a fair face. Now that she was tumor-free, she reminded Argrave a little of Elenore in demeanor. Just behind her, the other Quadreigns walked up—Vasilisa and Svetlana.

“You look well,” Argrave said as he walked closer, followed by his companions. “And those aren’t empty words, either. I’m very glad that you’ve made such an astonishing recovery. Vasilisa has told me of how you’ve toiled to keep the people in your territory prosperous despite the tremendous devastation the war wrought to your land,” Argrave looked to the Magister, giving her a nod. “I very much wished to have a longer conversation with you at the time, but... I cannot exactly fault that it was delayed until today.”

Diana’s steps slowed as she neared Argrave, staring up at him with some measure of caution in her face. And she was right to be cautious—Argrave had a battery of psychological tricks in his sleeve he’d learn in

negotiating with the patricians. He'd already used one—flattery. Argrave found people loved flattery when they didn't know that's what it was.

The baroness held out her hand. "I don't think it's so astonishing a recovery given our flame's nature... but yes, it's nice to speak with the three of you once more with my wits about me."

Argrave shook her hand. "I agree. On that note, I have something for you." Argrave reached into his coat with his free hand and pulled something out—the second of his tricks. "A little gift to celebrate your recovery."

It was a golden ring with a sun wrought atop it, four snakes as its rays. It was one of the enchanted rings Argrave had made. It was nothing special, but it was a gift. Human nature is that of reciprocity. Thus came the old proverb, 'there is nothing more expensive than something free.' By giving a small, inconsequential gift, Argrave had gotten people to agree to much more beneficial deals later in the conversation.

"I made this—an enchanted ring that conjures a B-rank ward," Argrave described as he held it in his palm. "Perhaps you might consider it in poor taste to bear something with my personal heraldry... but I hope to change the relationship between Quadreign and Vasquer. I won't deny that my family, and more specifically my father, ravaged this land. What's been done can't be changed, but I hope that it can be remedied. I thought this ring might stand as symbol to that. Let my symbol become a shield for you and yours."

Diana was caught off-balance. Argrave left out key details, making the ring seem a personalized gift when it was really something Argrave had made far prior for another reason.

Hesitating, the baroness held out her hand in rejection. "That is far too expensive. Please, keep it."

"I insist. Your protection is important," Argrave held it out further.

Diana pursed her lips, then slowly accepted the ring. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Argrave didn't reject the title in favor of acting closer to Diana, as retaining authority was another trick of the mind he'd learned. His title of 'king' had weight, he found. But he wasn't about to let up the pressure.

"Vasilisa has already volunteered you as Archduchess of the North." Argrave smiled. "Something I'm sure she told you of."

Diana found a foothold in the conversation, and butted in, "That's precisely what I wanted to talk to you about, Your Majesty. I—"

"Good," Argrave interrupted her. "Wandering through this northern land, I learned a lot. I can't say that I have the knowledge a local might have, but I think I understand what historical good your house of Quadreign has done for this land. I greatly admire your dedication to the people of this land. Food is scarce, the wilderness is dangerous, yet the Queendom of Quadreign served as protectors for all. I think it's the duty of a leader to do precisely as much—I think we have similar mindsets on this.

"Furthermore," Argrave turned his gaze to the window. "I believe the north has unique needs compared to the rest of the continent. The taxes levied here aren't quite right. Your villages cannot afford to give

their harvest like those of the south. To that end, I think that any agreement we reach in terms of vassalage should differ accordingly.”

“I agree,” Diana managed to get a few words in. “Food is valuable here.”

“Indeed. As such... I believe it would be best for both if this newly established Archduchy needs only pay something it has less need of—coin,” Argrave suggested. He had more in mind, but he would leave it out until Diana pushed back.

“Coin?” Diana furrowed her brows. “But what of military responsibility?”

“I would take no soldiers,” Argrave shook his head. “I have need of spellcasters, Diana, and nothing more. I would take all magical forces you can muster, but your men are needed for hunting and tending the herds. I could not pull them from that in good faith.”

“But coin... Vasquer coin is not that present in the north,” Diana crossed her arms. “It’s here, certainly, but not as integrated as it is in the southern territories.”

“Yes. I hoped to foster trade,” Argrave nodded. “By necessitating coin, the people here can be incentivized to trade with the south—I believe there are many opportunities. You have beautiful furs that could be luxury products in the south, coupled with gemstones from precious mines in the hills and pearls from the coast.”

“It’s... a little...” Diana hesitated. She turned her head back to her daughter and her sister, but none could offer advice.

“Hmm,” Argrave mused, touching his chin. “How about this, then? In trading foodstuffs or seeds—things the north sorely needs—there will be neither tariffs nor taxes. The people of the south will come here with food aplenty if things turn out that way. And... you will be exempt from *all* taxes for the five years.” Argrave spread his arms out. “I believe we have a deal. You need only accept these terms,” he said, implying she might lose out if she refused now.

Generous terms? Perhaps. But if the deal finished here, Argrave earned all of the northern spellcasters, a very positively predisposed figurehead, and an amply loyal populace. Above all, he did want the north to prosper. What he’d said wasn’t wrong. Someone foolish might think he was losing a lot, but he had come here with three people, and earned the entire northern portion of Vasquer.

Diana had been hit with a vast array of tricks Argrave had accrued over his life, and it showed. Her face betrayed that she was desperately looking for a way she could reasonably get more, yet various factors at play in her head screamed at her to say something in particular.

“We have a deal,” Diana agreed, like someone conceding defeat in the face of overwhelming force.

Argrave beamed. “Wonderful.”

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The Quadreign family and Argrave’s companions, with the negotiations settled, enjoyed a pleasant time in the clocktower’s chamber. Though Argrave had been a bit competitive when it came to negotiations, he relaxed and found himself enjoying the company of the three people in the new Archduchess’ family.

Anneliese got along with Diana splendidly. Galamon, though he was still more reticent than usual, enjoyed Vasilisa's company.

They talked of much—Argrave's plans for the kingdoms, Gerechtigkeits, and the war. More mundane topics came up as well, like simple hobbies. At the end of it all, Argrave and his coterie left before the moon grew too high above. Once they were well and truly gone, Diana plopped in the rocking chair by the window.

"By the flame..." she sighed.

"Mom?" Svetlana questioned, coming closer.

"I never stood a chance," Diana reflected.

"What do you mean?" Vasilisa, slightly sloshed, didn't follow.

"Svetlana... I think you should go with them," Diana said. "I think you have to be a part of that parliament our new king is building. You can learn a lot more from him and those he keeps near him than you can me. I can at least be smart enough to realize... a new order is coming to this continent," she looked out the window, watching as the three of them moved across the courtyard.

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"That was pleasant," Argrave reflected as they walked back to the guest house. "Isn't that right, Galamon?"

"Hmm," he grunted back, nodding.

Argrave bit his lip, seeking conversation points. "You seemed to like Vasilisa," he noted.

"I'm married," he said at once.

Argrave scoffed. "You can be friends, no?"

"Hmm," he grunted once again.

Argrave looked for something more to say but found nothing. As they walked in silence through the courtyard, dormant thoughts occupying his attention rose to the surface. Before long, he found himself thinking about the A-rank ascension he'd been obsessing over.

"Hey, Anneliese," Argrave called out. "I learned a lot about the general makeup of A-rank ascension from Vasilisa. I think I can learn about projected constructs from Hegazar. And I can learn about specialization into a field from Vera," he pointed out, turning his head to look at her.

"All true," she nodded, following.

"There's something missing in that equation," he pointed out. "Involving the soul. And I... well, I'm getting a crazy inclination that I can't shake."

"Let me help you shake it," Anneliese insisted, knowing well that when Argrave said 'crazy,' it generally meant dangerous.

“Well, I know about a shrine. It’s far, but not exactly across the world. We’ll have to wait regardless for the spellcasters to gather, so we’re not wasting any time,” he said hopefully.

Anneliese closed her eyes as they walked. “...we will have to stay in this region for another few days regardless,” she admitted hesitantly.

Pleased she agreed, Argrave continued rapidly, “It’s guarded by a ferocious creature that I think Durran would like very much. And this shrine... I’ve been to one like it in the past. I’m thinking my A-rank ascension, your A-rank ascension, and Durran’s druidic bond... we might knock them out in one fell swoop. We get that pet, we get knowledge about using my living soul as an anchor, and you experience that presence Llewellen insisted helped him so much.”

Anneliese stepped ahead and stopped. “You cannot mean...?”

“I can,” Argrave nodded. “I’ve got an itch to visit an old friend. And the more I think of it, the less of a bad idea it sounds.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 314: Knocking Heads

“Your Majesty won’t be attending as... well, as yourself?” Diana questioned Argrave.

Diana had donned different dress than the casual things she had been wearing the days before—now, she wore an elaborate dress of white fur. She had a large silver circlet embedded with sapphires and pearls resting atop and partially weaved into her blonde hair. She stood alone with Argrave and Anneliese in the spacious yet warm palace of Quadreign. The warmth was new—though the Flame of the Tenebrous Star projected no heat, the Quadreigns of ages past had engineered it in some way to manifest as such. That was another bizarre oddity Argrave had no answer for.

Dismissing his thoughts to answer her question, Argrave shook his head with a pleasant smile on his face. “No, I’ll be staying in the shadows for a while longer. No need to draw undue attention just yet. When we march south into the former kingdom of Atrus to converge with Elenore’s force... I can have the grand reveal then. For now, you have people to greet,” Argrave looked to the door of the castle.

Diana sighed. “Indeed. It’s been some time since such a large number have gathered in Quadreign.”

“And in the days to come, yet more will gather. Then, we head south in force,” Argrave nodded. “For now... good luck, archduchess.”

Diana nodded evenly. “I hope that my daughter Svetlana receives the same well wishes from the crown when she takes my place, and even her daughter after her.”

“I have meant to ask... why does Quadreign disqualify its males from succession?” Anneliese asked curiously.

“The only way to ensure purity of bloodline is through the female line,” Diana explained. “The woman cannot bear a child not her own, unlike a man. That is the crux of it, despite what rumors persist about the woman’s role as a life bringer engendering benevolent rulership.”

“Really? I thought...” As he spoke, Anneliese looked at him, and Argrave scratched the back of his neck. “Guess I had things wrong.”

"If only you admitted your wrongs on other accounts so easily," Anneliese said pointedly, still ill at ease after their conversation regarding visiting Erlebnis.

Diana looked between the two of them, probably not wishing to get involved in their dispute. She prudently changed the subject, asking, "And this outing you mentioned..."

"Provided we can enlist Vera's aid, it'll be no more than a day," Argrave nodded his head. "We'll be back before nightfall."

"Then I have nothing more to stall with," Diana took a deep breath, then looked outside. "I should greet my... new vassals."

The newly established archduchess walked towards the exit of the castle. Once she left, a few seconds passed before her voice rang out once again. She gave a speech to the people outside, updating them as to their new liege—namely, Argrave—and their duty in coming to the south. She promised protection under Quadreign and Vasquer both, and further the blessing of the flame of Quadreign.

Many of the assembled were the old guard of Quadreign that had been disbanded only by Vasquer's conquest. Diana was able to work them into a fervor easily. Argrave smiled when the first cheer came.

"I forbid you to smile until your idea works," Anneliese punched Argrave in the arm.

The punch was gentle, but Argrave feigned being injured as he retaliated, "Hey, come on now. That's too tall an order. I'm the Smiler, or did you forget?"

"What if Erlebnis does not want the knowledge you offer?" she pressed worriedly.

"Then nothing is lost," Argrave dropped his levity, realizing he needed to answer her worries seriously. "The larger point to this all is allowing you to be exposed to whatever Llewellen says that you need to grasp his method of A-rank ascension. It's but a day's detour. It'll be fine."

"I am not superstitious, but do not tempt fate by saying such brash things," Anneliese grabbed her forehead and walked about aimlessly.

Another person walked in not so aimlessly—two people, to be precise. Galamon led Vera to Argrave, then dipped his head and fell in behind him.

"I don't like being fetched... first, your man Durran brought me, and now this Galamon." Vera bit at her lips, then surrendered, "I suppose it's a bit different now. You're my king. Well, what did you need me for?"

"I need to make a visit somewhere," Argrave explained succinctly. "It's far enough to be inconvenient, but if I can count on your help... it ceases to be troublesome. We can be back before our small army of spellcasters assembles."

"You want me to be your coachman?" Vera's orange eyes narrowed. "Fly you across the skies?"

"With a Magister's pay, and some moderately influential passengers," Argrave corrected. "I imagine it'll make the job bearable."

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A two-armed head jumped at Durran, an inhuman and airless shout bursting from its bleeding lips. He cast a spell of wind and then swung his glaive in a wide arc. The wyvern bone glaive caught and wreathed itself in the spell, and blade and magic both tore straight through the necromantic abomination with ease. Though it was with ease... doing it dozens of time was wearing at him, and his breath was heavy. His magic was thinner than his breath, too.

Wheeling around, Durran looked at the rest of the battlefield. These creatures were twice their party's numbers, and though he'd never seen their like before, he recognized them at once from all of Garm's writings. These were necromantic creatures from the Order of the Rose. They outnumbered the royal guards and Melanie two-to-one, yet almost an hour ago it had been ten-to-one. As soon as they entered a stretch of the taiga, these things started to plague them and hunt relentlessly.

Melanie had set aside her zweihander as the massive weapon tired her out. She fought with the hooked chains she concealed ably, and they whipped throughout the air tearing chunks of flesh out of her foes. She looked exhausted, and her legs were shaking. Durran didn't feel much better himself, and he had royal-forged armor unlike her.

One of the Order of the Rose creatures got hooked onto her chains without dislodging, and it whipped throughout the air as she swung the metal around. It crawled up her chain with determination only the dead could possess, and the seasoned mercenary, battle-experienced though she was, seemed ill-prepared to deal with this.

"Swing it at me!" Durran shouted, wielding his glaive.

Melanie, though panicked, could listen to orders. She swung her chain about with the necromantic abomination attached, and when it neared, Durran used both his own power and the force of her swing to bisect the foul thing.

"Hah! Used to play this game as a kid!" she shouted, stepping back as more approached her. "Have a few more, then!"

Durran almost found it funny, yet Melanie was true to her word—she used her long chains to hook the creatures, casting them at Durran one after the other with such skill it was awe-inspiring. He'd only seen better weapon control in Galamon. To his part, he cut them down one after the other, yet resisting the force and weight of the swung abominations wore at his arm.

One of the creatures that Melanie hooked came free and flew at Durran awkwardly. The two-armed head grasped the haft of Durran's glaive with one hand and reached to strangle his neck with the other. Durran grabbed its wrist with his left, finding his hand insufficient for the task with its missing fingers. He dropped the glaive and slammed the head down, pummeling its face with his freed right hand until its skull gave into gore.

Utterly exhausted, Durran grasped at his discarded glaive and rose to his feet. Things were winding down, and the royal guard dispatched the last of them. But then, they'd been winding down for hours—these necromantic creatures seemed to come without an end as they advanced to lure out the Unhanded Coalition.

There had been no casualties. But this was but the second day, and the numbers came more and more as they advanced behind the mountain to seek an opportunity to allow the army to advance. The royal

guard were good at what they did and were well-protected by their armor and Argrave's gift of enchanted warding rings. But things couldn't last like this forever. Sooner or later... someone would slip up. Then another. And before long, this expedition of theirs would end in utter failure.

"Melanie!" Durran managed to shout. "Catch one alive!"

"What?" the red-haired mercenary questioned, short of breath. "They, uh... we can't exactly interrogate them. Unless you want something to... relieve some anger on."

Durran shook his hand free of gore. "There's more than one way for them to talk. Argrave taught me something—rather than killing the summons, kill the summoner." He looked at her intently. "I know some necromancy. It's enough to learn where the bastard that's sending these might be hiding."

"Hah," Melanie laughed. "Looks like there is a dark side to you, huh? Alright. I'm itching to get my sword in someone that bleeds hot blood, and better yet if it's the corpse-wrangler behind these things."

As Melanie went to do that, Durran looked back at the corpses of these necromantic creatures. Unlike Argrave, Anneliese, or Durran, he'd never dealt with these things before. But seeing them, they were markedly familiar—it must've been Garm's soul influencing him. And moreover... something told him that these creatures weren't newly made.

Durran's intuition screamed they were from Order of the Rose ruins. And that meant they might be nearly unending.

"Gods be damned... wish Orion was here," Durran muttered. "He wasn't so bad after all..."

The only hope for their expedition rested in dispatching whoever was sending them forth.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 315: Abyss Attraction

A bird of wind tore through the skies, keeping its mystic wings steady in its glide. A party of many sat atop it—Argrave's coterie and the Magister couple of Hegazar and Vera. It brought back some memories. Argrave watched the terrain disaffectedly, focused more on the duty coming ahead than the scene before him. This ride had inspired awe the first time, but the second time not so much so, even with the time gap.

"Dispel it here," Argrave looked back and told Vera.

The Magister nodded and the bird supporting them exploded all around in a great gust of wind that gently lowered them all downwards. Soon enough, they landed in a portion of the taiga that seemed remarkably similar in all directions. Even still, Argrave trudged forward.

There was an unusually somber air over their party, and even Argrave did not break the silence with his voice as he generally did. The area, much as the first shrine to Erlebnis, inspired an air of quietude and reflection. Things seemed gloomier in this stretch of the taiga.

Argrave did not fear betrayal from Hegazar or Vera once they learned of why he was here, not anymore. He'd won their loyalty by ensuring their future under his wing. Anneliese, empath that she was, had confirmed loyalty from Vera, though Hegazar was still the wild card with his illusory projection. Nevertheless, Argrave felt confident. Argrave's association with Erlebnis would give the two Magisters

no ammunition. They sailed on the same boat, and the two Magisters would never be so foolish as to sink it. Mutual interest was inextricable.

They walked far through the taiga, trudging through melted snow and densely packed soil. At a point Argrave had been searching for, the land sloped downwards ahead of them and ventured into the depths of the earth, half-hidden by the melting snow of a winter past. Argrave stopped at the mouth of this entrance, peering beyond.

“The magic is thick within,” Hegazar said as they made their first step downwards. “It’s dense all throughout this place. It almost tints the air black.”

Even Hegazar’s words lost some of their typical glib. There was something in their sixth sense that told them of the true nature of the power within this place. Argrave supposed that was a good feature to have for a place of worship. Argrave, too, could see the wisps of magic floating about the air with the sight offered to him by Garm’s eyes. He considered that the shrine in the south probably had the same features, but now he could simply see them clearly.

They pressed onward. Though they passed beneath the earth briefly, soon enough the scene once again opened up into an expansive cave with a hole in the top that allowed light to fall in. Most obvious was the gargantuan bear resting in the center of the beam of light pooling in. Argrave had seen grizzly bears and polar bears before, but none could compare to the sheer size of the black-furred beast ahead. It was fearsome enough Galamon stepped in front of Argrave, prepared to handle it should the thing stir.

Less immediately obvious were the walls of the cave. There was a single sculpture carved out of the stone and repeated in perpetuity until the stone cavern was completely filled with countless replicas. The carving depicted a great eye peering down into the cave, and just below it an arm held a book in its hand for the eye to read. In the back, like a nexus for all of these eyes, was a large head. It was perhaps fifteen feet both in height and width. It had no distinct features from this far away.

The bear slept... or hibernated, perhaps, given the winter that had just passed. Argrave cast a glance to Anneliese, and she took the signal to step forward. This bear had been born in this cave, had eaten its food in this cave, and had lived in this cave its entire life. Unwittingly, it had taken in many of the energies of this place throughout its life. Both in size and intelligence, it was incomparable to any of its species. Yet its fatal failing was its bestial nature—it had no resistance to simple druidic magic. Its soul remained mundane, unlike those of elves or humans.

The bear opened its eyes and raised its head as Anneliese approached. It began to prepare a roar, but a spell manifested in her hand—a B-rank subsidiary of [Progenitor], called [Family Tree]. Faint roots of green energy came from her hand and gently surged into the bear, like the faintest whisper of benevolence. At once, Argrave felt a new presence in the druidic network that he and Anneliese were bound in. Doubtless Durran would feel it, too.

“I was expecting... a smaller bear to transport,” Vera admitted. “The spell might not... well, it might,” she reasoned, sizing it up with her orange eyes.

The spell did nothing but improve the creature’s disposition towards them tremendously. Argrave hoped it would prove easy to direct—Anneliese could not control it directly with [Family Tree] alone.

“What in the world is this place?” Hegazar looked around. “How did you know of it?”

“Stick around long enough, you’ll learn,” Argrave answered simply and stepped forward, running his hand along the bear’s coarse dark fur. The creature relaxed as though it was among members of its family instead of potential threats. Argrave’s nose curled—the animal would need to be washed, definitely. As its black nose curled, Argrave suspected it thought the same of them. Galamon paid the creature cautious attention as Argrave made his way to the head, joined by Anneliese in short order.

Argrave looked upon the stone head in front of him. Unlike the shrine he recalled near Mateth, this one was both grandly carved and decently maintained. Though the stone had gone green, many of its features remained. Though bald, Argrave gradually distinguished from facial features that this statue depicted a woman, not a man. Other than that, it was hard to say more—it was, after all, but a statue.

Kneeling, Argrave retrieved a stone tablet off the ground, and picked up a stone quill. He looked back to Hegazar and Vera.

“I’m going to speak with an emissary of an ancient god,” Argrave said with a face of stone. “I thought you might want some forewarning.”

Hegazar let out a small chuckle from his nose, latching onto the statement as humor. Vera, though, recognized at once that Argrave was being serious.

“Elaborate,” she demanded, and Hegazar looked at her before refocusing on Argrave. Both looked concerned.

“Erlebnis, one of the ancient gods of knowledge,” Argrave said, not expecting them to know the name. In a vaguely religious state like Vasquer, other gods weren’t widely remembered. “And there. You know one of my secrets.”

“An ancient god?” Hegazar repeated. Even though the name sparked no memory, they knew enough for that alone to spark some unease. Ancient gods were not viewed kindly in Vasquer. Much like the Hellenic gods were viewed by Greeks or Romans, the ancient gods of Vasquer were viewed as temperamental, selfish, and prone to rampant destruction in the face of hubris.

Most matched those descriptions, granted.

“Leave if you’re uncomfortable. Stay if you aren’t,” Argrave summarized briefly.

“Argrave,” Anneliese looked at him. “Do not manifest your tension to create a poor situation.”

Argrave realized only then how tense he truly was. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed. “She’s right. I asked you to escort me here, but I didn’t hope to involve you in this. If you want to leave while I take care of this, I will think nothing of it.”

“I suppose this explains the tremendous strides you’ve taken in magical growth,” Vera reflected. Argrave felt she was misunderstanding things, but she was right in a sense.

“I know one other Magister who consorts with an ancient god,” Hegazar continued. “He’s mad. None associate with him. He lives in the sea.”

“This is transactional,” Argrave explained. “I offer knowledge for knowledge.”

“That’s how it all begins,” Hegazar noted. “I hope, for your sake, you understand what you’re doing.”

“But we should go,” Vera nodded. “We will wait far beyond this cave.”

Hegazar nodded in agreement, then turned, regarding the multitude of sculptures cautiously as he walked out. Their quiet footsteps were deafening in their conviction as the two walked out. Argrave was left with Anneliese, Galamon, and the bear. He held the stone tablet in his hands, feeling it was a bit heavier than before.

“Argrave,” Anneliese knelt. “We have the aid of three Magisters. They gather an army of spellcasters, prepared to head south to remedy a severe deficiency we’ve been struggling with. We will have all the north, the majority of central Vasquer, and Orion prepared to surrender Dirracha once we arrive.”

“And no one seems to have faith in this idea of mine,” Argrave finished. “I could use Erlebnis’ knowledge. And you’d benefit, too.”

“I will do as you do. But I think you should take a minute to reflect why you have chosen this, then examine the choice once more,” Anneliese said. “Once you have... I will relax completely. All I fear is that you act brash for my benefit. Self-sabotage is a real phenomenon, and I do not want you to engage in folly.”

Argrave touched her cheek, then nodded. He rose to his feet and stepped around the cave, reflecting.

To start, a simple question came: what did Argrave want? At his core, he wanted this war to end so that they could focus on Gerechtigkeith. He had come to the north to personally facilitate that development. But no, that wasn’t the crux of things—he wanted to be prepared for Gerechtigkeith. Even deeper than that, he wanted those near him to make it all the way. Anneliese’s strength was his, too. He did wish to help her.

But there was something deeper than that. In Relize, Argrave felt stagnant—A-rank loomed above, almost unreachable. Now, he’d seen a light. He enjoyed progressing in the ranks, enjoyed the feeling of growing both in knowledge and power. Working with Elenore, who’d assumed most administrative duties, he felt his importance in the fight against Gerechtigkeith lagging behind. He was envious of her intelligence, he realized.

Argrave closed his eyes, doing his best to strip away both desire to advance and envy of someone better than he was. He tried to frame things logically. Erlebnis had no history of malevolence. Argrave had already met with the ancient god’s emissaries once before. If they failed to make a deal, nothing would happen. At the same time, other repercussions might rear their head—Argrave had used Erlebnis’ name, and he had allowed the black flame of House Quadreign to affect the Blessing of Supersession.

But... no, Argrave refuted with a shake of his head. Erlebnis had demonstrated clearly in Margrave Ivan’s basement the god could cause repercussions whenever he wanted, and they had not come to him yet. There was no logical reason this could be dangerous. Erlebnis didn’t need Argrave to knock on his door to kill him.

Argrave had a desire for success, true enough. But a desire wasn’t wrong, and Argrave’s logic was sound. There was a large divide between those who achieved success and didn’t: that divide was having the courage to act when the plan was sound. No one succeeded sucking their thumb.

“I’m going to do it,” Argrave opened his eyes and declared.

“Okay,” Anneliese nodded neutrally. “Then there is nothing more to say.”

Argrave stepped back to the stone head and picked up the tablet once again. He grabbed the quill, heart pumping blood as he wrote, ‘I seek wisdom beyond my years.’ The stone quill left no markings, just as the first time.

He set the tablet down and waited. Slowly, he noticed a shift in the surroundings. The black mist pervading the air swirled and danced, then started to whirl near the entrance to the cavern. Argrave turned his body to watch his development. Before he could process what was happening, he saw a hand materialize out of the air—a tan female hand, with long nails that were wholly black.

A spell matrix manifested in this hand, and a mana ripple spread throughout the cavern. Argrave’s eyes widened, and as he opened his mouth, his whole world was shrouded in darkness. His head whipped about in panic, and yet his head felt heavy and incapable of thinking. How did he defend himself, again? Who was he?

As these questions resounded, humanoid figures rose up, their arms held in a triangle pointed at their head. Their heads were strange symbols, and they whirled around Argrave, slowly converging. He recognized them. They were spirits of other planes. Those symbols marked them as spirits capable of transferring people vast distances. This was shamanic magic—manipulation of spirits to achieve near anything the caster desired.

Argrave couldn’t think of how to attack. He didn’t know what was wrong with his brain, but he could think of no way to resist. His heart pumped quicker as he questioned how he had miscalculated. Yet then... calm set over him. He didn’t need to defend himself. This was just a misunderstanding. All he needed to do was stop the spirits of the other planes from transporting him.

And to do that, he needed to be too heavy to lift.

Argrave activated the Blessing of Supersession and the shamanic magic exploded, unable to contain the vastness welling within him. The spirits howled out and rushed away from him. Argrave staggered forth and grabbed Anneliese and Galamon, who both confronted the new arrival ahead of them.

In Argrave’s brief absence, a tan woman’s arm had formed of the magic mist whirling about the air. Now, a face and eye converged from pure magic, and he recognized who exactly this person was. This was the champion of Erlebnis, last of the living ancient elves, and a mage of unparalleled strength who had mastered the art of transforming her body into magic.

“Why do you resist?” the woman’s voice asked, her mouth formed from the whirling black wind. It looked like true flesh. “You cause me problems. My spirits...”

“I made a clerical error,” Argrave said, clenching Anneliese and Galamon tight before they did something untoward. “This deal involves all of us here,” he explained, and managed a laugh at the ridiculousness. “Sorry. *We* seek wisdom beyond our years. Bring all of us.”

“I see,” the woman’s full body started to emerge from the whirling magic mist. “So be it.”

She held her hand up, and the magic mist whirled up towards the hole in the top of the cave offering light. It whirled around the walls of the cave, spiraling downwards. Where it touched, the inanimate eye

and hand sculptures on the wall came to life as eyes and hands both. Before long, each and every sculpture became flesh, including the gigantic head just behind them.

The eyes all focused on them. The hands closed the books they held all at the same time with a deafening *pop*, almost signifying court was in session as thousands of eyes fixed upon them. The woman took full form before them—white of hair, tan of skin, and with ears near one foot long, she was the last of the pureblooded elves alive in this world. She was uncomfortably bare, to put it kindly. Her eyes were amber and reminded Argrave strongly of Anneliese's, to his great discomfort.

"Hello," she greeted.

"Hello," Argrave responded in kind, straightening. "Nice to meet you, Onychinusa."