

In coming into this cave, Hegazar had commented about the thickness of the magic in the area. Argrave had thought nothing of it at the time, but thinking back, that had been a mistaken assumption. Onychinusa, pure-blooded ancient elf and mortal champion of Erlebnis, must have been in this area, waiting and watching. She could disperse her flesh into pure magic and stay hidden in that manner. That meant either she or the god she championed anticipated this meeting. And that bode terribly for its outcome in Argrave's favor, he predicted.

Argrave looked around what had once been stone, wondering if each of the statues around them had become an emissary of Erlebnis individually. Hundreds of eyes the size of his head peered down, each varied in slight ways and planted atop stalks of flesh. The head in the back of the cave remained still, eyes and mouth closed. The hands carrying the books the eyes had been reading moments slid away into an abyss that betrayed nothing of what hid beyond. On top of all that, the nude elven woman standing in front of them... to say the least, she did little to settle the nerves.

Onychinusa had already demonstrated mastery of shamanic magic—namely, a magic that allowed one mastery over spirits. But as the champion of Erlebnis, that could be considered one small portion of the pie of her abilities. She was well over eight hundred years old, and all of that time of hers had been spent in service to Erlebnis. With that pool of knowledge, the support of Erlebnis' blessings, and the sheer quantity of time in her favor... it was a formula for success that made her one of the most powerful mortal spellcasters in the entirety of Berendar.

A good person for an assassination, Argrave supposed. But sticking to his thesis that had led him to this choice, he reminded himself that if Erlebnis wanted him dead he would have bitten the dust long ago. Even still, she had not responded to his greeting just yet, and Argrave wasn't sure where this conversation was heading.

"What is this place?" Anneliese inquired, staring around at the eyes on the wall and the giant head in the back of the room.

Her relative state of normalcy calmed Argrave greatly—it meant she gathered the woman ahead was not an active threat. The newly tamed bear, still animalistic, seemed ill at ease with the change in scenery. Galamon, too, held his Ebonice axe in his hand. Tension persisted.

"I have been tasked with one thing alone," Onychinusa brushed past her question. Her voice, her demeanor, her body language... they were all off, and not because she was an elf of ancient lineage. She wasn't raised around those similar to her. Since shortly after her birth, she was under Erlebnis' wing. That sort of environment led to a very warped person, ill-suited for normal conversation or society. "Argrave must allow himself to be taken."

"Taken where?" Argrave asked.

"To the lord's realm," Onychinusa said simply, frustration already seeping into her tone.

Argrave swallowed, unease returning as soon as it had left. This woman's life—all nine hundred years of it, thereabouts—had been one twisted psychological experiment. Her parents were dead, and this fact was explained to her from an early age before she could even understand concepts like life and death. Indeed, her adoptive parents answered any question with complete candor. Her caregivers were simply elven-shaped amalgams made by Erlebnis, and thus possessed no emotions. Her needs were attended to and her purpose as Erlebnis' champion was explained, but beyond that, her life was one of cold logic and constant insistence on betterment. No affection was given, and any she gave was disregarded. That sort of neglect made her a very stunted individual, emotionally speaking.

Like a lack of inhibition, for starters, Argrave reflected, making a point only to look at her eyes even if the party in question wouldn't care. She didn't want to stare at him back, he found.

"This is for the best. Once the lord's blessing wears off, we must go," Onychinusa continued quickly. "My spirits cannot transport you with such massive power welling from within."

The best for whom? Argrave wanted to press, though he didn't care to step on the dragon's tail. He didn't intend to be taken anywhere. He'd hoped that Erlebnis would manifest here in some manner, not that he'd be taken to the god. He needed more information.

"Since you were waiting for me here, I can assume that Erlebnis has an offer for me, personally," Argrave guessed. "If you can tell me what this deal is about, you can save him some time explaining things."

Onychinusa's eyes focused on Argrave for a moment, and then quickly darted to the side. "I was meant only to bring," she resisted inflexibly.

"Regardless, we have to wait," Argrave said quietly, still basking in the power of his Blessing of Supersession. "There cannot be any harm."

The tan elf's eyes narrowed, though she still resisted meeting Argrave's gaze. "You will employ your considerable knowledge of unknown origin to help the lord break the cycle of judgement."

It was Argrave's turn to narrow his eyes. He wasn't surprised that Erlebnis had learned of the breadth of his knowledge—wittingly or unwittingly, the ancient god has ways of learning from different people about a large variety of things all around the world. No doubt he had heard of what Argrave had done, and deduced that the things that occurred were no coincidence. Still... the fact he'd garnered attention uneased him.

"...surely he should know I already endeavor to do that?" Argrave asked.

"No. You prolong the cycle," Onychinusa said angrily, long ears swaying as she shook her head. "Lord Erlebnis intends to break it."

Understanding dawned on Argrave at once. What Erlebnis proposed was not defeating Gerechtigkeits, but destroying it permanently, thereby ending the cycle permanently. That notion defied all of Argrave's knowledge, and so he rashly said, "That isn't possible."

"How do you know?" she asked. "The lord is capable of anything."

"Because..." Argrave stopped himself.

"I answered your questions," Onychinusa insisted. "You must respond in kind."

"Argrave," Galamon interrupted, his voice steady.

Argrave looked back, only to notice Galamon watched behind them. When Argrave followed his gaze, he saw the gigantic head behind them had come to life, somewhat. Its eyelids had opened for familiar reddish mercury portals. Argrave expected something to emerge from them—an emissary, perhaps—but instead, the eyes closed.

"It seems we'll learn no more. Others were an unexpected variable that greatly hindered the effectiveness of this idea," the head said, its voice that of a young woman's. "The lord wishes you to return."

"I see," came Onychinusa's response, genuine annoyance coming through in her voice.

When Argrave turned back, Onychinusa was already dissipating into magic once again. It seemed that the woman could not wait to get away from the situation.

"The lord wished to establish the goal in your actions," the head explained as Argrave turned back. "And further... He wished for some insight as to the depths of your knowledge. Considering you brought this woman here to glean insight from His presence, such actions can be forgiven for the trade ahead, I trust."

Argrave released his breath, not realizing he'd been holding it. "So... there is a trade in mind. And all of that... what, information gathering?"

"You no longer speak to His mortal champion. You speak to us. And in most nonessential questions asked to us... there is a price associated," the head continued solemnly.

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, choosing all of his words carefully. All of that... there was no way Onychinusa had been acting. Anneliese would have seen through it. Given her nature, Onychinusa's acting could not be especially good, so maybe even Argrave would have seen through it.

"Hey, Anne..." Argrave said, still staring at the head. "Do you think Onychinusa was even aware of this plot?"

"Umm..." Anneliese looked at Argrave confusedly, questioning if she should respond.

"We can't offend these emissaries. No point hiding our words," Argrave turned his head to her. "Even if we made a ward, I imagine they could still make out our words. Reading our lips, the flow of the wind... whatever. They've got eyes everywhere," he noted, gaze flitting from the eyes all about the wall and ceiling.

"Then..." she hesitated even still. "No, she wasn't. Not in my opinion."

"Then she's still just another tool to him," Argrave nodded. "Let me guess what the idea was from the beginning. Once you had written permission, you intended to bring me before Erlebnis. Maybe you thought it'd be harder to refuse if I was in his realm... and I think you'd be right on that front. Failing that, you wanted her to draw information from me, expecting I'd try to do the same for her. But that still tells me one thing—the boundary between realms has weakened enough that spirits can break through

them, even transport people between them. And that means... time is running out fast. And your lord recognizes that.”

“Running down, perhaps,” the emissary confirmed—in a rare show, it was frank. “The being you call Gerechtigkeits comes, yes. The lord sees and admires your efforts on that front... and He sees your knowledge, too. In the face of the cycle of judgement, collaboration is necessary.”

“Collaboration?” Argrave’s eyes brightened. “I’m hoping that means you’re amenable to a trade. Or rather... Erlebnis is.”

“An offer,” the head shook. “You have attracted the eyes of many gods, young and old, Argrave. The gods of Vasquer pay attention to you for corrupting their champion and jeopardizing fragments of their being. Fellhorn, even in his perennial haze, has not been blind to how you harmed his endeavors in the Burnt Desert. And the words you speak... there are ears to listen everywhere, and the gods pay greater attention to the continent soon to become their battlefield. Greater gods of magic, of life and death, of natural order... many eyes fall upon you. If you think the eyes surrounding you now are many... they pale in comparison to the watching gods.”

“Is that really an offer?” Argrave questioned. If the emissary was trying to unsettle him, it was working. Underhanded or deceptive they might be... but liars they were not. Their word was gold. He’d caught some attention.

“Our lord Erlebnis does not wish to receive scraps of knowledge whenever you should need Him,” the head shook. “He is loath to give away his secrets and blessings so freely.”

“You can’t put that aside?” Argrave raised a brow.

“If you are as knowledgeable as we think, Argrave, you know that is not the case,” the head shook, slowly this time. “The gods define the mortal world as much as the mortal world defines the gods. To act against His nature and reputation is to fade away.”

Argrave put one hand on his hip, then gave a resigned nod. “...alright, I’m following.”

“Become Erlebnis’ second champion,” the emissary suggested. “Give your knowledge—all of your knowledge—freely, and you will be similarly rewarded and blessed.”

“If you’ve been paying attention to me as I think, I imagine you’ve predicted my response to that,” Argrave guessed.

“All of you and yours would be protected. Anneliese. Your sister. Durran. Galamon. Elias of Parbon. Nikoletta of Monticci. Any name you mention can be sheltered within His realm. He is not the sole power there, but He is the dominant one. No harm could ever come to them, and the whole of you could work towards delaying the cycle of judgement for yet another round. The lord wants what you want,” the head continued, voice as level as it always was.

“I...” Argrave did hesitate a beat. “I don’t think that can happen. Couldn’t convince the people in question to fall in line with that idea. And I can do much better here than at Erlebnis’ side.”

“Then herald our lord,” the head continued. “Bring His name to your people. Supplant the half-spirits that would play at being gods of Vasquer. Build shrines in His name. You know well the value of reverence of knowledge: you cannot lose in this. In return, you would be suitably compensated.”

Argrave looked off to the side, but only watching eyes awaited his answer.

“Diligence, wisdom, and intent,” Argrave said, looking back. “If you’ve got all three, you can be a good ruler. But if you have the first two, and not the third... well. That’s a recipe for disaster, in my opinion.”

“Meaning?” the head pressed.

Argrave turned his head around, looking to be sure something was still present—or rather, someone. He was beginning to see the way this was going, but he thought there might be one thing he could do to come out ahead in this.

“Let’s take an example: your current champion,” Argrave began. “Her parents gave her to you in return for two things—preservation of elven knowledge, and preservation of the elven bloodline. Even though you could have saved more of the ancient elves, you kept her alone and isolated, raising her as your ageless champion and keeping the knowledge of the elven ancients to yourself.”

“Are you implying our lord Erlebnis deceived, did not keep His promise?” the head asked. Its utter lack of fury was even more terrifying than if had howled with anger.

“You kept your promise,” Argrave nodded. “And a finger on the monkey’s paw curled.” Argrave let some silence hang as he thought of the Burnt Desert under Fellhorn, then said decisively, “I greatly appreciate your lord for his consideration, but I don’t think I’ll take either of the offers.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 317: Going Where the Dead Have Gone Before

“If the only thing you’ll offer to our lord Erlebnis is bits of knowledge that may interest him, then this meeting is over,” the gargantuan head continued after Argrave’s refusal to accept its offer.

Argrave stared at it resolutely and confirmed, “It’s over, then.”

The emissary stared ahead for a few moments, unblinking. “Perhaps you did not understand the implication of what we said earlier,” the emissary continued. “Many gods have a vested interest in you, many of them negatively predisposed. Those of Fellhorn, or the Vasquer pantheon... Erlebnis is of similar or far greater strength, has a vested interest in you, and is positively predisposed. In the times to come, when the great curtain dividing the mortal from the immortal falls away... these powers will have freer reign.”

“I realized what you meant when you first said it,” Argrave stayed his course. “I appreciate and recognize the magnitude of the offer, but I must refuse.”

The head continued to stare for another few moments, and then shut its eyes. When it opened its lids again, the reddish mercury substance that appeared whenever the emissaries were coming took the place of its eyes. Argrave stepped back almost by instinct, only to notice something similar happen in all the eyes around—they closed as though a wave passed through them, and then opened supplanted by the gleaming red liquid. In perhaps a dozen second, the entire room became a glow of red orbs on stalks

peering down on them. The bear roared out in defiant fear, and Galamon whirled about as though expecting to defend from an assault at any moment.

Argrave's breathing grew labored from panic and his heart drummed fast. Then, like topping to this dreadful meal, something familiar returned. It was a *presence*. It was the same sort of presence as Argrave had felt back when he allowed House Quadreign's flame to burn its way to the Blessing of Supersession. Its existence felt like nothing at all, but every part of Argrave's body screamed that there was something here. Whatever part of him was not mundane could feel it. It was like gravity upon his very soul, weighing his being down.

And then... stone.

The cavern returned to normal. Everyone in the party whirled their heads about in a panic, anticipating an attack of some kind. Yet the eyes had returned to rock sculptures and the hands beneath these carvings once again held books for them to read. The bald, detached head that had spoken to them moments ago turned gray and inanimate. All had returned to the still and lifeless state it had been when they entered. The black mist permeating the place was gone.

Argrave thought of something so suddenly it seemed to come from nowhere: the offer would remain.

When he realized that thought might not be his own, it did little to settle his pounding blood. As the bear roared out deafeningly, Argrave steadied himself and looked to Anneliese. She, too, was dreadfully pale and looked like to faint. Yet she gave three quick nods, confirming an unasked question.

That was what she needed to experience coming here, Argrave reflected in his head. Erlebnis showed himself. What was that? A gift? A message? Adrenaline began to fade, and he took stock of his faculties. Whatever it was... it made me sweat enough that I need to wash.

"...let's get out of here," Argrave said after a while.

"Rejecting those offers... a choice well made, Your Majesty," Galamon said, the first of them to fully regain his bearings.

"No. Not quite," he reflected, grabbing his chin. "Coming here... it wasn't a mistake, not at all. I made the right judgement: we lost nothing. But it was one of those failures you prudently advised I need learn how to accept and carry on," Argrave harkened back to Galamon's advice he'd imparted long ago, stepping towards the entrance. "I didn't learn what I needed to move forward on my path of magic."

Anneliese tapped the bear behind its ears, and it largely ceased fussing. Gradually, the great lumbering creature moved forward on its paws, its weight great enough to be felt through the ground with every step it took.

"You must not discount the tremendous amount we learned as a whole," Anneliese said, striding behind the bear while using it as support for her unsteady gait.

He could not blame her for being rattled—Argrave had gone through this once before, even if in lesser magnitude, and he still found this particular experience harrowing.

Argrave's eyes wandered, but seeing that the black mist was gone, decided that Onychinusa probably was as well. He departed towards the exit eagerly as he responded, "We learned that I have enemies in

the immortal realm as well as the mortal one, and that the boundary between realms is so weak that spirits can break through them.” He looked to Anneliese, who trudged forth beside that great bear. “Quite a potent reminder to get back on track. But more important than what we learned... is what *you* learned.”

Anneliese closed her eyes and stopped her walk for a moment, and Argrave paused with her. After a few moments, she opened her eyes, their amber projecting the sharp lucidity within. “I gleaned what I must to attempt the advancement to A-rank. That... Erlebnis’ presence... experiencing it for so long, in such a concentrated way... Llewellen described it as ‘being shown the bigger picture.’” Anneliese focused her gaze on him. “And right now, I can see the magic around me in a way I have never comprehended before. I have seen something so broad that all before cannot compare, and so my vision my widened to accommodate that.”

Argrave gave her a nod despite not understanding, and they started walking out again. They dipped beneath the earth, the bear’s breathing echoing throughout the small cavern. Once outside, Vera and Hegazar sat on a rock, waiting. They looked ill at ease, but some relief showed on their face when Argrave and his coterie reemerged.

“When will you be ready?” Argrave asked Anneliese.

“...tonight,” she said after hesitating a beat. “I understand the whole of it, and with the final piece... I should do it while it burns fresh on my mind.”

Argrave nodded as Vera and Hegazar approached them. “Then I’ll see to it you have three Magisters to help in this.”

Together, they stepped out towards the approaching Magisters. In the darkness behind lingering in the caves, two faintest flashes of amber receded to darkness like embers fading away into nothing.

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Durran stepped through the wet taiga of the lands of Atrus, doing his best to keep a low profile and his left hand steady in casting the magic spell. He kept his breathing light, his steps silent, and his movements inconspicuous. Melanie, keeping close beside him, managed an even quieter gait while wrapped up in magic just as he was. She had set aside her gargantuan sword for this task. Durran had thought illusion magic would be a waste to study, but now he was glad that he had. Had he not, this plan of his wouldn’t work at all.

Durran had easily completed the task of tracking the necromancer that sent forces to harry their party. The problem that arose was how to act on that information. If their entire party went, both Melanie and Durran reasoned that whoever was causing this issue might be able to relocate. It was an untenable problem that might force their total retreat... or defeat.

Melanie, however, clearly did not trust Durran to go alone. It was both in the fact of being incapable to handle things, and the possibility he might simply abandon them. In the end, the two of them went while the royal guards kept the creatures busy. Durran had to admit... Argrave’s guard had not been ill-chosen, both in resiliency and loyalty.

Now, Durran stared at smooth walls of stone that called out to him like nothing else—doubtless Garm’s influence still persisting in his soul. As soon as he had seen these walls, he knew that there would be a fortress of the Order of the Rose nearby. And moreover, he knew that the necromancer was meant to be in this area.

Hefting his glaive closer with his tired arms, Durran bit at his lip indecisively. Could he, with Melanie alone, head into this place, make it past all of whatever awaited beyond, and then dispatch the necromancer? He was but a C-rank mage—even with an Ebonice dagger he’d borrowed from Argrave’s royal guards, his armor, and the element of surprise...

Something broke past the brush, hurtling out near them. Durran tensed, waiting and watching, only to see a small horde of the same two-armed heads crawl past in their unnaturally fast movement. The creatures clearly had not spotted them, and Durran calmed gradually and kept himself still.

“We’ve got a winner,” Melanie whispered. “Let’s go.”

“Eager to join the dead?” Durran returned, grabbing her shoulder as she moved to head forward. “Think about what we might encounter within. Even without your stupidly big sword, in those close quarters the little crawlers have all the advantages.”

“I’ve got some tricks I’ve been saving,” Melanie looked at him evenly, brushing off his hand with her own. “Not because I wanted to hide something, but because they’re valuable. I’ll shed no tears about using them to turn the bastard causing all this into pulp, though. After all, you’ll put some good words into the right ears.”

Durran stayed focused on her, surprised at how well her brashness reassured him. “I thought you were a waste of money. Glad to know I was wrong. Let’s talk details, though.”

“Hah. And I thought you were a product of nepotism,” she struck back, her levity making Durran smile even out of their depth as they were. “I’m less glad than you might be. Your skill makes it harder to get my job back. Anyway... I’ll tell what I’ve got in my purse, even if it is rather improper for a lady of Relize...” the mercenary mused, blue eyes focused on the entrance ahead.

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“So, you know everything you need to know?” Argrave asked Anneliese.

Anneliese sat in a room, surrounded by Vera, Hegazar, Vasilisa, Argrave, Galamon, and a bear. The black beast looked fretful, clearly unaccustomed to human surroundings, but it was doing its best. Fortunately, it had been washed. It looked markedly less uncomfortable than Anneliese, who had been fussed over the past few hours.

“I believe so, yes,” Anneliese nodded confidently.

“Your Majesty acts as though she’s giving birth,” Hegazar noted. “Take it easy.”

Argrave looked at the bald Magister, and nodded despite not fully agreeing with the assessment. The ascension that Anneliese would be enduring *was* dangerous, as evidenced by Llewellen’s demise. Death was the most severe consequence... yet she might lose all her accumulated magic. She reconstructed

her vessel: to fail was to lose all her progress throughout life. In this way, it differed greatly from other methods.

"I would most prefer privacy," Anneliese said, looking around. "Everyone... thank you for your contributions, but would you step outside?"

Everyone looked between each other and then nodded. All of the least interested walked towards the door without hesitation. Galamon eventually did, too, and Argrave hesitantly made to leave with him. Anneliese grabbed his wrist, though.

"Not you. Please, stay. I want something to keep me grounded," she explained.

Argrave took a deep breath and quipped, "The bear won't help?"

Anneliese laughed. "No, I think not."

As though responding to her words, the bear rose to its feet and pushed past the door, its great bulk shifting through the stone of the palace in Quadreign. Galamon watched this happen, then stepped after it. "I will guard," Galamon said, closing the door after his departure.

Alone, Argrave looked at Anneliese. "You sure you don't want to review Llewellen's words once more before you do this?"

"Just take a seat," Anneliese directed him. "Where did your utter confidence in me vanish to? All of this talk about me becoming a Magister, the youngest S-rank spellcaster... was it flattery?" she teased.

Argrave stepped away from her, putting his hand atop a chair and nodding seriously. "You're right. But you're also a liar."

Anneliese blinked innocently. "What?"

"You don't need me here. You want to help me for my own ascension by observing things firsthand," Argrave pointed out.

Anneliese couldn't stop a smile from taking over her face. "And so?" she defended. "Is that so wrong?"

Argrave smiled in kind. "Good luck."

Her grin continued for a bit, then faded as he sat before her. "Then... I'll begin."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 318: Drinking Deep of the World

Though Anneliese put up a strong front before Argrave, the truth was she was greatly nervous about this. Hiding as much was a habit she had picked up from Argrave. She had not lied about being confident in understanding Llewellen's lectures, yet even still, the hound of trepidation followed her as Argrave gazed with expectancy and nervousness both. As though to shut away the world, Anneliese closed her eyes and focused only on the knowledge she had accrued regarding A-rank ascension during the past months.

For a spellcaster to ascend to A-rank was not as simple as comprehending another form of spell matrix with greater complexity than the ones before. Instead, it was a fundamental reconstruction of the magic

and body to accommodate handling mystical forces beyond what most mortals were capable of. There were two kinds of processes to break into A-rank: active and passive processes. Active processes reformed the body directly. Passive processes made a change in their magical makeup, and then their body itself changed to match. The body was the essential part that had to change. In essence, the body became a part of the matrix forming the spell.

The methods of ascension were unique to each strategy—traditional Veidimen techniques, for instance, focused intensely on the cold their people survived in. Anneliese did not know details, but what few she had ferreted out from her teachers back in Veiden suggested intimate contact with ice to change the nature of the magic inside the body.

Llewellen's [Life Cycle] was a passive process. His instructions were similar to Veidimen techniques only in that both sought to advance to A-rank.

The first part of the process was something that Anneliese was well-practiced in. Magic permeated her being—though many spellcasters grew accustomed to interacting with this force only when casting spells, Llewellen's obsession with his insufficient pool led him to constantly examine it and manipulate it. The first part of his technique revolved around getting a full grasp of one's own magic and priming it for movement.

Anneliese did so. Her experience both in seeing liquid magic from the Amaranthine Heart and seeing Onychinusa's magic in mist form allowed her to easily visualize and seize the mystical force throughout her body. In short order, she felt she had a sufficient grasp of it. She wrapped her will around the black storm of power like an envelope, and her bindings held firm and strong.

The next part, too, Anneliese was practiced at. In anticipation of this day, she had done it many times before. She used her will to direct the power within her to stretch and crane and thin, testing the boundaries of the veritable vessel that housed her magic. Llewellen had taught this might be used to gain an objective measure of the magic within any one individual. Now she needed to do precisely that, in preparation for the reformation.

Anneliese tested the limits of her vessel time and time again, her magic fumbling about like a hand grasping in darkness to find the walls. Before long, she knew where the magic would stop and where it could proceed—it was a familiar process, after all, and did not take any longer than half a minute. The next part, though... this was where her progress had ceased before.

Yet it was an impediment no longer. Erlebnis' presence, that *experience*... the second encounter she had been expecting and anticipating the feeling, and as though caught, it left an indelible mark on her perception of the world around her. The first time had an effect, true enough... but it was faint enough that Anneliese doubted it. Now, she was certain of its existence.

So much projected its presence outwards. Living things, magic spells, even the ground beneath her feet... they were all constant suppliers of magic, taking it in and expunging it concurrently in one grand cycle. Llewellen had changed his vessel that held magic to accommodate these suppliers. He could harness the magic within spells, from living things, and from the world itself. Ordinarily, the body and its vessel rejected these things: Llewellen changed that.

Llewellen's fatal mistake had been accepting the magic of the world. It projected too much for his body to accommodate—no matter how high he went, no matter where he travelled, it assailed him like an unending river that eroded his vessel from within. His inevitable fate became death: the torrent was simply too great in magnitude to handle. His revised A-rank ascension rebuilt the vessel, though made a notable exception for the magic emanating from the world. If she allowed the magic of the world to pass by, she would meet the same fate he did.

With these emanating forces all around her... Anneliese felt she had a grasp of what must be done. But the task remained before her. She had to destroy her own metaphorical vessel—a culmination of well over a decade of effort—and rebuild it to accommodate foreign magic. If she should fail in this, she would not die... yet she would no longer be a mage. Decades more would have to be spent rebuilding this foundation.

The nervousness had been quelled by starting the task, but now it rushed up once again, fluttering within her chest so fiercely she could hear her blood pump in her ears. Time was of the essence—once she broke her vessel, the magic within her would drain. She had to maintain its form by willing her magic in shape before it all escaped, all the while rebuilding what had been broken in a new manner.

Anneliese hesitated a while. A long while. She recalled Llewellen's description of *how* to break the vessel, and it played in her head again and again... yet still, she dared not do it. She stood on the edge of a cliff before a pool of water, yet she dared not jump. Her mind wandered... until a burst of courage found her.

A burst was all Anneliese needed. She jumped, and then she was in the sky.

At once, she could feel the magic escape from her body like air escaping from an airtight bag. She heard a sharp intake of breath from Argrave as something occurred outside her body, yet she was already on to the task at hand—rebuilding what she had shattered. Llewellen had described this process in the best detail he could, and his words rang in her head as she followed the procedure.

As the magic flows out of you, that once within will briefly intermingle with that currently without. It remains within your will. Grasp it, seize it, and mold it around what you have broken, Llewellen's words filled her head. You must filter out the strongest energy, though. Pick for what is not harmful.

She did precisely as he instructed... and felt a rush of triumph as she realized it worked. The walls of her vessel, once gone, now returned. Her magic did not escape from all points as it once had. Her will moved and moved with the magic like a craftsman digging wet clay from the ground to build the beginnings of a wall. It was constructed perfectly: stable, strong, and capable of accepting that without.

Yet as Anneliese persisted... though the make was perfect, she realized her speed might be lacking. Filtering the magic of the world out of the construction was a trying task. The rate at which she replaced the broken wall did not match with the speed at which her magic escaped. She tried to hasten yet found that a trying task. She pushed and pushed to go faster, faster, then made a mistake and lapsed back into an even slower speed.

I'm not fast enough, Anneliese realized, though had the bearing to remain committed to the task. Once all the magic escapes, the construction will become hollow and collapse in on itself before it can finish.

Anneliese stubbornly resisted against what she saw written on the wall. Still, no matter how hard she tried, the reconstruction remained perfectly slow. As she confronted this, tears started to well in her eyes, distracting her even further. The thought of failure loomed.

"Glad I paid attention to Llewellen's instructions..." a voice came, then she heard something move before her. She opened her eyes only to see pale skin before her face... and a dark redness pooling out. Argrave held his wrist out, a great cut open. Dark red blood already fell on her chest. "Don't make me bleed for nothing, now."

He would replenish my magic with his own blood.

Anneliese blinked away her tears, but realizing no other option existed, obeyed. She struggled to swallow the warm, metallic-tasting liquid, nausea further enhanced by her fear of failure... yet then, a new and steady trickle of magic already her own returned to where her vessel was, replenishing what escaped.

On the verge of vomiting, Anneliese drank Argrave's black blood. The wall built and built and built, dreadfully slow. As things neared their end, Anneliese felt the flow start to cease. Argrave pulled his wrist away, and she thought it was truly over with failure... yet in seconds, his other arm took its place, bleeding afresh.

Finally, Anneliese finished building the vessel anew. She pulled her mouth away and fell over, gagging and spitting up his blood. Argrave knelt down beside her and she looked up at him, utterly ashamed and embarrassed. She wished to heal his wrists, yet he'd already tended to that... and she was in no state. He only smiled, reached out, and held her.

"I'm sorry," Anneliese muttered into his arm. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"I should be saying that," Argrave said softly. "Pushed you too hard."

"No," she protested weakly, feeling faint. Her body had undergone fundamental changes, and it had to change. Her vessel could take in foreign magics: her body had to change to match. She could not yet be called an A-rank mage... yet the worst was over. Unconsciousness threatened to consume her. "I wanted this... as much as you did."

"Shh," he soothed. "It's over. Take it easy. You did it, Anne. It's over and done. And you did it."

"Not me. We." Anneliese looked at his wrists and saw the copious amounts of blood spilled everywhere. With what little strength remained, she clenched him tight and said, "I love you... so much."

Argrave smiled. "As I love you."

With that exchange... Anneliese drifted off.

#####

Galamon opened the door to the room, feeling that things were over. The Magisters pushed past him and inhaled sharply when they saw the state of the place, Argrave holding a bloody Anneliese.

"Did she...?" Vera began, utter shock on her tone.

"She fell asleep," Argrave explained. "I'll bring her to bed. I think... a quiet night would be best."

With that, Argrave rose to his feet, carrying Anneliese even despite the state of his arms. The Magisters looked about the room, and then slowly acquiesced, filing out with their concern unalleviated. Argrave gave a nod to Galamon. The big Veidimen looked around the room... at the blood spilled just about everywhere... he'd heard the exchange, and he knew what happened. But Argrave's blood had missed its mark more than met, it seemed.

And Galamon realized he felt nothing at all, looking upon so much blood. With that realization, the snow elf turned and shut the door. He stared at his hand wrapped around the doorknob for a long while. Then, a faint growl sounded beside him, and Galamon turned his head to the bear. He stared at the big black beast for a moment.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" Galamon spoke to it.

The bear stared back.

"I am, too," Galamon said. "I heard the villagers slaughtered cows."

The bear tilted its head.

"Are you...?" Vasilisa asked.

Galamon snapped out of his haze, realizing others were present. "I have to guard His Majesty. Have someone send a meal," he asked, acting as though he had a purpose in his ramblings.

Slowly, the Magisters left, talking amongst themselves. Galamon leaned up against the wall just beside the bear, vigilantly watching the hall. He stewed over his realization. Both he and the bear were enduring great changes, it would seem. They would have to become accustomed to living civilized lives once more, free of their bestial natures.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 319: Magic Migration

Anneliese awoke with a sharp intake of breath. She sat up with surprising energy, then looked around the room. Most notable was Argrave, sitting by her bed in a chair. He looked tired, yet locked eyes with her all the same.

"You alright?" Argrave questioned.

"I..." Anneliese grabbed at her chest. "I feel so strange." She paused, questioning if she was still covered in blood. Looking around past him, it seemed Argrave had cleaned everything.

"Strange how?" Argrave leaned in intently, placing his elbows upon his knees.

"I..." her gaze lingered on him. Dancing wisps of smoke poked around his body, and she watched them perplexedly. "I think... it works. I can see the magic within you. Faint, but..." Anneliese lifted up her hand and looked at it in wonder. As she saw her wrist, clarity returned. She looked at Argrave. "Are you alright? What exactly happened?"

"I'm fine. It's morning, now. You took less blood than Galamon did that one time, I think," he joked. Seeing Anneliese was not amused, his smile faded quickly and he continued seriously, "I healed the wounds pretty quickly. I do feel a bit sluggish, but I got accustomed to that on account of using blood magic so frequently. To summarize, don't worry. As far as I'm concerned, it was just a little lapse back into my usually scheduled programming," Argrave shook his head.

"I..." Anneliese looked to the ground, feeling guilty, embarrassed, and ashamed in equal measure.

"Let's not waste time with this routine," Argrave reached forth and put his hand on her leg. "I wanted to help, so I did. It seemed you needed it. I'd sooner lose a pint of blood than watch you lose all your hard work because of my insistence," he noted pointedly. "And I wouldn't have insisted so hard if I didn't think this was an option."

Anneliese covered her face with her hands, ill at ease with what had happened. "I... underestimated the difficulty of filtering out the magic of the world in reconstructing my vessel. Llewellen was able to do it quicker than I was because he had no such limitation, I think. Or perhaps... he is simply more talented than I am."

"Don't fret on the why," Argrave shook his head. "It's over, isn't it?"

Anneliese slowly uncovered her face and nodded. "...yes. Yes, I suppose it is."

Argrave leaned in a little further and grabbed her hand. She was puzzled, yet after a few moments felt a strange sensation travelling up her arm. She realized that she was draining him of magic.

The moment she recognized what was happening, Anneliese yanked her hand away. "Argrave...!" she called out, distressed.

"Given that reaction, I can assume you took some magic from me," Argrave said, sinking back in the chair. "Either that, or we're not as sound as a couple anymore. Don't break my heart, now."

"I... drained you," Anneliese looked at her hand, rubbing it in distress.

"My personal supply remains untouched," Argrave informed her. "In Heroes of Berendar, a few things would change. Your melee attacks would recover your magic, while spells would actually drain magic from targets. You'd have... I think it was about 30% spell absorption," he mused, scratching his nose.

"Not a grand list, but a formidable, all-purpose A-rank ascension that puts you far ahead of just about every magic user. As for what it does now in this reality... I suppose we have to test it out, won't we?"

"[Life Cycle] is a passive ascension," Anneliese noted. "I don't think my body has fully adapted to the change. I cannot cast any A-rank spells... yet I can say I am soon to be an A-rank spellcaster. I..." she closed her eyes. "We did it, Argrave."

"I just filled up your tank once. You were driving the car," he dismissed with a shake of his head. "And speaking of driving... Diana says that the bulk of the spellcasters we're going to get are assembled. All that remains is marching through northern Atrus and converging with Elenore's force. And given the situation there, I think it'd be best if we hurry."

"The situation?" Anneliese looked at him concernedly. "One so bad you hear of it oversea?"

“Elenore’s men sent a bird here with a message. She’s already facilitating the move to grow her position in the north—she wants to be in position to secure the bulk of the profit for the trade concessions I gave the archduchy,” Argrave explained. “Insider trading... it’s a little grimy, but I trust her to be fair at the very least. She understands the situation.”

Anneliese nodded intently. “What did the bird’s message say?”

“Georgina, one of the protagonists, is heading a guerilla force against our army and succeeding quite splendidly,” Argrave said without hesitation, recalling the message well given how much it caught his attention. “Without spellcasters, the army’s advance is nigh impossible. Durran has led out an expedition with Melanie to take care of things.” Argrave rose to his feet. “The two of them are capable, but they still lack something we have: good magic users. Consequently... I think it’s long overdue to remedy that problem, isn’t it?” He held out his hand. “How are you feeling? Good enough to stand?”

Anneliese turned until her legs were off the bed, then took his hand lightly and rose to her feet. “Like I said, I feel strange... and the most dramatic of the changes has yet to come. Nevertheless, I feel well,” she confirmed.

“You can rest longer if you want,” Argrave suggested, watching her to be sure nothing would happen.

“No. Vasilisa’s ascension was a passive method of change as [Life Cycle] is—I want to speak to her about what to expect for this process.” Anneliese stepped about, retrieving her footwear. “Let me... eat breakfast, reflect and process what happened. My mind is rather messy at present.”

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After Anneliese had some food and some time to think alone, she was able to largely gather herself. Argrave was not entirely sure what to expect of the aftermath of this event. When she began to expel the magic from her body, it had been a rather harrowing thing to witness—the magic escaped from her body much in the same way Galamon’s vampiric beast had manifested, scaring him to no end. From what Argrave could see, things went well.

Anneliese judged that she would much prefer keeping busy as opposed to laying idle in bed with only her changes to think about, and so Argrave confirmed that he would be meeting with Diana today. With the core of their forces gathered, it was time to plan things. To that end, the figureheads of their spellcaster retinue had gathered: the Magisters and Diana.

Galamon opened the door, holding it open for Argrave and Anneliese. For now, the bear that was a gift to Durran had been relegated to the outside after they received some complaints from the people within the Quadreign palace. Argrave took confident steps into the room, mindful of Anneliese just beside him.

Archduchess Diana of Quadreign turned around from the table she stood at. Her gaze jumped between Argrave and his companion beside him. “Your Majesty, Anneliese,” she greeted politely. “People tell me your ascension was a success,” she locked eyes with the elven woman, looking up at her.

“Perhaps in a few days I can claim things are fully complete,” Anneliese nodded, watching as Galamon closed the door and stood behind him vigilantly. He seemed... brighter, somehow. Argrave was perplexed.

"A passive ascension, I see," Diana nodded. "My ancestors passed down their method of A-rank ascension... yet I could never grasp it. I lacked the affinity for magic," she said wistfully, blue eyes growing distant. Then, her face turned to her sister just nearby. "Vasilisa, contrarily, made her own method up entirely spontaneously."

"You're still young yet," Vasilisa defended.

Diana scoffed. "You're the younger of us, you forget."

"I hadn't even realized I *had* ascended to A-rank for a long while," Vasilisa recounted. "I just thought I could cast spells without matrixes for no reason at all. As it turns out, I was pioneering a new method."

Argrave absorbed the information. The topic was a complex one, it seemed, which only made him more and more fretful about his future on this matter. Anneliese had described what she experienced... and it seemed like something so complex it made his task impossible. He was not someone like Llewellen or Vasilisa—he was only someone who relied on foreknowledge and luck to come this far. He didn't feel he could compare to people of this magnitude on the field.

"Let's not reminisce," Hegazar cut in. "We have a bunch of lovely men and women with fire in their blood, and I think it best to solidify their course before snow falls and turns flames into embers."

"Congratulations, Anneliese. I see I was wrong in assuming you needed my help all those months ago," Vera said. "But Hegazar is right. Time wastes."

"It sort of marches on as ever," Argrave disagreed, stepping up to the table. "But fine, let's get to it."

Anneliese joined to the right of Argrave, and then Diana to the left.

The archduchess peered over at various papers, sorting through them with nimble fingers. "I think you'll be rather pleased, Your Majesty. My steward Ferrel has taken a tally of all those that heeded the call. The party accrued consists of four hundred and twelve B-rank mages. Additionally, there are seven A-rank spellcasters... I think it's a rather alarming number."

"Alarming how?" Argrave looked to her.

"We command a force ostensibly far more powerful than the known loyalists that will be leading," Diana looked between the Magisters in the room.

"I don't think..." Vera began. "Being outnumbered won't be a problem," she decided, looking at Argrave and Anneliese both. "Those two are strong. And forgetting strong, they're leaders I think can control those beneath them well... even if they are personally weaker. Isn't that right?" She smiled crookedly.

"...sure," the archduchess agreed hesitantly. "Do you intend to expose your identity, Your Majesty?" Diana asked.

"Mid-journey," Argrave nodded. "Little morale booster. But what of the lower ranks of mages? They factor in just as powerfully. C-rank, D-rank, et cetera."

"I hoped to have them defend Quadreign," Diana said, speaking slowly and cautiously as though she feared to offend. "Many are young sons or daughters of those already in the force. The vast majority of

those that join hope to elevate their family as direct vassals of the new archduchy, as it was before the queendom fell.”

“And you’ll build their magic supply with the flame so that they can be ready to defend this territory,” Argrave guessed.

“Yes,” Diana nodded.

Argrave considered that. The potent force they brought with them... it was already incredibly powerful. Still, Argrave had been given a stark reminder yesterday that *Gerechtigkeit* was the larger issue.

“Anne?” Argrave turned his head. “Thoughts?”

Anneliese, despite her own troubles, remained sharp as she answered quickly, “The sheer number of B-rank mages vastly outnumbers both central and southern Vasquer. Combined, they may have more. I would add that qualitatively, both sides have a greater number of A-ranks or above... but that was when we left. Given Castro’s efforts, that may well change.”

Argrave nodded, then looked back to Diana. “Alright, then. Focus on building your defenses with this young blood.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Diana said. “Your largesse will—”

“Now, the path,” Argrave interrupted, feeling there was no time for praise. “I’m thinking we employ something I did in coming here. Travelling is made easier if we do it low-key... along the coast, perhaps. Where’s a map?” Argrave looked around. “I have something in mind that’ll lead us right to where Elenore needs us.”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 320: Surprise Drop-in

Ruleo stepped through the stone confines of the Order of the Rose fortress he inhabited with one other beside him. This place was far more elaborate and long than most fortresses of theirs he’d visited—from all he’d gathered in old books, this place had been the site of a prolonged war. The fortifications, and concurrently the number of undead, was astronomically high in this place.

Ironically, that war was mirrored centuries later—Argrave’s army stood opposite the valley, while their Unhanded Coalition defended the valley with Castle Cookpot. The exact same situation had occurred long ago, with the Order of the Rose building these fortresses beneath the earth for a strategic advantage. It had led to their victory, evidently. And Ruleo felt somewhat confident it would lead to theirs, this time.

He looked to Georgina. For some reason, she’d brought a large backpack with her. She fought for King Felipe III, but Ruleo didn’t care who won this war.

“What?” Georgina looked at him scornfully. She didn’t like being looked at, he’d found, and any compliments about her beauty might as well have been insults in her ears. Worse yet, any sort of attention she got was assumed to be lecherous. In truth, he didn’t like her at all.

“You’re wasting your time coming here, Georgina,” Ruleo told her curtly.

“The undead you’re sending out could kill tens of thousands of soldiers. I let you go unsupervised, but this could be just as big a threat to the Unhanded Coalition as it is Argrave’s forces. And you send them out... especially recklessly.” She paused, peering ahead into the darkness. “You’re throwing away a precious fighting force with such little regard for what they might be usable for in the future. I wanted to see why.”

Ruleo paused, too. “I send them recklessly because they need to die.”

“A necromancer thinks the undead are abominations?” she crossed her arms.

“I don’t care about necromancy,” Ruleo shook his head. “It’s only another form of magic in my eyes, same as any others. In fact, it makes corpses just a bit more useful. Might be considered a boon,” he mused. “But... I know something is coming. Something that corrupts all of these things against the living—makes them weapons of war in a calamity. I have to get rid of them before that happens.”

“What is this, a fairy tale?” Georgina said disdainfully.

Ruleo felt the frustration that came with someone acting arrogant when they were only ignorant. “You want to talk fairy tales? Then let’s talk about King Felipe’s prospects. Him taking the throne once more—that’s a fairy tale.”

Georgina scoffed and smiled brightly. “If you really think that, why are you here?”

“I’d be here regardless. These things would be chewing through northerners instead of Relizeans, though. The only reason I work with you is because I’d like Argrave on the throne the least of everyone, and you gave me the information I needed to ruin his advance,” Ruleo cracked his knuckles. “Bigger things are coming than this civil war. This is a month’s work, wholly insufficient... but I can’t do nothing when I’ve seen what’s coming.”

“I didn’t need to see the undead,” Georgina put her arms to her side, and Ruleo watched to see if she drew a weapon or cast a matrix. “My intuition alone is enough. You’re dangerous.”

“And you’re dumb. Not dumb enough to start a fight here, though,” Ruleo chuckled beneath his breath. “I don’t care for your little coalition. I don’t care for you—not one bit. But I’ve hurt some people I like a fair bit, and I’ve helped some people I didn’t. So long as you keep feeding me information, I’m no double-edged sword. Just an ugly looking one,” he finished, white eyes veritably glinting.

“I’ve got a sword of my own. And your designs might interfere with that. If I’m the dealer, I’ll pay attention carefully to all cards that leave my hand,” Georgina watched him. Then, her gaze looked beyond him, and she cried, “Look out!”

Ruleo laughed, refusing to take his gaze off her. “Like I said—”

Pain assailed the back of Ruleo’s head for half a second, and then blackness took him.

#####

Melanie hadn’t been arrogant when she mentioned she had valuable tricks up her sleeve. Durran used but one—she called it a Windflesh Brew, and it changed the body so that any movements didn’t disturb the air. The place was dark already and he employed illusion magic on top of that. With all those factors

in tandem he'd been able to sneak through all of this so adroitly it felt unfair. Melanie still had other things hidden away, too—weapons of mystical origin.

Yet the deeper they went, the further Durran felt this situation was nightmarish. Though they'd only been plagued with fast-moving heads with arms emerging where their ears ought to be, fouler things had been gathered here into newly-made cages—chitinous humanoids with blades embedded in their flesh, gargantuan thousand-armed creatures. Durran suspected Ruleo controlled only batches at a time, sending them to fight piecemeal. Death by attrition. He had no idea how Ruleo controlled these creatures—Garm's writings never spoke of co-opting things already made.

But that was over, now. Durran stood over Ruleo, brandishing his glaive nimbly after hitting him with the blunt end. The blow was still powerful enough to draw blood, and he stepped over the unconscious man to confront this brunette woman—from their conversation, Georgina. He hoped to end her now. He'd intended to kill Ruleo, too, but after what he overheard he decided an interrogation was in order before they came to that. Even despite things, Durran was still strongly in favor of putting him to death.

"Melanie," Durran called back, kicking the man's body as he cleared him. "Take him, secure him. Too early for his death."

Georgina pranced down the long corridor cautiously. Then, she held her hand out and prepared a spell. Durran perceived the matrix's potency at once—it was B-rank. A wave of frost erupted, obscuring all vision in front of him. Thinking quickly, Durran reached to his side to retrieve a dagger of Ebonice. He threw it where he last saw her, then used one of the rings that Argrave had made. A ward of matching rank with the approaching spell emerged to shield him. It wasn't large enough to cover the whole hall, so frost wreathed about it, coating all but a cone behind him in crystals of ice.

Once the vision cleared, Durran looked beyond his ward to see what was happening beyond. Georgina tried to cast another spell, but the matrix wobbled and shattered. Durran saw it, then—the knife had stabbed into her shoulder, barely getting past her armor. Seizing the opportunity, Durran dispelled the ward and sprinted forth.

The woman panicked as Durran ran, backstepping to put distance between them. She vainly attempted another spell, but when it failed once again her hand reached for the Ebonice dagger. By then, Durran was nearly upon her. Then, her body shifted dramatically—one foot planted steadily, and her momentum rotated from moving backward to forward without any loss of speed in a strange, serpentine technique. She pulled the dagger out of her shoulder and lunged towards him.

Durran shifted his grip and used the haft of the glaive as a quarterstaff, swiping at Georgina to contest her quick speed. She ducked low and stabbed at Durran's knee, aiming for a gap in his armor. He shifted his leg backwards to dodge, yet the moment his leg was off the ground she raised free hand to cast another spell. It was a quickly-forming low-rank wind spell, and with only one foot on the ground his balance was dreadful. Durran staggered, very nearly falling to his back.

Georgina stepped back, dropped the dagger, and used both her hands to grab her backpack. She got her arms out of its straps quickly and slammed it to the ground. It clanged noisily, then howled as though something within had been hurt. She tried to reach for the Ebonice dagger, yet Durran cast the C-rank [Skysunder], striking her with white lightning. Spasming once, as soon as he had her faculties she gave one final push of her backpack and ran like a burnt dog.

Durran stepped to pursue, prepared to bound over whatever she'd set down. The fabric of the backpack exploded outwards, revealing a battered cage. Three blue ethereal paws rushed towards Durran, swiping at him with long claws. He ducked low and jumped backwards, but one slashed across his thigh. He expected his armor to work as well as it usually did, but instead his flesh seared in pain while his armor remained untouched. He felt warm blood pooling in his boot.

Maintaining a healthy distance, Durran swiped at the claws emerging from the cage with his glaive, yet it passed through them as though he held nothing at all. He cast a spell of flame, and though that had some effect, his magic was running low after their long journey. He dodged another swipe, then used his glaive to sweep up the discarded Ebonice dagger. He took it and ran back.

As he slid the Ebonice dagger back into his belt, he saw Melanie. As he asked, she'd bound Ruleo... though in a crueler manner than he'd expected. She had his hands tied behind him and further bound by stabbing his palms with barbed tent stakes. Durran supposed it was a mercy the man was unconscious.

"What is this? This is the guy, right?! The necromancer? Good gods, he... he worked for Elenore..." Melanie looked down at him angrily. "We need to end him, get out of here! That woman is definitely going to bring reinforcements."

"He has valuable information," Durran disagreed, kneeling down and healing the wound on the back of his head. "I'll carry him if you're worried about breaking your back. He's worth more alive than dead."

Melanie looked back at the cage, still writhing with those ethereal paws. "I'm only worth anything alive. I'll leave you here if you're slow."

"No, you won't," Durran said, grunting as he hefted Ruleo over his shoulder. "You couldn't leave me here if you tried."

#####

Ruleo opened his eyes and winced in pain that surged from several places. He tried to move his arms, but that exacerbated the pain in his hands and he cried out in pain. He realized something bore through his palms.

"Long time no see," a voice greeted him, and Ruleo whipped his head up.

Ruleo exhaled, and the fear of death fell over him as he met familiar golden eyes.

"Should've guarded all your entrances. Got careless," Durran told him. "Never thought we'd take the fight to you, alone and isolated, huh? Did you forget about cornered rats?"

"Hah," Ruleo laughed. He could always laugh at the wrong times. "Rats that don't know that..." He winced. "...that they're rodents."

Durran leaned in, and Ruleo feared the torture was to begin. "We're going to talk about that calamity you mentioned. Among other things."

Ruleo narrowed his eyes, surprised that of all things, the calamity would be the first topic of conversation.