

Their party was soon to depart on foot to First Hope from Quadreign. When Argrave had gone there originally, he'd come with only Vasilisa and her personal companions. Now, he returned with a relatively vast force of spellcasters—well over four hundred, all expertly trained and with vast reservoirs of magic. On top of that, he'd secured Vasilisa, Vera, and Hegazar as steadfast allies. But rather unexpectedly...

Svetlana of Quadreign stood before Argrave, her bags packed. Another was by her—Ganbaatar. He had no such luggage, only his blades.

"You don't want to stay with your mother?" Argrave asked Svetlana.

"Of course I do," the woman responded at once. "But this is work. And work isn't doing what you want, Your Majesty. My mother wants me to stay by your side and help you where I can."

Argrave held his hand out to stop her from talking, then pointed to the white pile of hair atop his head. "I've got the wig on. Call me Silvaden," he reminded her. "Well... alright. I can think of some things I could use you for. But you, Ganbaatar. You're coming too?"

"I intend to depart shortly after we head back south. I think it would be best to travel with you for a brief while longer," the elf nodded.

Argrave nodded. In truth, he did want to enlist the elf. Well, the journey was to be a long one... and doubly so when they first needed to find a way to transport a bear and over four hundred men and women. He turned away from Svetlana and looked out across his large force of spellcasters, newly acquired. They were a mismatched bunch, and uncoordinated... but nothing could be done. Each was potent enough to kill hundreds on their own, provided no other spellcaster interfered.

All these new spellcasters heeded Diana's words, which in turn meant Vasilisa's. The prospect of gaining access to the Flame of the Tenebrous Star was too appealing for them to show any disobedience. It was a relic of the legendary Queendom of Quadreign, a nation which only fell to Vasquer because of a betrayal. Some had benefitted personally from the flame in the past, yet others only knew legends. All knew it was returned, and all knew that Argrave had facilitated it. Still, none knew that he travelled among them. And he intended to keep it that way.

"Let's move, then," Argrave declared. "I'd like to get there quickly."

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Bringing the spellcasters into First Hope was meant to intimidate the Drawnwaters into obedience to the new regime, yet it had other purposes as well. Argrave checked in with progress there, ensuring everything advanced as he wished. After, they secured passage on a boat, cutting through the North Sea to a settlement further south. As Argrave suspected, it was troublesome getting passage for a giant bear and four hundred men. They had to wait a day for a suitable vessel—a day which Anneliese reported slight changes to her body on account of her passive A-rank ascension. Still, they found a grand passenger ship, and with a high fare, they even allowed the bear on.

The voyage through the mild North Sea passed without trouble. Argrave had first considered walking, but sailing was faster by a large degree. Regardless, their destination was deep inland, and they made harbor at a small village which seemed miniscule before the ship they rode on. Nonetheless, travelling by boat for a small distance had saved them some days of marching.

After resting for a night at this village, they moved onward by Vasilisa's order—in truth, Argrave was giving her these directions. Their destination was the hills of Vysenn. There, Argrave would finally make good on many promises—healing Elenore, healing Durran, and if it was possible, securing future healing for Elias and his sister. Vysenn was a little beyond where Elenore had reported their army made camp. It wasn't the same inhospitable taiga that constituted most of Atrus—instead, it was *extremely* inhospitable, and almost impossible to enter in large numbers.

Vysenn was an extremely deceptive place. At its edges, one would see extreme vegetation—thriving plants, flowers, all in a great circle. The soil seemed fertile and rich, and able to house life in abundance. Yet deeper within, beyond the verdant hillsides, there was a stark black formation billowing smoke: a cinder cone, the remnants of a prior eruption from the active volcano beneath the ground. This volcano had not erupted for some time, though Gerechtigkeith would poke it with a stick and make it blow sometime later. As of now, it still emitted deadly gases that stagnated in the hills surrounding it, making traversing there all but impossible.

The active volcano did not make Vysenn so unique, though—Argrave had read about Cerro Negro and Kikhpinych, the two volcanoes that inspired this place. Such a geological formation was not so far diverged from that on earth. Its animals, on the other hand, *had* diverged far from normal evolutionary paths. And so had its people, Argrave might note.

Once the gigantic cinder cone was in sight, Argrave went to find Vasilisa at once. As soon as they were out of earshot, Argrave told her, “We should camp here.”

“Here?” Vasilisa looked to him as they walked and narrowed her eyes. “Everyone knows about this place, Ar—Silvaden. Barbarians roam the hills, the air itself kills you... I had hoped to give this place a wide berth. Food tastes worse drenched in poison gas.”

“Yeah, well, I have to meet some people,” Argrave nodded, slowing his pace. “I have to bring Elenore here, anyway. I figure, while we pass, I might... ingratiate myself with the locals. I can't exactly roam as I please in this place, and there's a culinary masterpiece that might raise my Michelin star rating if I put it on the menu. It'd be best if I get this out of the way now.”

Vasilisa stared up at him, somewhat flabbergasted. “It seems you are loathe to lead from the front. You would rather lead in the enemy's heart, at all times. You leave Relize to handle things personally in the north, leave Quadreign to go exploring, and now this...? If you crave excitement, why not gamble? Dice, perhaps. I never thought I'd say this, but it's less risky and equally thrilling.”

Argrave laughed. “It's not like that, but...” Argrave trailed off when he realized Anneliese was staring at him. “Well, maybe it is like that. You can rest assured—please, lead these people far, far and away from Vysenn. We'll rejoin when we're done. Don't worry. Elenore knows this group is coming, and with a word to Anneliese I can find you anywhere.”

“And the bear?” Vasilisa looked at it, stopping her trek for a moment.

Galamon was feeding the bear slices of meat from a moose that he'd hunted. Argrave's Brumesingers nestled atop its back, enjoying the warmth of its fur. Maybe it was Argrave's imagination, but he felt both Galamon and the bear seemed somewhat happier in recent days. There were cat people, dog people, and then... bear people, he supposed. And rather unlike nature documentarists in over their head 'bear whispering,' Argrave felt Galamon could take the bear in a fight.

Without looking away from the black beast, Galamon vouched, "The bear will be fine,"

"I trust him," Argrave decided at once, though still looked to Anneliese for confirmation. She, too, nodded decisively. "Who knows? Maybe having a big bear at our side will help with the barbarians."

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A man and a woman sat in a dark stone chamber. The woman was Georgina. She was heavily dressed, even more so than usual, and wore a mask over her face. The man across from her was unusual in appearance. His skin was like alabaster—white and glossy, it didn't even appear to have the texture of skin. This made the paint he bore on his body especially noticeable. Threadbare clothes of primitive make covered him.

"The burden upon your people might be a bit heavier," Georgina said. "The force I talked that might be supporting you... that's off the table, now."

"The burden?" the man flashed a smile. His teeth were almost less white than his skin. "Iron and steel have been greater seeds than wheat, and you've delivered them to us. My people do not die easily, yet these weapons facilitate injury to a far greater degree than we thought possible. If we are armed, foes that enter our sight will become corpses by the time they leave it." He waved his hand in Georgina's direction. "You have helped build our homes, restore our strength, ward off disease, and establish our position amongst the other tribes. To repay is not a burden, Georgina."

"...they number twenty-five thousand," Georgina continued, quiet voice further subdued by the mask about her face. Seeing as the number brought on no reaction, Georgina elaborated, "For every one of your able men, they have ten."

"And decades ago, when we were last strong enough to try and come into the richer, fertile lands... we were outnumbered even greater," the alabaster-skinned man said. "If I have the opportunity to go far ahead of our rivals and seize this opportunity, do you think I should take it?"

"Alright," Georgina nodded. "I simply thought it'd be best to tell you, in the interest of full disclosure."

The alabaster-skinned man scoffed. "Interest of full disclosure? We call that sort of speech Brightrat tongue. Sweet, but the body stays empty."

Georgina stared blankly for three seconds, then rose to her feet. "I'll be heading out now. We'll get things ready on our end."

The alabaster skinned man leaned back. "Alright. Impatient as ever. Do you still need help with the door?"

Her face flushed slightly as she rose. "I don't think so."

Georgina walked to what seemed to be a sheer rock of basalt. She fit her fingers into slots that seemed a little too big, and with both her strength and the full weight of her body, shifted it forward. Like a fridge opening, white gas came into the room slightly. Beyond, a vast verdant landscape of rising steam and infinite green waited, in stark contrast to the blackness of the ground just before them. Georgina held the mask tight to her face and walked out, leaving the alabaster-skinned man to his home.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 322: Ashen

Once everyone had set up camp, Argrave stole away from the encampment just before dusk and headed for the ring of verdancy beyond Vysenn. It was difficult for them to do so because their forces performed their duty of night watch seriously. Argrave took comfort in that fact, seeing it as a sign that these new spellcasters would be able to follow orders well.

It was extremely strange the way the temperature shifted hotter as they walked deeper. Distant plumes of gas rose up into the sky like smoke from chimneys that marked no homes. Argrave intended to keep one principle in mind—avoid low elevations, as it was there the heavier volcanic gases would pool. Some of the wildlife might prove troublesome, but Argrave was well prepared to home in on their objective—the salamanders needed for regeneration of body parts.

Argrave ran various strategies through his head, recalling details about the dozen or so tribal chieftains he might use to his advantage. This would be his first time navigating a situation with so many characters of varying interest with roughly equal factional strength. The tribes of the alabaster-skinned men in the hills were not especially small in number, yet the culture varied between each so much.

“The ground shakes,” commented Galamon as they neared.

Argrave paused, holding Anneliese to stop her as they tried the same thing. After a few seconds of nothing, he suggested tentatively, “...perhaps it just does that. As you recall, even if I’ve been here, I’ve never *been* here.”

Galamon walked ahead, saying nothing. “No,” he finally said. “This... comes rhythmically. Mining, or hammering.”

Argrave furrowed his brows. “I... let’s hurry,” he said, instinct flaring to tell him that this might be bad.

They proceeded further. As they did, Galamon’s account of what he felt solidified. It had a set rhythm—each shake that came did so synchronously, yet it wasn’t unified in origin. That cemented Argrave’s thoughts, and he hurried to take a high elevation to confirm them. When they did, Argrave spotted something visible even in the low light of dusk.

There was a cloud of what looked to be bugs. In actuality, it wasn’t—it was basalt, crushed into fine particles and writhing about around people who were barely visible behind the cover of the storm.

“Tephramancy,” Argrave said as he stared at the cloud. “Their shamans prepare for war. They’re gathering the loose basalt at the base of the cinder cone.” As his eyes danced across the scene, Argrave calculated things. “It looks like we’re just in time for a battle between tribes. And if they have an enemy, we might gain a friend.”

“Tephramancy?” Anneliese repeated.

Argrave knelt atop the hill, gaze wandering the base of the cinder cone in search of another similar storm of ash. "It's a genetic magic, like a dragon's breath, particular to bloodlines within the barbarian tribes—generally chieftains or their families. It uses fine particles spewed by a volcano and collects them in an intangible, manipulable latticework of magic. Given that this magic is limited to one region, I can't say much more than that. I know the methods of attack or defense in tephramancy, but not details about how it works."

Anneliese listened and watched in fascination as Galamon stared out across the landscape. "I see them. They're... unusual in appearance. They distribute steel weapons and hearten their forces for the coming march."

Argrave rubbed his knee as he knelt. "Alright. I think it's reasonable to assume these people are the aggressors. We need to find the defenders and see if they're a cause worth supporting. Some tribes will never tolerate an outsider, and I won't endanger us with a lost cause. Anneliese, any thoughts?"

Anneliese stepped around the hill, then narrowed her eyes. "Steel weaponry, Galamon?"

Hearing her repeat that drew to attention the fact it was out of place. Not to mention the lack of development in these people, Argrave wasn't sure they had ready access to steel. Argrave looked to Galamon, looking for his confirmation now just as much as Anneliese's.

"It is," Galamon nodded. "Unless... other metals exist."

"Not here," Argrave shook his head. "Deeper underground, yes, but not here. Even if it wasn't steel, the point stands..."

"They should not have it," Anneliese finished. "Not by your recollection."

"No," Argrave confirmed. "Anneliese, could you—"

"Already planned to," she confirmed, her Starsparrow taking off faster than the eye could see the moment she cast the spell.

Argrave waited anxiously, trying to explain things in his head. Perhaps the barbarians had looted the battlefields—but then, Argrave heard the fighting in Atrus was not especially intensive, and Elenore had been occupied more with negotiations than combat. Other explanations came, but only one prevailed—they had been supplied these weapons by an outside force. And given that Elenore had not told Argrave of such an arrangement...

"Argrave," Anneliese's voice cut in as he came to a hypothesis. "I overheard something. They intend to march to an encamped army south."

It would seem that rather than gaining a friend from an enemy... their only gain was a potent foe.

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"Commander Lottherf," a young soldier stepped into the room, bowing before the man. "Lady Georgina is here to see you."

"Send," the man said with a wave of his hand. He was a tall, middle-aged man who, though formidable in stature, had a rich and full face that did not seem to have suffered much hardship. He sat at a table

beside the balcony—another meal was already prepared, complete with candles with blue flames that contrasted starkly with the dusk outside.

Georgina entered shortly after, stepping to Lottherf who sat beside the balcony. He didn't touch his food, only stared at the woman ahead.

"You need to prepare to sally," Georgina said at once.

"What?" Lottherf furrowed his brows. "Have a seat, eat. Explain."

Georgina looked at the table and the candles, and her brown eyes hardened further yet. "No. I have things to prepare of my own, and you need to be prepared to sally from Castle Cookpot when the time comes. Soon enough, a storm of ash will poke over the hills, heading for the army encamped on behalf of the claimant, Argrave. The force wreathed in ash is formidable alone, but with the Unhanded Coalition and all the men at your disposal... we can wipe out their army in one fell swoop."

Lottherf touched the collar of his shirt, some frustration on his face. Then, his nose wrinkled. "You smell of sulfur. Then, these barbarians... they're finally coming?" He rose to his feet. "I thought His Majesty needed something else from them beyond mere bodies in war."

"No longer," Georgina shook her head. "I retrieved what I need to heal His Majesty, so they're no longer of any use. I intend to deliver the cure to him personally once the war is finished. And if you wish to remain in his good graces, I suggest you *prepare*," she emphasized.

"You'll heal him? Then I suppose you will be the Unhanded Coalition no longer." the commander laughed, but when Georgina did not join him he trailed off awkwardly.

"A battle comes." Her eyes scanned him. "I expect you to wear steel instead of satin. If you want to impress me, you might lead the charge."

With that, Georgina turned and walked away. Lottherf watched her walk away with a clenched jaw. Once she shut the door behind her, he backhanded the candles away, cursing under his breath, "...stuck up, pretentious..."

With one arm on the table, the commander stewed in silence for a few moments. With a decisive slam on the table, he rose, retrieving his belt with his sword attached. He strung it over his shoulder as he walked towards the door with heavy steps.

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"So, Elenore knows what's coming. And Vasilisa received the message?" Argrave asked Anneliese, who nodded, Starsparrow atop her finger. "And she responded in the affirmative?"

"She cursed at you a lot, but by the time I left she was getting everyone together for the march." Anneliese crossed her arms and looked to the tephra storm, which by now was almost entirely shrouded by the transition from dusk to night. "Vera... elected not to come. She said that her spell of transportation was too costly to provide real help in the fight after, and I can say she was not lying. She will arrive with the others."

"And what of bringing other people?" Argrave held his hands out. "Hegazar, Vasilisa, the other A-rank mages?!"

“...if you intend to respond...” Anneliese began. “I can send the message. Personally, I do not think she will bend on this. Her personal safety is paramount to her. She will not head to an armed conflict with poor reserves of magic.”

Instead of growing angry, Argrave closed his eyes and focused on more important matters. After a few moments, he opened them. “If Vasilisa is moving... we should go, get ahead of the barbarian’s march. If their warriors are within the storm, my lightning will be useless—it’ll dissipate on the tephra long before it makes contact with anyone. With only Elenore’s forces as support, the best we can manage is holding out. Even with B-rank spells at our disposal, tephramancy can’t be underestimated. Until the spellcasters arrive, we’ll be at a massive disadvantage.”

Anneliese kept her gaze focused ahead and declared, “I believe they move, now.”

“They do,” Galamon confirmed.

“Good lord...” Argrave stepped down the hill slightly. “The only benefit we have is our small number—we can move quicker than they can. So, let’s go.”

“Hold,” Anneliese grabbed Argrave’s arm. “I am certain Elenore will be expecting this, too, but... what if the force that supplied these barbarians attacks at the same time?”

“I don’t think we have another choice, here. The barbarians, especially when they have weapons on hand, will cut through our army like volcanic rock through butter. And losing limbs is hardly a deterrent to these freaks,” Argrave said, freeing his arm gently. “Whatever comes... all we can do is deal with it. We’re the closest.”

Anneliese took a deep breath. “Alright. Then let us hasten.”

“Right,” Argrave said, then set off down the hill.

Anneliese stood still for a few moments, then looked at her hand. She moved her fingers gingerly, then looked to the cloud of black debris shrouding the warriors as they marched away. With a determined nod, she followed after. Unlike Argrave, she seemed confident in what was to come, as though there was some secret she bore.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 323: Alone Against the Storm

The staves of the tephramancers beat down upon the soil of the earth, sending an echoing boom out into the world. It was a marching drum of war that stirred the spirit and could be felt for miles. Every time their rods met the ground, the basalt storm about them whirled faster, then died down until the next drum came. In the darkness of night, the black mass about hid their advance. The only sign of their approach was the rumbling noise erupting from the beaten magic.

Argrave could feel it pounding in his soul. The drumming was heavier than his heartbeat, heavier than the giant bear at their side, and heavier than fear. It sounded as though some giant, four-legged monstrosity had been freed on the earth and ran to hunt its prey with the primal rhythm of a predator. But just as much as that sound emboldened the alabaster warriors of the tribes of Vysenn, so too did it spur Argrave’s steps ahead.

They crested a hill and set eyes upon a great horde of troops—*their* troops, Argrave reflected. And his banner—the sun, with four snake heads emerging from its rays—hung in the sky, repeated again and again and again. And so, Argrave called out, “Only a little further!”

But his words were unnecessary, and his colleagues rushed past him as they headed for the army. It might be a dangerous proposition to approach an encampment so quickly, but Argrave had sent foreword. They headed for where the torches were thickest. Soon enough, people shouted. In a blur, Argrave exchanged words with several people, getting his point across as quickly as he could. And before long...

“Argrave!” he heard a familiar voice, then turned to watch Elenore moving the fastest he’d ever seen her. Durran’s prosthetics, it seemed, helped her greatly.

“You’re here,” he greeted her, sparing no time for a warm reunion. “Have you any ideas?”

“None beyond what Anneliese shared,” Elenore shook her head at once, breathing a little thin as she came to a stop. “The soldiers at Castle Cookpot are moving. People are emerging from the mountainside—the guerilla force of the Unhanded Coalition. We face attack from two sides. We outnumber them, but... qualitatively... it’s in the air,” she said quietly, then asked hopefully, “Your force of mages...?”

“They march, but... it will be some time before they arrive.” Argrave looked out to the distance. “You cannot see it from here, but you can just barely feel it. That... drumming. The barbarians come.” He turned to her. “The prospect of a peaceful venture into Vysenn seems to have died on the vine.”

“Argrave, your pack,” Anneliese interrupted them.

Though Argrave was curious what she referred to, he did set his pack down. She rummaged through it and retrieved a white mask—the Humorless Mask, which spawned pure air mixed with healing magic. He watched, puzzled, as she pulled its strap behind her head and wore it.

“Elenore—your men will be torn to bits fighting against the tribals,” Anneliese declared boldly, setting her own pack down and ensuring her gray duster fit well on her person. “The storm of tephra—I have seen it, felt it, and I know its power well. Crossbowmen will be useless against it. Send them and all lightly armored troops to engage with the other force. We need heavily armored units and nothing else.”

Elenore digested that but still looked to Argrave for confirmation of the order.

“Do as she says,” Argrave nodded. “Galamon—you’ll take command of the heavily-armored units. But Anneliese...?”

“You wear one too,” she commanded, handing him a Humorless Mask. After, she braided her long white hair with incredible speed so that it would not hinder her in battle, then pulled her hood up to cover it completely. “I know you are our leader, Argrave, but I see only one way out of this with minimal losses. Namely... with the two of us against the enemy, backed by the force commanded by Galamon.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes, seeing the strategist he knew bursting from Anneliese in this dire situation. He saw the sense in what she said. But...

“You intend to test your ability here?” Argrave asked.

“I do,” Anneliese nodded.

Argrave gave her a confident nod. “Then... us, alone, against the storm. My blessing...”

“No,” Anneliese interrupted. “I think that you might find a better use for it. Hear me out, please...”

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They relayed their drastic orders with startling efficiency, largely because Argrave had sent warning to this encampment ahead of time and all were prepared to move. Though dividing the forces in this unorthodox manner was challenging, Elenore seemed to have a great handle on the camp.

Now, Argrave stood at the top of the hill. Anneliese held her hand out, and a great ball of light appeared from a spell matrix. It danced upwards into the night like a star, bathing the battlefield ahead with light. One could barely see the distant storm of basalt coming their way, hiding all within its mass.

Behind, a great many armored infantrymen numbering perhaps two thousand crouched behind the hill, taking cover in case their foes had ranged weapons. Galamon headed them, five under him as officers. They seemed uneasy just as much by the approaching force as recognition of Argrave. The giant black bear beside Galamon undoubtedly contributed, too.

“People of Vasquer, of Relize...” Argrave called out, then said simply, “Calm your nerves. I intend to make good on my promise to protect you, today. As you support me, so will I lead us to victory.”

He said nothing more, and Argrave wasn’t certain it had the intended effect. Nonetheless, he looked towards Anneliese. With an exchanged nod, the two of them stepped forward towards the black tempest.

As they neared, the steady drumming changed—the tephramancers beat their staves upon the earth faster as though their song of war reached its crescendo. Argrave’s Brumesingers stepped down from their hidden places, their eerie chiming echoing as their warriors of mist mimicking southron elf warriors joined to march by Argrave’s side. As the volcanic storm roared to match the furious rhythmic drums, a horn from far behind echoed across the battlefield.

The tephra cutting through the air writhed, merging and gaining solidity. The war drums of their foes became the sound of a thousand horses running across the plains, and a charge of black lances surged towards them, seeking to break Argrave and Anneliese and all beyond them to begin a momentum that utterly annihilated. The spring grass and the earth beneath it shattered in the wake of the deathly force approaching, gashes marring the earth in their wake. The pair in front held out both of their hands, spells taking shape.

Anneliese advanced ahead at the coming charge, then ducked low and cast her spell. A towering, wide wall of ice erupted, near two feet thick—a simple spell of C-rank. The moment the charge met the wall, the structure splintered, cracked, and broke... yet it did slow what came. And by the time the magic broke past, both Anneliese and Argrave had their next spell ready. With momentum slowed and the heart of the attack closer, they could move forth with power of their own.

“Charge!” Galamon bellowed from behind.

As he did so, their two spells unleashed. Argrave used the B-rank wind spell [Furor], and a howl like a crowd's rage surged from his hand in the form of an unstoppable gale travelling in a straight, directed line. Anneliese concurrently cast [Rip Current], and twin geysers of water burst free from her hands, gaining in size and swirling to form a cone.

Under the vast pressure from both their spells, the tephramancers deadly charge—their favored tactic to begin a battle—halted. The squall of basalt reared back like a panicked horse, its battle of force briefly lost to their spells. Alabaster skinned warriors, steadfast in their march, briefly appeared in vision. But *drum, drum, drum*—again the tephramancers beat their staves on the ground, reforming their magic into a deadly force.

But as it was the tribal's shield, so it could be theirs. Before their tephramancy could be fully realized once again, Argrave and Anneliese stepped forward. They headed into the writhing debris. Anneliese stepped boldly, Argrave cautiously, and before long... the sound of metal boots clanged behind them. Galamon, his officers, and all their knights walked into the darkness of the storm of pyroclastic rock. The squall sheathed them, and they were gone.

Within the storm was vastly different than without it. Here, the deep drums of the tephramancers echoed in such a way to inspire a brash hot bloodedness unlike anything Argrave had ever experienced before—perhaps this inspiration was a part of their magic. As Argrave entered alongside his men, the tribal warriors rushed to expel them.

The warriors of the hills of Vysenn rushed fiercer than the storm surrounding them. Whether individually or in groups, their steps never faltered. Five rushed Argrave, and the mist warriors of his Brumesingers rose to defend him. The blades of the elven warriors fell upon the tribals... yet their pale skin was as tough as rock, and the tribals did not seem to feel pain. They pushed past the Brumesingers conjurations, rushing at Argrave deliberately. They knew he was a mage.

The great bear from Quadreign barreled into them, casting them to the earth. Galamon and other knights advanced in at that point, contesting the foes. Whether they were stabbed, crippled, or maimed, the tribals did not cease their attacks until their body ceased to function. Their vitality was so overwhelming that, despite the advantage in armor, the knights of Relize were pushed back. It took three of theirs to kill one barbarian.

Argrave noticed the storm above shift slightly and turned his head towards its source. A man with a staff strode towards Argrave, banging his staff against the ground rhythmically. Each time it struck the earth, it sounded as though a bass drum had been struck. As he neared, he raised his staff up, and the tephra gathered into a weightless blade near ten feet long atop his staff. He struck the earth again, and it solidified. By this point, the Brumesingers mist guardians rushed at the man. With one too-fast swing, it sheared through all of them.

Argrave had not been idle—as one hand prepared a spell, his enchanted ring quickly brought a ward to defend. The ashen blade cut straight through the golden shield. Argrave narrowly dodged, and the blade cut a foot deep into the earth. The blade began to disperse into dust, yet the man raised and slammed the bottom of his staff on the ground once again to reform the magic. The tephramancer prepared to swing once more, using the tremendous reach of the weightless blade to attack Argrave without much risk.

Realizing his disadvantage, Argrave rushed forward. As the blade came, he finished a spell— [Pavise Gale]. The knight of wind conjured by the spell slammed its giant tower shield into the coming ash blade, shattering it. The tephramancer seemed to feel none of the attack's force, though was forced a few steps back from the fierce wind generated. He drummed his staff against the ground twice in a steady rhythm. A shield came down to defend him, while an axe head the size of a person formed atop his staff.

Argrave tapped into the barely-refilled reserves of his silver bracer to use blood magic— the C-rank [Putrid Paramerion]. A curved blade of blood filled his empty hand, and he sliced at the black shield without any expertise. It felt like he cut through air... yet when it was done, the shield had been cut in twain. The tephramancer had lost both his staff and his hand. His wrist bled for half a second before stopping, and then he charged Argrave in a reckless tackle. Five swords pierced his body then, wielded by the misty apparitions of the Brumesingers. The man spasmed, then fell. Argrave watched him for half a moment. Even dead, his wrist writhed and healed. Remembering his place, Argrave whirled back to confront whatever came next.

"Argrave!" he barely heard above the din. Anneliese rushed to him, some blood staining her gray duster. "The magic... it pools within me so quickly. It abounds in this storm, bolstering my power every waking second. And with every drum, I can feel them. I was right. I know where the tephramancers are. I can find them," she said confidently as she removed the Humorless Mask on her face.

Argrave briefly grabbed her wrist, then stared out into the storm beyond. He could hear the drumming, its constancy.

"Then go. When the storm ends... I will be ready," Argrave shouted grimly.

Anneliese put the Humorless Mask back on, then nodded. "This is my time," she said simply.

With a final squeeze of his hand, Anneliese turned and rushed into the storm. Her enchanted boots came to life, wind bursting and hastening her advance deeper into the chaos. She headed for the closest drum.

The storm of tephra prevented reckless use of spells. Only powerful B-rank spells could break past it, and even then, Argrave doubted being able to kill their entire force. Argrave's favored [Electric Eel] and Blessing of Supersession combo would be largely ineffective here, for the lightning constructs would dissipate on contact with the particles in the air. But if the storm were to vanish, if the tephramancers were to fall... Argrave would be free to act recklessly.

And so Anneliese intended to kill each and every one of them to make that happen.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 324: A Dance for a Song

If Anneliese were to analogize being in the tephramancer's storm of basalt with Llewellen's [Life Cycle] empowering her, a perfect example came to mind at once. If she had been walking on the land as a B-rank mage, now she was swimming through a still ocean as a fish might. Up, down, or any direction she pleased—if she made the effort, she could reach it.

With magic pouring into her being faster than she could hope to use it, Anneliese sped alone through the black clouds of tephra. Partially concealed by illusion magic, she used her enchanted boots to propel her advance, heading closer and closer to the pounding boom of the tephramancers striking the earth. Her heart beat with their primal rhythms, stoking her boldness further and further like a flame in a dry forest. Anneliese prided herself for remaining calm, but that had no place here.

What few tribals blocked Anneliese's advance she broke with a relentless barrage of magic. The tribal's steel sung in tandem with their cries of war, cutting, stabbing, and gouging... but none met their mark. She danced beyond their range, employing illusion magic to further confuse them, then sent cold blades of her own. The Veidimen were born in the ice, and the sheer cold of her people's ancestral magic sent them to an unmarked grave with frozen soil.

When Anneliese's spells met flesh, she felt her magic flourish like a cut stem budding another a thousand times over. Their death fueled her life. Her focus was sharp enough that nothing seemed to escape her notice—not a soul came near to harming her. Such a thing was only possible because of her complete mobility in the confusion of the storm.

Her unrelenting advance towards the drumming led her to its first source. The woman readied for Anneliese the moment she was spotted, and her staff banged against the earth. Anneliese sent a spear of ice at her foe the moment she was able, yet a basalt shield rose to defend. The spear pierced it... and the ash degraded, the magic keeping it solid now sapped away by Anneliese's spell.

Anneliese continued her unrelenting assault, sending wind, fire, and ice in waves at her foe who defended with that unyielding tephramancy booming against the earth. What magic she called forth was soon replaced. *This is how Argrave feels*, Anneliese realized, recalling well his state of destructive focus when he used his Blessing of Supersession. *It feels as though the strength of the world is at my back, making all bend before me.*

Eventually, the enemy slipped, and Anneliese finished the tephramancer with the B-rank [Glacier's Garrote]. Innumerable knives of ice bound in a chain sprung from Anneliese's hand and wrapped around the caster, then squeezed inwards until she was pierced a hundred times over. The moment she died, the storm waned slightly, and Anneliese felt the ambient magic dim slightly.

The roar of a crowd alerted her to foes coming. She turned and cast [Icebound Twinblades] without a moment's thought. Two ice arms bearing blades as tall as a person appeared, then spun in a deadly whirlwind that cut through them all with ease. What few that did not lie dead fled immediately back to where the storm was denser.

Anneliese continued onwards without a beat for rest, hunting the next with the same reckless abandon. Cutting through dozens more and routing twice as many, she found the next. This one's defense was a little weaker. As their number faded, so too did their power wane. She sent the cold ice of her ancestors, the roaring fire, the howling wind... and froze them, burnt them, cut them. Her adept maneuvering and skillful illusions ensured her safety—a costly feat of magic sustainable only because of the great wealth of ambient magic spawned by this tephramantic storm.

As Anneliese's hunt continued, her foes grew ready for her assaults. They resisted Anneliese, trying strategies against her. Two tephramancers grouped, their song of war beating in tandem as they used the tephra to kill her. Yet for every blade they sent at her, Anneliese could return one of her own. The

warriors threw their weapons or tried to surround her. Every one of them only met their end, replenishing her fluctuating magic.

The dancer, they called her in fear. The Stormdancer. The title came from foe and friend alike, both witness to her feats all the same.

The tephramancers and their beating staves dimmed in numbers again and again and again... yet as the tephramancy waned, so too did the surge of magic pouring into Anneliese. She fought weaker foes with feebler defenses, yet she herself was weakened in kind.

It mattered not. Their great booming magic was three, and still she hunted. The battles began to blend together in her head. She sent an illusionary form of herself towards her foe, then stole around from the back and ended him with a spike of ice through the head. When he met the ground, dead, they were two. The twisting blackness shrouding all vision faded, and Anneliese already moved towards her second to last quarry.

The next attacked her with weak, rapid attacks aggressively, slamming his staff upon the ground in a desperate march of fear. She blocked patiently, receiving the now-weak blows with lesser wards. Each time the ward was hit, her magic was replenished. She caught a gap in his rhythm, then struck him down with the B-rank lightning spell [Cloudborn Chain]. Then, the drums were one.

The tephramancy began to die, the writhing mass unable to persist from the magic of one man. It shrunk in size, focusing around the last drumming tephramancer in the far distance. With it shrinking so, all around were revealed—hundreds of tribesmen and knights locked in combat. They saw her standing alone, and she turned her head waiting to see which came... but none approached.

Soon enough, even the last beat faltered. When the curtain of basalt fell to the earth, its power gone, it revealed the one beyond. A man leaned on his staff, staring at the scene with wide eyes. The barbarians of Vysenn fell into disarray with their song of war gone. Basalt fragments fell to the earth, blanketing the ground until nothing below was visible.

To take the place of their foe's song... the first crackle of electricity echoed out, following by a scream of pain. Anneliese, unharried, looked to the distance. Sparking constructs rose to the night sky, replacing the storm lost with another. There, it was another's time. It was Argrave's time.

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The barbarians of Vysenn were only human.

It had been difficult to remember that fact earlier. Their skin looked glossy and hard, truly like alabaster. They didn't flinch at losing limbs, and they were so unrelenting in their assault as to appear inhuman. Their strength was difficult to contest, and doubly so with their blood pumping hot from the tephramancy whirling about.

"Fall back!" Galamon shouted, his voice so loud as to cut past all the noise Argrave made. "Everyone, fall back!"

With their commander's words, the men obeyed in mute shock, pliable in wake of the sudden end of the storm. The barbarians of Vysenn had charged towards their line relentlessly. But now, Argrave advanced

into them, the Blessing of Supersession fueling his frenzy. And as they bled, burned, screamed, and fled, their humanity was abundantly clear.

Argrave called his strategy 'sword and shield.' His right hand—and Garm's eyes, when needed—were his shield, blasting away all that came near with powerful magic. His left hand conjured [Electric Eels]. The constructs of electricity would attack whatever he willed. And in the black field of basalt fragments before him, targets were plentiful.

Their party had faced foes with an overwhelming advantage in power before. But humans thrived using tools, cunning, and intelligence despite relative weakness. Hunters of the past took down even mammoths with smart strategies on Earth. With the barbarians' tool broken, their strategy cast to the wind, and their plan dismantled... the human weakness was plain to see.

Argrave wrought great destruction upon the battlefield, warding away the darkness of the night with fire and lightning. He used the knowledge they intended to kill those that would fight for him as fuel for his advance. If they had succeeded... Elenore, Durran, all of them would be dead. And that was a fine fuel for the fire he needed. The men tried to resist him, but it was like trying to extinguish a bonfire by blowing on it or plugging a hole in a dam with their arm. Soon enough, they realized that the man that came to slaughter would not stop.

The fear of one tribal became the fear of two. As two ran, four joined them. With four, the barbarians had social proof retreat was the best option. And like this, the force that had battered against theirs so relentlessly turned and ran back for the hills, blindly stumbling in the dark. But Argrave did not give them an easy escape. If the tables had been turned, the barbarians would give no mercy.

Soon enough, Argrave was alone in a field of basalt and bodies, steadily fueling the giant star of lightning above him as the last surviving barbarians fled, broken. The Blessing of Supersession died, and Argrave ceased adding to the mass of magic above. He looked up, bearing witness to the gargantuan ball of electricity, hundreds of eels swimming in and around each other. It looked like a second moon in the sky. Then, he looked down, searching for someone.

Argrave found Anneliese quickly enough, standing tall and somber just as he was. He walked to her, bathed in the blue light of his magic above.

"Anne," he said simply, touching her shoulder.

She looked at him, saying nothing.

There was a shared camaraderie in their gazes. Neither spoke, nor wanted to speak. They turned back and walked towards the line of infantrymen. The countless infantrymen stared at him... but far more stared at the great mass of electricity far above him. The bear roared at it as though it was a moon.

"People," Argrave called out, staring out beyond where torchlight persisted. He could hear the song of war repeated there, though played in a different pitch. Elenore would be commanding the front there. And from their position, he could tell they were losing. "We cannot rest just yet. Your brothers and sisters fight against other foes." Argrave stepped ahead of them. "Our duty is not done yet. Follow!"

Argrave's feet felt like stone... but still he moved, striding to fulfill the pledge he made to lead them as their king. His most trusted allies joined beside him, and just behind came their troops.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 325: Vice

On the front opposite the barbarians, the battle was pitched to the point of hopelessness. The army of Relizeans outnumbered their foes, true enough... but the garrison in Castle Cookpot had one advantage over them: spellcasters. They were not of grandiose rank or stature, but they had many. That, alone, was enough.

The crossbowmen, numbering near four thousand, were largely invalidated by the presence of mages. Wind elemental magic, wards... their bolts were deflected or neutralized with ease, and the marksmen had no such defense to the retaliation that came. They had slaughtered the bandits and minor lords upon their march here, yet now true resistance came harder than they could handle.

This was in large part due to the constant skirmishes from the Unhanded Coalition. Though small in number, they were fierce, quick to move, and nigh impossible to punish. They used the hills and nearby forests to their advantage. They set fires, traps, and all manner of deterrents.

What few spellcasters were in the Relizean army were heavily pressed to defend, and from their results, they were found wanting. The lightly-armored infantrymen, though well-trained and capable of holding their own, could not achieve a decisive victory over the army as they had in the past. And without decisive victory, thousands could die—deaths Argrave's faction could not afford to take. Even if victory came, their grip over Atrus would be weak, and the other forces in the war would decide the terms, not them.

Elenore knew all of this to be true before the battle began. She could not see the field of battle, but her knowledge of the opposing force was deep. In her time as the Bat, she came to believe a good business mind knows what it can and cannot handle, and tackles what it can do while avoiding what it cannot. She believed long-term success relied not so much on relentless opportunism as it did avoiding folly. And engaging with these foes? It was folly.

Argrave wished for her to stall for time, awaiting the arrival of the spellcasters he'd brought from the far north. But whether they fought the foes or ran from them, time flowed the same.

So Elenore ordered again and again simply this: fall back. Abandon the tents, the supplies, the encampment. Abandon the soil they had laid claim to, abandon the siege. It was an order not many commanders would be willing to give. But Elenore did not consider herself a commander.

This plan of hers... it was a simple one, but Elenore was not certain she would have been able to make it a few months ago. After all, it relied too much on someone else. It placed her future in the hands of another, trusting Argrave and his coterie would handle things and come to help. Yet strangely... she was never once nervous.

Elenore noticed the situation changed not from seeing what was coming, but from perceiving the change in the men around her. They told her what they saw: a writhing star of electricity took shape in the sky like a great beacon for the weary retreaters. She could not witness it, but she felt the hopelessness and despair from the forced march veritably melt away as people recognized what came to their aid. The rumors of their king and his legion of ghostly snakes were reborn anew, recited to

explain what they saw. She heard the morale rising from the depths as men called out in relief... and knew, then, that their king marched to defend.

Elenore saw nothing, but she remembered well her brother's figure. Argrave's steps were not certain, nor confident, nor indefatigable. Indeed, he had a rather unremarkable air. But he always *took* those steps, moving from place to place to fulfill pledges he had made. And to his army, taking the steps was all that mattered in that moment.

A vision took form in Elenore's mind to substitute her lack of sight. It was as though a great giant had come to the head of their army, wielding a torch to ward away the monsters biting from the dark. Argrave's legion of ghostly snakes—electric eels, Elenore knew—was his torch. Try as they might to advance, none of the beasts wished to throw themselves upon the sword.

Elenore knew, then, the fortunes of war had reversed. And she was certain it was just the beginning.

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Durran stood with his hand held to a railing, staring out into the darkness of the night. He was atop one of two towers far before Castle Cookpot. These places had tunnels heading all the way through the mountain—impregnable from the front, but wide open in the back. Durran had forced his way through the tunnels, seeking to force out the residents of the tower. Six royal guards came with him. The other six went with Melanie, seizing the other tower. The resistance was startlingly frail, and Durran realized only once they occupied this place that it was because the defenders had sallied out.

"You're seeing this?" Durran turned his head. "That's your king's work, you know."

The royal guards stood one and all, watching the battlefield transfixed. Ruleo, captive and bound, desperately craned to see without success. King Argrave, together with Anneliese, slowed the advance of an army of thousands. But Durran was far more interested in another spectacle beginning opposite the king. There, distant spell light flickered through the dark night, barely perceptible beyond the veil of an illusion. He furrowed his brows.

It seemed a force of a few hundred came. Were they friend, or foe?

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"For Quadreign!" Vasilisa shouted.

Her war cry was the signal to a devastating onslaught. Magic burst from the fingers of eager hunters, tearing through the unsuspecting enemy force with a terrifying *boom* that heralded their allegiance. Fire, frost, lightning, wind, water, blood... it fell upon their foes in droves, as though all the resentment in their night march poured forth as a wave of mystical destruction.

The sudden arrival of rampant devastation from the rear sent panic through ally and enemy alike. The earth shattered, the wind howled, and the trodden grass became alight with fire and sparks. No matter the method, the outcome was the same: unrelenting defeat for Argrave's enemies.

In the span of minutes, what had been a pursuit of fleeing foes turned into a desperate defense. The spellcasters grappling with Argrave's legion of ghostly snakes attempted to head to the back to offer resistance, but in quantity and quality both, they were overwhelmed at once. Commanders on the

enemy's side blew horns calling for retreat. As though attempting to drown it out, a far greater noise split the air—though horns all the same, they came from Argrave's army. And they signaled a unanimous charge.

Their enemies were hounded on one side by magic users bringing the cold resentment of the north. Concurrently When the Relizeans were given leave to charge, they drove into their opposition with bloody vengeance in mind. And trapped between these two... the outcome for the Unhanded Coalition and Castle Cookpot's garrison was inevitable.

Complete defeat.

The last bastion of resistance in Atrus, its every advantage torn away, shattered. They had overextended far beyond their fortress. Retreat was no longer an option at their disposal. The force of soldiers and spellcasters came together like a hammer upon an anvil, crushing what lay between without mercy.

When that deed was done, they rallied, merging into a cohesive if disorganized force and advancing forward to Castle Cookpot. The two towers—once formidable bastions for archers to fire upon them—already bore the sun-and-snake heraldry of Argrave's house, and the gates to the towers rose to receive them.

Their force soon reached the main castle. Argrave prepared to deliver the command to attack... and yet before the words could leave his lips, the gate rose. The flags atop the parapets sunk, lowered. In their place was a clean white flag, showing total surrender.

And so... their force advanced. It was a cautious push at first, but as they saw their foes laying down their weapons, the men cheered and celebrated. These remaining few that had the sense to yield were taken prisoner, hauled off to their own dungeons in a matter of minutes.

"People!" Argrave shouted, his voice loud and booming. He had come to stand atop the battlements, overlooking the great many of his soldiers in the castle's courtyard. Everyone paid attention to him, and cheered when they saw who it was. Some—the spellcasters in Quadreign—recognized the man, though were puzzled by his reception. Soon, the images of Silvaden and King Argrave overlapped.

A commander handed Argrave his horn, and he blew it. A silence set over the crowd, waiting for his words.

"All of you... I am proud to have fought beside you in battle," the king declared. "This was our greatest test yet, but you have endured many more before this. We fight to secure a future far better than that which we experience now. I will live or die amongst you all to fulfill my pledge to lay down the prosperity we deserve!"

The cheers were so deafening that even the king took a cautious step back from atop the battlements.

"For now, celebrate!" his voice rose again. "Let us enjoy well the fine foods stocked in this castle!"

Their voices came again, louder yet. Their fervor had never been higher than in that moment. The men had been doubtful of their king while marching through the taiga. The easy spoils had contented them, but there was a fire in their hearts that died by the day during this stalemate. Yet then, on the hour of their need, the king himself took the field, moving from front to front in avid defense of his people. And so that flame of loyalty burnt the brightest yet.

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"You certainly know how to create a spectacle," Elenore spoke to Argrave, standing at the doorway. She stepped within and shut the door.

They stood in a spacious room—the previous commander's quarters. Anneliese picked up a candlestick that had been tossed to the ground, where two uneaten yet decadent meals sat cold on a table nearby.

"Just seized the moment," Argrave dismissed, pacing about the room and examining things. "And there's more of that to do. I had planned on being diplomatic with the barbarians... but now, I think we have an excuse to be more forceful. If we march into Vysenn with righteous anger, they'll have to abate our wrath. Doubtless rumors of that tribe's demise will spread rapidly. I was upset at letting some escape, but now I think it'll come in handy."

"On that point... rumors already are spreading everywhere," Elenore continued. "Of you. The king who headed to the far north, disguised. The king who brought all of Quadreign under his heel. The king who arrived like a guardian angel at the last possible moment." She pointed at Anneliese. "They speak of her, too. The Stormdancer, hunting hundreds through the basalt storm like a demon. Defending her king from assault as he held back thousands of troops." She shook her head. "It's sickeningly positive. You have a cult on your hands, I'm afraid."

"They should be singing your praises," Argrave dismissed, uncomfortable with this whole debacle. He pulled off his silver bracer that drew his blood and set it on a dresser. "You did all the hard work. I really just swung by and stole your glory."

"True," Elenore nodded without argument.

Argrave laughed. "Ah... I missed you, I hope you know."

Elenore fidgeted in hesitation, then decisively stepped forward and hugged him. "Well, you can stop doing that now."

Argrave said nothing, holding her for a moment. Then, she pulled away.

"I regret that," she admitted. "You should wash."

"Thank you. Very touching reunion," he said wryly, unable to muster indignation.

"Rest, now. I am going to go find Durran, get caught up on the last of things. On top of that, we have to prepare to consolidate the rest of Atrus. Given your display here, I believe the whole of them will be willing and able to surrender in an orderly fashion." Her eyeless sockets rested upon him. "You look liable to faint from exhaustion, so I will leave you be. For now."

Argrave rubbed at his face. "Long day." As he spoke, Anneliese walked up to him, resting her head upon his chest tiredly. Whether it was to seek or offer comfort, he didn't know or care—he embraced her all the same, glad to put the battle behind him. They had much to talk about, but sleep awaited them both.

"Then, rest well," Elenore dipped her head, perhaps seeing their embrace as her cue to leave.

As Elenore turned to walk away, Argrave called out, "Elenore." She turned around, waiting for his next words. "I want you to come with me to Vysenn, tomorrow. Durran, too. And when we leave... you'll be

able to see across the verdant hills with your own two eyes and feel the grass beneath your own two feet. I promise you that.”

Elenore inhaled deeply. “I... see.”

“So you should rest well, too,” he told her, staring at her squarely.

The princess stood there for a few moments, doing nothing. With a nod, she swallowed and stepped out of the room somewhat clumsily.