

"We cannot afford to make this a long journey," Elenore informed Argrave as she slipped on some heavy gloves suited for travel. "Given the recent influx of spellcasters you brought, we have no excuses to languish within this fortress. Any wounds have been healed by magic, any supplies lost have been regained from the larder here, and we sit at the precipice of total consolidation of all the north. The officers and patricians beneath us are eager to move. They salivate like bears who happened across a beehive without bees."

Argrave, Anneliese, Galamon, and Elenore stood atop the battlements of the fortress. There was a rather peculiar difference in what Argrave saw—he witnessed a lot more of his personal heraldry everywhere, the sun-and-snake. Before, it had been wielded as a force of necessity—the soldiers needed a banner. Now, in but a night, many wore it proudly. Argrave had mixed feelings about this.

"Is two days fine?" Argrave asked her, turning his head.

The princess paused, deliberating. "I... it will be difficult. And you have plenty of matters to settle today."

"Do you *really* need me to settle anything? Seem to have done fine, and I liked my absence more than I care to admit," Argrave looked about.

"Now that people have seen you, I can hardly provide the same excuses I have," Elenore reminded him. "And... Durran told me he captured someone. Ruleo," she said gravely. "Durran can tell you details, but... the man seems to have gained an inkling of Gerechtigkeits. Their expedition narrowly averted a disaster with undead created by the Order of the Rose. I think it best you decide his fate."

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. "...let him wait," he decided. "Keep him prisoner."

Elenore narrowed her eyes. "So he can break out and cause us problems again? The man is nothing if not resourceful. Procrastinating with prisoners because of the headache-inducing moral quandaries generally leads to poor outcomes. Kill him, spare him... best to decide now."

Argrave was unpersuaded and opened his mouth to disclose so.

"Your Majesty!" someone called out cheerily, and Argrave turned his head. Durran walked towards them, arms outstretched.

Argrave smirked and stepped to greet him. Galamon and Anneliese came along as well.

"Look at you, gray eyes once again," the former tribal greeted him. "Anneliese... looking healthy. And Galamon..." he searched for the words.

"Looking mortal," Argrave finished.

Durran narrowed his eyes, then widened them. "Well, is that right? I was a bit worried about getting these fingers of mine back... but I feel a little better about my chances, now. Show me your teeth, maybe?"

Galamon stared without movement.

Argrave gestured towards the encampment below. “We can do all the catching-up on the road. For now, there are a few things to put in order, and then we have to head out.” He looked to Anneliese. “One thing in particular deserves your attention.”

“We got you something,” Anneliese smiled at Durran.

“A souvenir?” Durran looked genuinely surprised.

“Come on. Let’s get ready to move,” Argrave beckoned with his hand as he set into motion.

#####

The affairs in the camp were not so many. Argrave got Svetlana and Ganbaatar settled in, coordinated things with the current army and the new arrival from Quadreign, and affirmed a few promises made by Elenore to skittish patricians or their subordinates. He also announced two days of rest for the soldiers, while diplomats were dispatched to those beyond the valley requesting surrender from all remaining lords. These diplomats brought prisoners with them—they were to spread the story of Argrave’s one-sided victory to any... undecided parties. The other prisoner—Ruleo—would remain under captivity. Melanie was assigned to guard him for their absence of two days, and all had ample confidence in her.

Durran finally got his gift—the great bear from Quadreign. He’d learned the proper druidic spell to bind its soul to his, and did so eagerly. The thing was giant, fierce, and imbued with power beyond even its formidable size. Anneliese told Argrave that Galamon was envious of Durran, bogglingly enough. Argrave was right—his old elven friend *was* a bear person.

A little before midday, they set out to Vysenn with a sizeable escort. Including two A-rank mages Anneliese deemed suitably loyal, Argrave was reunited with his royal guard.

“Sometime soon... I intend to test your progress,” Galamon spoke to the guard as they marched for the distant cinder cone.

The guards seemed chilled by this notion. Durran, riding atop his new bond, spoke in their defense. “They really held their own. Held out against hordes of the undead without losing a man, then still had the mental and physical wherewithal to charge into a fortified structure while towing along a prisoner.”

Galamon nodded, and then they continued their walk. Elenore rode with Durran, Argrave and Anneliese walked side-by-side, and the knight-commander guarded them diligently with the knights and A-rank spellcasters under his command. He resumed his position as though he’d never left it.

Argrave relaxed, for he roughly knew the plan heading into Vysenn—bluster, make demands, seek retribution. All the tribes would be on high alert, and none would be eager to defy Argrave or the one at his side.

“We finally have a moment to talk,” Argrave looked to Anneliese.

She looked a little more tired than normal, and the events of yesterday still showed on her. Then again, Argrave surely looked much the same. A battle like that didn’t fade from the memory in a day or two. Argrave wasn’t entirely sure the adrenaline was all gone.

"A moment seems insufficient," she looked back at him, then minded the path ahead once again lest she fall. "I wish I had two mouths... and you four ears."

"Without an extra brain for each, seems pointless," he responded dryly.

A small smile weighed down by the lingering somberness of yesterday rose to her face. "It is well enough. Some things... I do not care to discuss them publicly," she said. Argrave was about to ask what she meant, but she continued quickly, "[Life Cycle] is not as you remember it, Argrave. It is much more."

Argrave raised a brow. "Meaning?"

"As you say, touching people, or ambient spells, does gift me their magic," she nodded, pausing to step up a steep incline. "My spells, too, sap magic from the targets they hit. But it is more than that. My wards replenish my magic when struck by spells. In turn, what wards—indeed, any spells—I strike are similarly fractionally absorbed."

He blinked, the various uses for that running into his head. "That's—"

"Tremendously empowering," Anneliese finished for him. "Llewellen said I would become the first among equals. I think he undersold it." She raised her hand up, moving her fingers about. "I feel as though my natural magic regeneration has improved. On top of that..." she put her hand on his arm. "You radiate magic more than most."

"If it's you, I'm an all-you-can-eat buffet whenever you want," he looked at her. "But you don't sound happy to me."

"Stormdancer, they called me," Anneliese said, looking off to the landscape ahead. She paused and looked back, where a vast field had been covered with basalt particles and traces of battle by magic. Bodies lay crated in it everywhere. It looked like a pocket of hell placed on earth. "I want you to tell me of Gerechtigkei again, please. I think I need... a reminder. Of why this is the right thing."

Argrave watched the scene, same as her. "Certainly." In his peripheries, he saw Durran and Elenore chatting. Their conversation looked somewhat lively.

"...a greater asset than I thought," Durran told Elenore, the two of them riding on his bear. "I thought she was a waste of money. I told her as much. But... Melanie's not so bad," he admitted. "I kind of like the shameless greed. So long as she's in the right position, I think she could be a big boon."

Elenore's face grew stern from her spot behind Durran. "Time and time again, you think I make bad judgements. Asking Vasilisa to protect us. Having Melanie accompany you. I picked both for a reason, and both have proven their capability."

"When did I say you make bad judgements?" Durran looked back briefly. He looked somewhat miffed for a few seconds, then his face broke and he chuckled. "Oh. I know that face."

"And I know when someone is going to make a snide comment," she said with a sigh.

"You're nervous," Durran pinpointed. "The idea of getting your sight back has really rattled you, huh?"

At the unexpected accusation, Elenore's poor mood was somewhat disarmed. She said nothing as they rode onwards for a little while.

“Should I feel as though I’m putting a bandage around a bad cut?” she said indignantly. “This deserves anxiety.”

“Who’s snide now?” Durran pointed out. “Listen...” he turned his body around until he faced her, letting the bear lead without his guidance. “Something I learned going with Argrave. You can ask him questions to help refine his ideas... but he’s usually right about things. Just follow along, you’ll be fine.”

Elenore furrowed her brows, not fully content with that advice.

“And by the way...” Durran lowered his head. “I follow the same exact principle with you, more or less. I throw questions your way, help you refine your ideas... but generally, you’re always right.” He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, consoling.

Elenore did look a little better. Then, she squeaked and shifted forward rapidly, headbutting Durran in the chest in panic. The bear paused and tilted its head back. She reached into the back of her tunic, retrieving an ice cube that Durran had planted. She berated him, calling him childish as he laughed.

#####

Once they crossed a certain point into Vysenn, their leisurely approach could remain so for no longer. Argrave put everyone on alert, while Anneliese scouted ahead for the alabaster-skinned tribals making their home in the base of the volcano. As expected, all were on high alert, anticipating retaliation.

Rather than mindlessly rush into the hills and wait for an ambush to find them, Argrave allowed Anneliese to search out a secluded and small party unaffiliated with those they’d deal with yesterday. It was a trying task—Anneliese had to describe the tattoos, and from that Argrave had to extrapolate allegiance. He only remembered a few distinct markings, so it took quite a while to find proper candidates.

In the end, they did find a group that might help. And rather than be ambushed... they ambushed them, stealing upon them from a high vantage point. Argrave hung just before the top of the hill, Anneliese beside him. They exchanged a nod, and then stood to walk over the hill.

“Hello there,” Argrave greeted, causing an immediate reaction of fear among the five below. “I think it’s time for amends. And I think all of you are going to make that happen.”

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 327: Feed the Earth**

A small party of four navigated across a treacherous and narrow valley road where rockslides seemed liable to happen at any point. Their feet crunched when they fell upon with the loose basalt fragments beneath. They had the inhuman, alabaster-like skin of the people native to Vysenn. Their wizened yet large leader bore a staff which he leaned upon heavily to walk. Most of his body was exposed to the elements, though not indecently so. His red tattoos were densely packed as to give the impression he was wrapped in something.

The narrow pathway did eventually open up. An austere temple was the first thing to greet them. The structure was made of polished volcanic rock and made to seem a natural fixture to the mountain. The volcanic gases expelled from most of the earth had been pathed through loose stone bricks so as to

grandiosely shroud some of the building. The three escorting the old man looked up in wonder, yet he led on without sparing a glance like he'd seen it all before.

Inside, the old man's staff echoed through the halls, and they all walked in silence through the dark and poorly lit halls of the temple. The walk was quite a long one, and as it carried on, the man leaned on his staff more and more. In time, a brighter light emanated out ahead, and a wave of heat assaulted the four of them. It was powerful enough that it seemed to distort the air. The three escorts paused before entering, kneeling down and placing their heads upon the ground.

The room ahead was known as the heart chamber. It was a place of worship where only tribal chieftains could enter without special exception. The heart chamber was carved from the earth, fashioned into a crude circle. There was a large ring that acted both as railing and a table. It blocked any from falling into the titanic, uneven hole bubbling with magma far below.

The old tribal chief looked about, witnessing all present. There were many other chieftains here, but none so old as he. They sweated from the all-consuming heat of the heart chamber... but not all of their sweat seemed to come from that, he thought. There was nervousness and fear in the air. His eyes fell upon a young boy, who had the least tattoos of all present. He looked hollow and shaken.

"Why are you here, boy?" the old chieftain asked before any words were exchanged. "Where is the Blackweb?"

Another man stepped in, almost shielding the young one with his staff. "The Blackweb died, Firevein. The boy has abandoned his old name and taken his father's position, now."

The Firevein narrowed his eyes. "The next Blackweb was not so young."

"They all died," the other continued. "He's the oldest male of his bloodline."

The Firevein clenched his staff a little tighter. "He cannot even wield a weapon..." he sighed and stepped inward. "And we must deal with the Webspinners' folly? Ridiculous! They deserved what they got. Their tribe is dead, scattered to the wind, to be absorbed by the others."

"But we have to deal with the repercussions," another called out from across the gaping pit of fire between them.

"And why?" the Firevein rebutted.

"Because when disease infects one member of the family, the rest are sure to grow ill. We may blame the sick for their weakness, yet the disease must be dealt with all the same," he said proverbially, leaning onto the table until the light from the magma illuminated his blue eyes. His tattoos were white, and so provided a very peculiar effect upon his already-pale skin that made it seem textured. "The chief of the green lands beyond has come seeking retribution. His spirits claimed hundreds of the Webspinners, and he brought with him the one who hunted their tephramancers—the Stormdancer." He stepped back and slammed his staff upon the earth. "Gather, everyone, and let us discuss."

Everyone focused and shifted closer to the table with light, uncertain steps. The Webspinners were among the strongest of the tribes in the region. Despite this, their numbers had been culled until they were the weakest overnight. All survivors of the battle in the green lands spoke of the Stormdancer.

Equally pervasive was the one who'd slain them after with all the rage of nature, yet he had not been given a name.

"Their leader is the one who called the spirits?" another chief asked.

"What does it matter?" the Firevein waved his hands. He had a grudge with the blue-eyed chief, the current Snowrock, who'd spoken and did not care to see his point taken so seriously.

"History rhymes," the Snowrock said simply. "What happened before can happen again... on a grander scale."

"Can two alone repeat such results indefinitely?" the Firevein scoffed. "Then why have the green landers not conquered the world by now?"

"They hold all we know, except Vysenn," the blue-eyed chief rebutted. "Do you care to see that change, Firevein?"

The two stared fiercely at each other. Before they came to blow, someone with off-yellow tattoos stepped in front of the Firevein, breaking his gaze. "Come. Cease this bickering. The chief of the green lands has come seeking amends for the intrusion upon his lands. Unless others have alternatives... we approach this chief and see what he wants, or we prepare to fight."

The Firevein looked off to the side, and the heart chamber settled into silence.

The new speaker stepped around the table. "Those in favor of repelling him, say aye."

None spoke in favor.

"Then we have our decision," the Snowrock leaned away from the table. "All that remains is picking who goes."

With this, a great deal of debate erupted. All seemed to loathe the idea of this duty, but concurrently all realized its importance. In the end, the heads of the most prominent and ambitious tribes elected to go, if only so that they would be able to influence the outcome of things.

"The Snowrock of the Snowfalls, the Firevein of the Flames, and the Tender of the Grasses," the final decision was repeated.

"I have something to say," the new Blackweb stepped to the table. The young boy spoke words that sounded rehearsed. "In order to stay the wrath of Vysenn, and to combat the misery my tribe has brought upon our people..." he stepped up to the ringed table, then climbed atop it. "I would feed the earth."

A mixed reaction spread in the room. The Firevein nodded in approval, while the Snowrock looked greatly discomforted by this fact.

"What?" the Snowrock asked incredulously. "Boy... step away from the heart. Would those you've left behind want that for you?"

"He is no boy," the Firevein interrupted. "He is a chief and has a duty to this land and its people!" he pointed his staff. "A chief whose tribe is dead, at that. The best he can do is offer repayment to those his

forefathers wronged. We must do penance—so should he. If he can calm the earth and appease the gods beneath, that would be the greatest service. Am I wrong?”

“...that is your right as a chief,” the Snowrock hesitantly admitted.

The last bit of life drained from the current Blackweb’s youthful face. The Firevein lifted his staff up and drummed it upon the earth. In time, all gathered in a rough ring around the pit in the earth, striking their staves upon the ground. The boy stepped up to the pit, nervous and shaking. The ground beneath him seemed to rattle.

And then... he stepped in.

#####

The party of three chieftains stepped over the hills and laid eyes upon the waiting green landers. Prudently, they had chosen to meet outside of Vysenn. Things might have gone differently had these outlanders recklessly gone into the tribes’ heartlands.

Snowrock’s chest became aflame with nervousness when he set eyes upon their party, and he breathed deeply to calm himself. Barring the guards armored in metal, the people there were more than what was described. Tall, formidable, and calm: that was the impression they exuded.

“Swallow your pride,” the Tender, chieftain of the Grasses, reminded them. Unlike most of their brethren, he did not bother with tattoos and kept his hair long. “Standing can be regained, but death is forever. I don’t want either of you doing something foolish because you can’t bear to lower yourself before a rival.”

The Snowrock and the Firevein looked at the strange chief, then nodded their heads in turn. And then, they stepped out across the grassy hills on the edge of Vysenn... moving headlong towards their fears.

“We greet the chieftain of the green lands,” the Snowrock said, coming to one knee. He saw no point in putting on airs, and did not trust the Firevein to do the same—so long as he offered obeisance, so too would the others.

The other two returned the greeting in much the same fashion. The Snowrock dared a glance at them. The Stormdancer was incredibly tall, and the chieftain even more so. His hair was like the black glass formed from the volcano. He had eyes gray as stone... and they jumped between the three of them casually like they were animals that had strayed upon his path.

“You intruded upon my lands,” he began in a clear, somber voice. “You sought to kill my people. You collaborated with rebels.”

“Chieftain—”

“You will call him Your Majesty,” a titan armored in steel declared, guttural voice more terrifying than the rumbling of the volcano.

“Your Majesty,” the Tender lowered his head obediently, bowing until his hands needed to support his weight. “Please. One of our tribes acted alone. We ask for merc—”

“You deflect blame?” the Stormdancer spoke.

The atmosphere grew tense. “No, we...!” the Firevein tried to explain indignantly.

“I don’t care to hear explanations. The people that assaulted us came from this land,” the chieftain of the green lands pointed beyond. “The Snowfalls, the Flames, the Grasses, the Waterfallen, the Mistwalkers... I’ve known of your people. But your lands are useless to me, and so I have left you be,” he declared coldly. “But you spilled the blood of mine. And that has drawn my interests.”

If things had been tense moments ago, they were suffocating now. All waited as though a guillotine hung over their head.

“But death begets death. If you pay just recompense... we can end the cycle before it concludes your people’s history,” he said confidently.

“...what could one so mighty want from us?” the Firevein questioned bitterly.

“Your livestock,” the chieftain of the green lands held his hand out. “The salamanders you rear. The secret to your resilience.”

The Snowrock lifted his bowed head up in shock.

“You ask...!” the Firevein began loudly, but lowered his voice when Galamon took a step nearer. “We live on these lands because of those creatures... Your Majesty. If we give them up...”

“I don’t ask for them all,” the chieftain of the green lands said in annoyance. “Just recompense, I said. And I meant just.”

“And if we refuse?” the Firevein said. The Snowrock looked at him furiously, but he understood the man’s position—the bulk of the salamander herds were kept by the Flames, after all, so this request impacted him the most.

The chieftain of the green lands looked back to two rather inconspicuously dressed people. They held their hands out, and a great ripple of teal spread out from their bodies. Something incomprehensible danced in their palms.

And then... a giant blade of compressed wind formed in the sky on either side. They reeled back, their points barely meeting. Then, they swung. A powerful gale shook the earth. Their twin blades tore through a hillside each... and cut through it cleanly, leaving a flat stretch of earth that quickly crumbled into a more natural shape as the now-dislodged earth slid in a dangerous landslide.

“I’ll flatten these hills,” the king turned back and declared before the winds and tumbling rock had settled. “You can pay a few pounds of flesh... or a river of blood. It’ll be more difficult, but I can get what I want regardless.”

The chieftains were deeply rattled, and the Tender even fell to his knees in shock. That damage... they could achieve it, perhaps. And by ‘they,’ the Snowrock meant all of his people, all of his tephramancers working in tandem. This man had achieved that with two.

“It shall be done, Your Majesty,” the Tender lowered his head. The Snowrock was soon to follow. And lastly, gritting his teeth... the Firevein bent the knee, too.

“Excellent,” His Majesty declared happily.



## Jackal Among Snakes

### **Chapter 328: Hot Blooded**

Argrave eyed a wriggling bag made of poor cloth handled by one of the men of the tribes of Vysenn. Some animal lovers would undoubtedly take umbrage with the treatment of the amphibians, suggesting that they would be traumatized being transported in such a manner.

“Your Majesty... what are your plans for these creatures?” the Firevein, standing off nearby, questioned as he looked into the distant land of greenery where the spring taiga reigned. “Do you intend to raise them?”

Argrave looked to him. “It would be hard to prepare an environment for them. They live in heat and need volcanic gases to get proper nutrients, something that I lack on both fronts. I might sustain them for a time, but I cannot keep them.”

“What of the crystals?” Anneliese suggested. When Argrave furrowed his brows, she elaborated, “From my homeland. They were embedded in the roads to ward away snow and keep the path clear.”

“Oh!” Argrave said, pointing to her. “A brighter idea than I could ever hope to think of. But... the other point remains true.”

“You say that you do not desire our lands... yet these creatures are the only reason we can persist amidst the harsh rocks and dense miasma,” the Firevein asked without asking.

Galamon stepped up and took the bag from the other’s hands, holding it out before his body as though he didn’t care to have the salamanders touch his body.

“I have other uses for them than preparing a force for colonization. I’m not exactly sure why you’re so protective over land near a volcano,” Argrave said ponderingly. “If you’re smart, you’ll heed this. You probably won’t, but here’s the advice anyway: migrate. That volcano will erupt once again. Your homes will melt and fuse with the earth, and your flesh and bones will be unrecognizable in the liquid rock. Doesn’t matter who you sacrifice to appease the volcano or what measures you take to prepare—unless you migrate, you’ll die.”

“Those of the green lands have been saying such a thing for hundreds of years,” the Firevein shook his head, then respectfully appended, “Em... Your Majesty.”

The Snowrock, however, was somewhat more serious. “Where would we even migrate? The lands beyond all belong to Your Majesty, and we are strangers in appearance. How would we survive?”

“Hmm...” Argrave thought for a few seconds, then continued, “Your people are well-suited for the earth. Most of your homes are built from it. Miners are always welcome. As a matter of fact... I can think of a few areas they’d be in rather high demand in the coming years, to the point where I’d accept migrants myself.”

“As slaves?” the Snowrock guessed.

“That custom is long gone,” Argrave shook his head. “And even if it wasn’t... it’s better than death, I think. Life outside Vysenn is of much higher quality than that within it.”

“Yes... it is better than death, Your Majesty,” the Snowrock nodded slowly.

“Given your leave, Your Majesty...” the reticent Tender of the Grasses spoke. “We would return, our matter... settled?”

“It’s settled,” Argrave nodded. “Don’t soon forget the lesson taught here.”

Taking that as their cue to leave, the three chiefs and their small entourage that had delivered the salamanders made to leave. As they left, the Snowrock paused.

“Your Majesty... those salamanders... though they can be eaten...”

“Speak not another word!” the Firevein shouted at his compatriot.

“I’d agree,” Argrave nodded, holding his hand out to stop the other. “I already know the ritual, so save your words.”

The Snowrock blinked, and the Firevein grabbed the man’s arm to shepherd him along. The tribal chieftain resisted the older man, then asked, “Is there aught you don’t know?”

Argrave smiled. “Only how this world came to be.”

With this, their parting was final. Argrave turned away, trusting Galamon to watch his back. Anneliese joined him, commenting, “What strange naming customs. Did they have true names before they became ‘the Firerock,’ or whatever such title?”

“Yeah,” Argrave responded distantly, already thinking of what was ahead as he laid eyes upon Elenore and Durran.

Anneliese grabbed his hand to draw his attention—a rather effective strategy, Argrave noted. “The blue-eyed one... I think we have not seen the last of him.”

Argrave took a deep breath. “Meaning?”

“I could be wrong,” she shook her head, then fixed some of her long white hair behind her ear. “I just noticed... turmoil.”

Argrave nodded. “He and I are in the same boat, it would seem. I appreciate your vigilance. We’ll have to relay that information to my sister, too. But maybe... after things are truly settled.”

#####

“You have two options,” Argrave explained, hands on his knees as Durran and Elenore sat before him, cross-legged just as he was.

The stars and the red moon were especially bright tonight, almost to the point the campfire was necessary only for warmth. They decided to camp here—it was far from Vysenn, yet nevertheless Argrave’s royal guard kept watch. After Anneliese’s display of prowess with her A-rank ascendancy, he was markedly less worried about the barbarians offering any genuine threat. Their strength was their tephramancy, yet that power of theirs had proven to be a larger boon to Anneliese.

“One,” Argrave looked back at Galamon, who still held the bag. “You start a new diet. A lizard a day invites your bones to stay,” he tried his best to rhyme, though he wasn’t confident the mnemonic would

stick. "A live lizard, as a matter of fact. Apparently there'll be an itching sensation in the affected parts as your body starts to change."

"Are salamanders lizards?" Anneliese questioned. She actually held one already—it was a rather unassuming black creature with moist skin. Whatever it breathed out was visible as some sort of black mist. It squirmed uncomfortably in her hand, yet she held it firm. "I recall you mentioning they were kept in heated pools in Vysenn."

Argrave blanked, the answer not coming to him readily. Then, he answered unconfidently, "...no."

Elenore sighed. "I am instilled with confidence by your considerable knowledge base. As for that option, my jaw is rather weak and my stomach not so strong. What is the other option?"

Argrave looked in her eyeless sockets. "The ritual. You will be covered in fresh salamander blood and set aflame. Their blood is highly flammable, but it won't burn you. It'll seep into your skin and set to work immediately."

"Ha!" Durran reeled back and laughed. "I think that's enough for me. Unpleasant though it might be, I'll take a few scales trapped between my teeth and an uncomfortable meal any day over being set alight." He pointed at Argrave. "I got set on fire in the wetlands, and I still have nightmares about that. No thanks."

"They have no scales," Anneliese noted, observing the creature. "That was why I questioned if they were lizards."

Durran spared a glance. "Even better. No self-immolation for me, thanks."

"I'll do the ritual," Elenore nodded.

Argrave wasn't surprised. Elenore had chosen the same option in Heroes of Berendar. The person who was surprised, though...

"What in the world did you say?" Durran leaned in. "You, uh... you'd prefer being set on fire than eating salamanders? I thought you were smart."

"He said it was painless," Elenore pointed out.

"Coming from the guy who let somebody pull his heart out of his body, does that mean much? He was puking blood and turning inside out a couple months ago," Durran waved at Argrave. "I wouldn't use him as a good scale for pain."

Elenore crossed her arms. "Who said today that Argrave was usually right, and following along with what he did wasn't a bad idea?"

"Well, that's..." Durran trailed off, scratching the top of his head where his dark hair was thick. "I was talking about what I do, not what you should do."

"I'm doing it," Elenore shook her head, then rose to her feet. "Let us prepare immediately."

Durran stood too. "Elenore. What's the matter with a little deferred gratification? We have what we needed. No need to throw caution to the wind. I'd think you, being a business tycoon, could grasp that concept."

"You should care a little less about what I do, and focus instead on what you do," Elenore said simply, then stepped away.

Durran's mouth closed and his expression turned stoic. He looked as though he was choosing his words. Then, his bear roared loudly in rage, distracting all present. He stepped away to tend to his druidic bond, seeing what precisely it needed.

"Can we do this now?" Elenore asked, crossing her arms. She fidgeted, betraying her nervousness.

"I thought you'd be most comfortable with Anneliese doing it, given the nature of the, uh..." he gestured towards her body. "...the ritual. I'll be nearby if I'm needed, but I think she should do it."

"I see," she said neutrally. "I hadn't considered that. Thank you."

"You're sure this is the choice you want?" Argrave questioned.

"I am certain," Elenore nodded. "I want this over and done with."

Argrave rubbed his palms together. He didn't have as many qualms as Durran did, nor did he lack confidence in the plan. Eventually, he said jokingly, "It seems my sister is a picky eater. Well, you're rich enough to be, so I suppose it's fine."

Anneliese stepped forward, salamander still in hand. She offered her arm to Elenore. "Shall we?"

Elenore stayed silent for a moment, shuddered, and then walked with Anneliese, heading for a distant and private place.

#####

Darkness consumed Elenore's world. It had been some weeks since she last felt the total vulnerability that came with blindness. The bronze jewelry that Argrave had gifted her became a constant presence in her life to the point where being without them was a deeply uncomfortable thing. Even in changing clothes or washing, she never removed them all.

Now, though... she had to, and the night air felt cold upon her skin as she removed the last of her clothes. The only fabric left was a small sash binding her hair above her head, wrapped tightly. Even her prosthetics had been set aside, and Elenore sat on a rock she could not see.

"This truly is a tribal ritual," Elenore noted with a shivering voice, ill at ease from the howling of the wind beyond the hills that shielded them from sight.

"Yet there is wisdom and magic in it. I will be with you every step of the way," Anneliese said calmly.

The snow elf was extremely accommodating to Elenore, doing nothing to heighten her discomfort. She was kind, Elenore knew... but she wasn't sure her unease could entirely be abated.

"There are some things to remember. You will need to hold your breath for a long time, initially. Do not panic and inhale. Beyond that, I will take care of everything. Your body will undergo the changes

overnight. Argrave claims this is extremely uncomfortable, though not painful. You will not sleep, he suspects,” Anneliese finished evenly. “Are you prepared?”

“Yes. Perhaps the fire will expel this damnable chill,” she said dryly.

“I’ve put the first salamander above. In three, two, one...” she said, narrating her actions so as to be kind to Elenore.

Elenore expected warm liquid, but it wasn’t. Anneliese avoided her head, dripping the blood down her torso and legs. It was cold and got colder yet as the wind blew against her skin. The noises were disturbing and ghastly, and they carried on for some time methodically. Elenore thought to question Anneliese’s efficiency, but she was too cold to speak normally.

“There. I have done as best I could. I will set you aflame. To repeat—do not panic, do not inhale. Take a deep breath when I reach two in my countdown. I will ignite you on one.” The elven woman took a deep breath. “Three, two...”

Elenore inhaled deeply.

“One,” Anneliese finished.

Elenore felt as though she had opened the door to a blacksmith and stepped within as a wave of heat seized her. The natural, human response to sudden heat was fear, but Elenore was well prepared to suppress that. One second, two seconds, three seconds... she held her breath diligently, adhering to the instructions given.

The heat reached a crescendo, and Elenore thought pain was soon to come. But just as the apex came, so did the decrescendo come.

“Astounding...” Anneliese said.

Elenore held her breath, waiting for the next command.

“It... is already over. I will help you get your things,” Anneliese said, the awe still on her tone.

Elenore stood there blankly, basking in the heat as the last bit of it faded away. Perhaps she was delusional... but her blood felt hot. When she felt Anneliese’s touch, only then did she exhale.

“It’s done?” Elenore asked. “Did it work?”

“So far as I know,” Anneliese said. “Here. Come. Let us return you back to the others. I know well the security of loved ones when your body undergoes significant change. So does Argrave. Or Galamon. So, come. Let us get you moving...”

Elenore obeyed blankly. Before long, everything was back as it had been before, down to the prosthetics on her feet or the jewelry on her body granting her vision. Only... as they walked, Elenore realized she was not delusional. Her blood was hot. It was not as though the fire had burnt out, but rather... it had gone inward.

Her jewelry offered her a range of vision into places typically unknowable. And when Elenore gazed upon her blood with its magic... she saw it bubble and boil already.

## Jackal Among Snakes

### **Chapter 329: Blood Makes the Body Whole**

Argrave and Anneliese sat atop some temporary bedding—specifically, a large tarp splayed out across the flat grass with some fur blankets atop it. Anneliese was already delving into A-rank magic. She had two books on her knee—one projected the strange, incomprehensible full-body matrix exclusive to A-rank spells, and the other was a more mundane book. Argrave, however, was poring through letters. He rubbed his forehead to ease his headache.

Elenore was there, too, lying down just before them with a blindfold over her face to keep the sockets clean. She squirmed, continually raising her hands near her eye sockets and then pulling them away. They were in a private tent, Galamon just outside on guard with the others. Durran was sleeping with his bear.

“It itches so bad,” Elenore said with clenched teeth, then grasped the blanket over her body to relieve some of her frustration. “I can’t stand this. I feel like my blood has been laced with pepper. It’s like my hands need to sneeze—my whole body.”

Argrave narrowed his eyes. “There’s worse,” he promised her, glancing at Anneliese. They’d promised to keep her company until this was over.

“Tell me, please. Give me anything to distract from this,” his sister pleaded earnestly, much more emotion on her tone than usual.

“But you know the story behind my heart,” Argrave pointed out, adjusting his posture until he was comfortable. “Anneliese told you.”

Anneliese closed both of the books on her lap as she said, “She heard it from my perspective. I empathized with your pain, but I never felt it.”

“You were probably more conscious of things than I was, then,” Argrave pointed out, searching for another topic. What Elenore needed most, he felt, was something that made her think hard, something that consumed the mind.

“How about we talk about Atrus, the plans for the future?” Argrave suggested.

“You know them. Place those who surrender in resistance debt, sell these debt contracts backed by land to patricians to repay their stake in the war. Beyond that, we distribute the lands along the North Sea that we promised to Relize,” Elenore recited mechanically. “Refining that plan further would be frivolous until we have all information on-hand.”

Argrave sighed and fell to the ground, looking up at the tent above them. “Well... okay. How about Traugott? Any news?”

“None,” Elenore said simply. “Even if there were, I would not trust work from one whose blood is boiling. Usually I’d mean that metaphorically... but let’s stray from long-term planning. I can’t make good decisions right now.”

“You are picky,” Argrave reflected. “Anne, do you have any ideas?” he asked, looking towards her.

“Let us talk about He Who Would Judge the Gods, and the coming change to the world,” Anneliese said. “You have informed me amply. Elenore knows much... but she could always know more.”

Argrave rubbed his face. “Old Gerechtigkeits, huh? Part of me hoped we could talk about something happy.”

“You say that when you mentioned both Atrus and Traugott first?” Elenore pointed out, her constant writhing somewhat lessened already even after brief conversation.

“So sassy,” he clicked his tongue. “Well, you should know. We found out not too long ago that the boundaries between worlds have weakened enough for spirits to break past.”

“Spirits?” Elenore repeated. “Like dead souls?”

“Not mortal souls,” Argrave shook his head. “Spirits are broken gods—you might consider them the souls of gods, but the two don’t really compare mechanically. If you ask me how they broke, I’d say it depends... but they’re little fragments of a god, broken into symbols they bear atop their head. You might consider them fragments of power. They exist here, there, and just about everywhere. Some of them are small, powerless, and dumb. Others are intelligent and ambitious. The ones here on this realm are usually the dumb kind, controllable by shamanic magic.”

Anneliese inched closer to Argrave, sitting above him cross-legged as he stared at the tent’s top. “What makes them different?”

Argrave focused on her. “Strength,” he said. “Silvic, the wetland spirit... when Orion killed her, I’m sure she left some spirits behind. What they’d do, I can’t really say. Maybe they’d linger here. Maybe they’d reform on another realm. What defines a god isn’t entirely clear.”

“What were the game mechanics?” Anneliese pressed, her own curiosity leading her to forget that they talked to calm Elenore.

Argrave stared at her funnily now that she adopted terms like ‘game mechanics.’ “Well... there’s shamanic magic, like I said. It was mid-game content. Beyond learning the spells, you have to manage your supply of spirits. You could only find them in certain areas, and they didn’t respawn... so, it was a big money sink to sustain them. The spells are good,” he admitted.

“Does it have broader implications?” Elenore chimed in.

Argrave put both hands behind his head as a pillow. “For us mere mortals? Hardly. The gods like spirits. Some spirits like to become gods—see the Vasquer pantheon. Although... some might argue they’re not gods quite yet. Who knows? I certainly don’t. Spirits were almost a sort of currency at times, to trade with higher powers. Though from my perspective as someone who now lives, breathes, and eats in this realm... it’s not worth getting overly involved with the gods. I can’t predict them.”

Anneliese looked like she had more to ask, but she closed her mouth when she noticed something. “Elenore... what troubles you?”

Argrave looked over at his sister. He couldn’t really see what Anneliese was pointing out, but he trusted her.

“What do you think?” the princess shot back too quickly.

"Come on," Argrave touched her elbow lightly. "We're just talking here."

Elenore didn't answer. Argrave said nothing, and nor did Anneliese. The silent waiting must've gotten to her, because she started squirming faster before she eventually said, "I hate how much you know."

Argrave sat up. "Why is that?" he asked.

"It feels like I've been... stolen from," she said quietly, then huffed. "Forget it. You won't understand."

"If you give up trying so quickly, yeah," Argrave agreed.

Elenore raised her hand up to her face, tugging at the blindfold she wore as she resisted the urge to itch near her eyes. "I don't know, gods...!" she said in frustration, clearly infuriated by the feeling pervading her body. "It's just... I don't know. Whenever I share something personal, I always regret it. Could be my favorite book, could be something that happened in the past... I just hate it after. But you... you already know it all. And I hate it. I feel I can't look you in the eye."

"You haven't yet," Argrave pointed out, then wondered if that joke was a bit mean-spirited.

Elenore sighed deeply. "Forget it. Go back to talking about spirits instead of my ridiculous idiosyncrasies. I'll get over it. I always do."

Argrave thought about the merits of going along with that advice... but when he looked to Anneliese, her face clearly demonstrated she didn't wish to drop the matter.

Bunching his knees together in his arms, Argrave said, "Hey, I get it. You trade in information. Maybe that's why you feel stolen from. You have been, in a way."

"Maybe," she admitted. "It's a bad mindset. I'm your lackey now, not some bird trapped in a cage."

"Lackey," Argrave repeated beneath his breath, laughing slightly. He stared at her quietly. The way she'd phrased it... it wasn't merely about him, he realized.

"I haven't shared much of anything with other people. Anneliese has gotten fragments, I suppose," Argrave admitted, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I should apologize for that. But she's the soul of discretion."

Elenore tilted her head sideways. "Don't you look to her every time you want to gauge someone's reaction?"

"I like to think I'm the lone exception to her policy of discretion," Argrave coped.

Elenore huffed once, then turned away. "Whatever. What's the point..."

"You're concerning me, talking like that," Argrave narrowed his eyes.

"I meant the point of thinking about it," Elenore turned back. "Don't waste your concern. If I chose to live after getting my eyes and feet removed, I can certainly keep choosing to do so when my know-it-all brother blabs to his woman."

Argrave shook his head. "Such a way with words. You must get that from me."

Elenore opened her mouth, then closed it again, hesitating. "Do you really... view me as your sister?"



Argrave hadn't been expecting that question, but he quickly managed, "Considering how much I know of you, it's almost like we grew up together."

"Or... you watched me grow up, from afar, through a window," she said. "I can't imagine how you could view me as family, experiencing me in such a manner."

"I view Anneliese as family. Durran and Galamon, too," Argrave said calmly. "You're not so different."

Elenore swallowed. When next she spoke, her voice was tight. "And if you had to choose between us?"

Argrave was taken aback by the words... but then felt rather sad for Elenore. She always acted so indomitable, but she was rather insecure deep down. He'd seen that in the visions Vasquer gave him, and he knew that from his own experiences. All he could feel, then, was a deep sadness.

As the silence lengthened, Elenore shifted and turned her body away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't say things like that. That's a child's question, not an adult's." She rubbed at her face, then muttered, "What's on my...?"

"They're tears," Anneliese said curiously.

Elenore stopped moving. She rubbed just below her eyes, then pressed her fingers together. Argrave could see the glistening wetness now, too, just below her blindfold. The princess' fingers started to shake even fiercer than before.

"That's not..." Elenore began. Then, with her body trembling, she sat up and reached for her blindfold. She lifted one eye up, and Argrave saw eyelids flutter close—a flinch. Her breathing started to quicken as she pulled the whole thing off.

Elenore's eyes were not fully reformed, yet—they were red and raw on the edges, and seemed milky gray as though they were blind. Argrave could tell immediately, though, that she could see something. She reached a hesitant hand out and tapped Argrave's knee.

Elenore choked up immediately. Argrave leaned in, slowly, so as not to alarm her, then gave her a hug. "Congratulations, sister," he whispered quietly as she trembled like a frightened animal.

She shook once again, strongly... then clenched him tightly, like she held on for dear life.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 330: First Steps of Progress**

"You didn't have the foresight to bring boots?" Elenore asked Argrave as she leaned on his arm.

Argrave looked down at Elenore, smiling with bitter patience. She wore cloth pants for travel, and he could barely see her pink feet. Indeed, pink—the new flesh was like a newborn's, markedly different from the leg just above it.

"We," he rephrased. "We didn't have the foresight. You might be my lackey, but you have lackeys of your own. We'll get you some footwear once we get outside—one of the two mages has some to spare, maybe." He adjusted his arm slightly and she moved nervously. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I get a chill in my spine anytime I feel my... feet... fall upon a surface."

Argrave nodded. "But no pain?"

Elenore looked to him, and his eyes fell upon hers. They were still red and raw—it looked like she'd been hit by pepper spray, or something—but the bulk of her eyes had been fully restored. She had gray eyes, the same as he did. Seeing the change made him feel indescribably good inside. In the wake of the tremendous hardships of the past few days, he felt like he'd found a great buoy of happiness to draw him from the somber ocean he'd found himself in.

"No pain," Elenore confirmed. She blinked rapidly, then closed her eyes and squeezed them shut tightly. "Ugh. Dizzy," she said simply.

"I'll be with you the whole way," he assured. "Your bones could still be fragile, so try not to put your whole weight down. Just lean on me." He turned his head, vaguely gesturing towards Anneliese. "If you want, I could get Anne on the other side."

"Why not carry me on your back, spare me any strain at all?" she said sarcastically. "No. I'm fine."

"Then... move anytime you want," he suggested gently.

Elenore stayed frozen in place. She took several deep breaths, but her knees stayed locked in place and she made no attempts to move.

"...anytime," Argrave repeated teasingly.

"Yes, anytime. That includes now all the way to eternity, maybe even until Gerechtigheit himself blows away this tent," she retorted, clearly flustered.

Another while passed. Argrave waited for her first step with a patient smile on his face. Slowly, she lifted her foot up and stepped forward. Argrave advanced slightly with her as she gingerly settled upon the ground.

"There you go," Argrave said encouragingly. "I would clap, but that might cause problems. Anne, you want to?"

Anneliese prudently decided not to clap, but she looked on with a smile. Elenore looked deep in concentration as she moved the next foot forward for her second step. Slowly, surely, her confidence started to return and her pace increased. Argrave followed her about as she tracked a rough circle about the tent. Before long, she was walking at near half that of a normal pace.

"Hoo..." Elenore exhaled, clearly starting to feel a rush of various emotions. The corners of her mouth rose, bringing some bright life to her tired face. She laughed lightly. "Feels... funny," she said. "Tingly."

His sister's happiness seemed so innocent that Argrave stifled another tease. She kept walking carefreely, enjoying every moment of it with such enthusiasm she seemed a whole different person. The only thing that slowed her exponential growth of confidence was a slight slip, but Argrave steadied her gracefully.

"Thank you," she said, then laughed once again. "I didn't think... it would be so different from the prosthetics. But..." she struggled, her tongue tied. "I don't have the words for it."

"Ready to go outside?" Argrave asked her.

Elenore took a deep breath and looked towards the tent flaps marking the entrance. Faint dawn light barely peeked beyond them, offering inviting illumination. Though she looked nervous, she did eventually nod an affirmative.

Anneliese first lifted the tent flaps aside, offering more entrance to light. Galamon stood there patiently, guarding them. He was eating some rations—dried meat. Elenore shielded her newly formed eyes, blinking rapidly and slowly adjusting. Only after a long while did she feel confident enough to remove her hand and step forward into the light.

Once they stepped outside, he heard Elenore inhale sharply. Their tent was situated atop a hill, and it offered a fantastic view of the rising suns. The two balls of fire illuminated the spring beauty of the region of Atrus. Near Vysenn, civilization was especially absent—there was a lake, a beautiful field of wildflowers, and long stretches of taiga further north.

Elenore's eyes watered from the bright light, but she still seldom blinked, her gaze wandering the countryside with unabated enthusiasm. It overwhelmed her to the point her breathing grew uneven, and she leaned upon Argrave even heavier.

"I need to... sit," she said.

"Over here," he pointed with his free arm, then shepherded her until they came to the rock he pointed to. She sat down eagerly, then Argrave right beside her. Anneliese came to stand behind them, watching the view.

"Even once you gave me that set of jewelry..." Elenore began. "I always missed seeing the distant sights. When we walked down to Vasquer's holding area, I could not see the snake until I grew very close. During that battle, I could not see the gigantic mass of snakes you conjured. It was so unsettling."

"Eels," Argrave corrected. "They're eels."

Elenore laughed, wiping away some of the wetness on her face as she smiled brightly. "I remember... when I was young. I went traipsing through the royal gardens in my bare feet. When I returned, one of the royal maids chided me for acting unladylike." She placed her hands on her knees. "When I told my father, he came with me the next day. I climbed trees and jumped down, where he caught me in his arms. Sometimes, he'd even toss me back up onto the tree."

Argrave listened silently.

"Heh..." she laughed again. "I don't think I deserve to see again."

Argrave wrapped his arm around her and jostled her about. "Deserve? Nobody gets what they deserve. Who decides what you deserve?"

"I don't know," she said, then sighed. "There I go again. Sharing something personal, then regretting it."

"Regret all you want," Argrave said dismissively. "I'm here. You're my sister, and that won't change."

Elenore didn't say anything back, her watery eyes still wandering the landscape. Her eyes settled upon something. "Our army is a bit of an eyesore to this scene."

Argrave didn't respond, looking upon the distant tents just barely visible beyond the mountains that formed the valley Castle Cookpot resided in.

"We had best prepare to return," Elenore looked to Argrave, her gray eyes sharp and focused. "There is much to do."

#####

Within the hour, their party was prepared to leave. Rather than rely on Argrave for support, Elenore, her bones still somewhat weak, rode with Durran on his bear once again. That was not as carefree a ride as it had been the first time—some tension still persisted between them after Elenore had told Durran to mind his own business. The unresolved conflict manifested as a silence between them—both said only what needed to be said the entire time.

Galamon reported, though, that Durran had spent the whole night without sleep and had privately asked about Elenore's well-being multiple times. Elenore also still kept the prosthetics Durran had carved. Argrave didn't have the confidence to play cupid, so he banished the matter from his mind. He had already ruined his first attempt, and he didn't care to try another.

When they arrived back at Castle Cookpot at dusk, another wave spread through the camp. Argrave goes on a short journey with his sister, and they return the next day with the princess healed—surely such a thing didn't need to be spelled out. Argrave gave no concrete answers to what few people asked him questions, and Elenore didn't stoke the rumor... but then, she didn't need to.

Argrave was uncomfortable where these dramatic rumors were headed. Between his recruitment of the northern spellcasters, the actions in Quadreign to win the whole of the north to his banner, the battle with the barbarians and the Unhanded Coalition, and now the miraculous recovery of his sister... the talk spreading was unilaterally positive. Argrave was certain he could head to Guyana and build a nice little cult settlement. He didn't like the prospect, but at the same time saw no way to lower their expectations without failing them. And Argrave didn't intend to fail them, problematically.

Regardless, they all went to sleep, as it was dusk by the time they arrived and each of them had very little rest throughout that whole ordeal. The next day, well-rested, they rose early to tackle the various problems before them.

Early in the day, the first of the diplomats they'd sent out to various lords in the lands beyond Castle Cookpot returned. They had been seeking an unconditional surrender from the various lords, and total submission to Argrave as King of Vasquer. They'd brought prisoners who'd witnessed the battle to spread stories. These had only managed to visit the closest lords beyond.

The response? For this initial batch—those closest to their influence—the lords gave a resounding submission to their request. Elenore wasn't certain the results would be same further, but the encroaching presence of their army as they settled things coupled with the rise of the Archduchy of Northern Vasquer under Diana would undoubtedly facilitate a quick consolidation of power.

Then, by dusk...

Elenore opened the door, walking into Argrave's temporary quarters where he ate with Anneliese while they watched the suns set from the balcony.

"The front on the south has shifted dramatically," Elenore declared. "One side won... and two weeks ago, at that! My damned scouts..." she stepped closer to them, cradling her head in dismay.

"Tell me what happened," Argrave said calmly, placing his fork aside.

"Duke Sumner leads a force to Dirracha," Elenore said.

Argrave narrowed his eyes. "Not the Margrave?"

"So far as I can tell..." Elenore stepped about the room. "I'm just now getting reports. I don't know what happened. But the south won, and Duke Sumner leads the charge to seize the capital."