

Jackal 331

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 331: Race to the Finish

In response to the news that Duke Sumner, not Margrave Reinhardt, led the triumphant army of the south to seize Dirracha, Argrave gathered everyone important for the decision-making despite the late hour. All talked idly around the table waiting for the last arrival: Elenore. Beyond Argrave's inner circle, there were new arrivals: Leopold Dandalan Jr., eldest grandson of the Relizean leader and commander of most of the forces here, all three Magisters of the Order, and lastly... Melanie.

Argrave regarded the scarred red-haired mercenary curiously as she stood beside Durran. The two talked quietly as they waited for Elenore to return. Apparently the mercenary had asked Elenore to work directly under him, and further to earn a seat in Argrave's parliament. It seemed that she thought Argrave was a good investment for the future. Important positions in leadership, however, could be as much of a detriment as they were a boon. He didn't care to be exploited.

I'm being paranoid, Argrave thought, looking around at the others at the table. Yesterday I was worried about a cult following, and now I'm worried about insubordination. Things are going well. He rubbed his tired eyes, but the feeling of impending trouble didn't dissipate. Then what am I worried about? What am I missing?

The door opened and Elenore entered, finally. Argrave straightened and looked to her. His gray eyes met her own, and she walked towards him with decisive steps. He was proud to see her walk every time he did but was disturbed by how urgently she moved. She sandwiched herself between Argrave and Anneliese. For a moment, her eyes lingered on Melanie and Durran chatting. Perhaps she was having similar thoughts as Argrave was.

"Time to talk," Argrave said loudly, drawing everyone from their conversation. "Gather around," he waved his hands, drawing everyone inwards. As the people moved to obey, he pointed to Melanie. "We have someone new with us: our royal auditor, Melanie. She's here in an advisory capacity. She works under me."

Durran lightly elbowed her as the red-haired mercenary smiled. Some people gave congratulations despite the empty title—Anneliese, Galamon, all those familiar with her. Elenore was notably quiet.

Some, though, were not so interested in this announcement. Vera could not take her eyes off Elenore and inquired, "Will you explain how the princess recovered her eyesight, Your Majesty?"

"That's not pertinent," Argrave shook his head. To step past the issue, he brought up something he knew would shut them up. "But I made a promise. I'll announce it publicly, but you should know now—Hegazar and Vera will be named Duke and Duchess of Dirracha."

The two could not help but smile. Argrave let them bask in the glow a bit before continuing, "On that front, there's some landscape-changing news from the south that we all should hear." He turned his head to Elenore and nodded, signaling her to begin.

Despite the curious gazes from most not privy to her recovery, Elenore crossed her arms and said, "Duke Rovostar tried to strike directly at the leadership of the southern rebellion in an ambush staged in a

surrendered fortress. Duke Enrico of Monticci is missing, likely captured. Margrave Reinhardt suffered a blow to the head but has since recovered. During this recovery time, Duke Sumner split off with a force of his own and pursued the ambushers. After routing them, he carries onwards to Dirracha.”

Nikoletta’s father was captured. Argrave thought that didn’t bode well.

“They routed the loyalists?” Leopold Jr. repeated. Rather unlike his grandfather, he was sizable in stature, middle-aged, and had dignified air to him. With heavy plate armor and a stately white beard, he appeared every part the noble lord. He was Leopold’s successor, but Argrave thought the man was nothing like his father. “How sizable is this force to defeat the loyalists so soundly?”

“About five thousand,” Elenore said. “They’re heavy cavalry, mainly: knights. More worrisome is the large contingent of spellcasters travelling with them for the siege. It’s largely landed nobles who had the most discontentment towards the margrave.” Elenore looked towards Argrave. “However...the Magisters in their service have parted from the army and returned to the Tower of the Gray Owl. Castro pulled through, and they’ve been recalled to vote on an urgent matter,” she said with a slight smile.

“Surprised he can pull through that at his age. Any more details?” Argrave pressed.

Elenore looked back to the assembled. “Tower Master Castro has been calling Magisters back to the tower to initiate a vote. He’s been an advocate of Argrave’s, and I’m told the assembled council is one vote short of declaring complete support for Argrave’s cause.”

“Those old monsters?” Leopold Jr. looked surprised, and stroked his beard as he inquired, “The council of the Order of the Gray Owl has many more reclusive owls than it does social birds. Will there be enough for a full vote?” he vaguely gestured towards the three Magisters with them. Argrave was surprised at his bold talk right before S-rank mages.

“The head of those reclusive owls, Castro, sent us out to the north to persuade the Magisters there to return for the vote—Vasilisa among them,” Hegazar explained calmly. “We may have... been distracted by another matter,” his plain eyes settled on Argrave briefly. “The majority of the northern Magisters live in places so secluded they’re impossible to find, anyway. I think we can win it.”

Leopold Jr. clasped his hands together. “Well... by the gods. The Order, breaking its neutrality,” he said wondrously. “I will admit, Your Majesty... when I was marching into battle without you at our backs, I had some doubts. But now we’ve all of the far north under our banner, the majority of Atrus consolidated, and the Order of the Gray Owl on our side.” He lowered his head. “I apologize for harboring these doubts.”

“We’re still a vote short of the Order’s full support,” Argrave reminded him. “On that note... maybe one of you should return.”

“Hold on a minute,” Vasilisa held her hand out. “If the vote hasn’t been called, how can you deduce that we’re one short?”

“I know with surety who will vote in what way,” Elenore said simply.

“There’s, what, fifty-two Magisters?” Hegazar looked to Vera.

“Fifty-one,” she corrected him. “Did you already forget what we did?”

"Hmm," Hegazar smiled with a self-content little noise. "Still... based on Elenore's word... perhaps all three of us should go, make sure the vote can swing in our favor."

Argrave's voice was stoic as he asked, "Why?"

"Risk management," Hegazar said.

"Besides, Elenore said the Magisters on the south's side have all returned to the Tower," Vera held her hand up to emphasize the point. "With the forces you have with you, it should be fine."

Anneliese crossed her arms and said calmly, "You take Elenore's word for the Magisters in the opposing force, yet not the count of the vote?"

"Well, that's..." Hegazar began, searching for words.

"No need to argue," Argrave held up his hands. "Hegazar, Vera, you can return to the tower if you want. If you travel with your transportation spell, it should be no issue to rejoin us later."

Leopold Jr. leaned in. "Rejoin later? What does Your Majesty intend?"

Argrave looked to all present. "It's obvious we need to head to Dirracha. Orion controls it. Correspondence indicates he'll yield it to us upon our arrival. His only condition is preserving Felipe and Levin's lives." He clasped his hands together. "Provided we reach Dirracha, occupy it even with a small force... I think we can convince the south to lay down arms, even if its Duke Sumner instead of Margrave Reinhardt at the negotiating table."

Durran held his hands out. "There's the matter of the fortifications barring us from Dirracha."

"I thought of that. As such, I did some tracking..." Elenore looked around, then spotted a scroll. She grabbed it and splayed it across the table. It displayed a map of Vasquer. "Some few soldiers got away. We tracked them to see what they would do. They'll spread rumors of what happened here to all the lands they run across, I have no doubt." Elenore's finger drew a line. "I suggest we use the fear caused to seize on the advantage and offer generous terms. Doubtless the total victory here and the advance of Sumner's force will make them more amenable to surrender... if the terms are right."

Leopold Jr. stroked his beard, eyes distant as he looked upon the map. "What of Atrus?"

"We should take a small force to travel faster—that leaves plenty to wrap things up here," Anneliese pointed out.

The commander nodded slowly, but his gaze was still unfocused.

"There's the matter of delegating that duty," Melanie stated. "I bet the princess will travel with Argrave. Her system of negotiating and administration is complex."

All looked to Argrave, and he quickly made a judgement call. "Galamon, you'll pick out the soldiers you think should come with us and take command of them. Anneliese, you'll do the same for the mages," he looked back at his two companions. They nodded, and so he looked back. "Elenore, you know the situation here better than I do. Who should stay?"

"I think Durran and Melanie would be fine for the logistics of things here," the princess waved to them. "Leopold Jr. did a fine job of commanding the troops, too. I can think of no one better to stay on."

The man pounded his chest with his fist. "The princess gave fine orders for me to relay, nothing more."

"Hmm," Elenore nodded, clearly not taking the praise to heart.

"You want me staying here?" Durran tried to confirm as he stared at Elenore.

Elenore didn't blink. "Is that a problem?"

Durran stared for another few seconds, biting his lip until it grew a little redder. Finally, he shook his head. "No. No problem."

"A mercenary and a tribal giving orders here—you don't think that's going to cause a little dissent?" Melanie leaned in on the table.

"You wanted more responsibility," Elenore stared at her coldly. "Cold feet?"

Melanie smiled, then leaned away. "I think the princess likes me a little less than she used to, Durran. Or maybe it's just that her eyes can finally show it."

"Just run your orders through Leopold Jr.," Argrave shot his thumb at the man. "So long as the orders come through him, it should be no issue."

The heir to the Dandalan family nodded, content with his role.

"Alright. We get one last good rest before everything goes up," Argrave planted a finger on the table. "Elenore, let's work out a path."

"You've forgotten something," Elenore looked at him. "Ruleo. And Georgina, wherever she went. That matter is unfinished."

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek. She was right—he had forgotten, almost completely. The jubilation at Elenore's recovery made that matter an easy thing to shelve. He closed his eyes and said, "No use putting that off. Let's go deal with that now."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 332: An End to Things

Argrave walked down cold stone stairs slowly, his big feet forcing him to take the steps slowly lest he fall. He very nearly bumped into Melanie at the bottom. She stood holding an iron gate. Argrave entered, ducking beneath the low-hanging iron bars and entering into the dungeons of Castle Cookpot. Anneliese followed just behind.

The cells had been cleared out a great deal in the past few days on account of their fearmongering efforts in Atrus and beyond. Ruleo's cell was close, likely so that the guards could keep a close eye on him. Argrave waited for her to fit the key in and unlock it, then looked back as his royal guard spread out across the room.

"Where's Gala—" Argrave trailed off when he saw the big snow elf rush down the stairs, rejoining them. "What's wrong?" he asked him.

“Nothing, Your Majesty,” the Veidimen dismissed. When Argrave stared and waited for more information, he elaborated, “Something was broken. No one else seemed to be trying to fix it, so I spoke to someone.”

Argrave shrugged dismissively, then looked to the cell ahead. Opposite him, in the corner of the cell...

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Ruleo leaned his body forward against his chains, using them to support his weight. It tugged at his body, but compared to the stake driven through both of his hands, the pressure was nonexistent. The sound of many footfalls made him lift his head up. He saw his keeper, Melanie, holding a torchlight. There was someone huge at the cell door, though. Ruleo focused his failing eyes.

“Good lord...” the man said, stepping within. The shadows changed, and Ruleo’s eyes widened as he recognized Argrave. “Trying times for you, looks like.”

“Heh...” Ruleo managed a laugh as some of the vigor he thought would never return flared. “Got the guts... to talk to me? Never thought I’d see the day.”

Argrave fell to one knee. “It’s taking more guts to smell you than talk to you. I think your hands are infected.”

Ruleo wanted to spit at him. Behind, someone else entered the cell—a vaguely familiar white-haired elf. She stood in the corner, watching.

“Durran told me you gathered necromantic things in an Order of the Rose ruin. That you intended to send them against us to combat Gerechtigkeits eventual advent, weaken his arrival,” Argrave began without ceremony.

Ruleo only stared with hate. “What do you want?”

The claimant king sighed. “Do you have any idea where Georgina might have gone after the defeat?” he asked.

“Hard to see through stone. Last I saw, most of her men fell to sword or spell. Might check underneath the corpses you made,” he suggested.

Argrave put one hand atop his knee and clenched. “Guess not. I had hoped having a couple days to think about the coming calamity might make you reasonable.”

Ruleo closed his eyes. “When people leave you in a cell for days to rot, you give up on the hope of a reasonable world.”

Argrave’s voice came quieter as he said, “If I’d known your hands were bound like this, I might’ve given this more priority.”

When Ruleo opened his eyes again, Melanie pointed at him from behind the king and said defensively, “I did nothing wrong, Your Majesty. See if you’re so merciful when he’s been trying to kill you for near half a week. The man is a dangerous spellcaster.”

Ruleo looked at Argrave squarely and asked, “Given we’re talking... is there a way out of this for me?” his voice carried some desperation, and he scolded himself inwardly.

Argrave looked back. “You sent thousands of creatures at Durran, Melanie, and my royal guard. You were planning for worse—having thousands of men pledged to my service slaughtered by unthinking monsters.”

“Cut off my hands, that path closes for me forever,” Ruleo said gravely. “In fact, that’s about the end of my career in everything. I’ll go live with my mother peacefully. You’ll never see me again.”

“I don’t think that would stop you,” Argrave stared with his cold gray eyes. “Fact of the matter is, I have a rather high regard for your resilience and capability.”

“Is this flattery supposed to raise my hopes for a royal pardon?” Ruleo narrowed his eyes, suspecting this was another of the sadist’s games the royal bastard so loved to play. “You’re toying with me, even now.”

Argrave rose up to his full height once again, looking back to the white-haired elf. She shook her head, and he seemed to make up his mind in that moment.

“...no. I can’t trust you to set aside the grudge you hold. I don’t want to kill you—you’ll be of great use when the sky starts to fall. At the same time, you tried to kill someone I love like a brother,” his tone grew low and cold.

Ruleo’s fear rose, yet he could only laugh in response—a wheezing, breathless whistle of exhalation from his lungs.

“But I’ve got a lot of people I could make use of, and a lot of opportunities that are being unrealized,” Argrave continued. “Me and my coterie alone can only travel to so many locations. There are ruins I’d love to visit, but can’t. And with people like you, Melanie, Ganbaatar, all at my fingertips... that’s a fine little team forming. A team I trust to keep you in line until they can catch you up to speed on the truth.”

Ruleo tried to lift his head to look the king in the eye but couldn’t. Where was this heading?

“Your situation is going to change. You’ll remain a prisoner, but under less... strenuous conditions,” Argrave said kindly. “And in time, you’ll be compelled to do certain things to the world’s benefit.”

“You’re enslaving me?” Ruleo lowered his head, his strength leaving him. “Given how well you regard my abilities... how, exactly, will you compel me to work on your behalf?” he challenged.

“If you want to die instead, talk to your manager,” Argrave said dryly. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by this outcome. Over time, you’ll come to see things my way... because you’re smart and I’m right.”

Ruleo stared up at Argrave’s smile, and felt it was markedly wicked than he remembered.

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Durran stared at his bear’s closed jaw as it slept within this abandoned stable. He leaned up against its stomach, almost entirely buried in its thick fur. His face and body were covered in blood, and he wore a ratty shirt with his armor removed and placed off to the side. The man held a salamander in his hand

and tore bits of it off, chewing it with a grimace on his face. Even now, with so much of its body missing, the thing still twitched. He sighed despairingly as he chewed.

"What in the world are you...? Oh," someone said, and Durran whipped his head up to spot Elenore. "I see," she raised her hand to her face, trying to hold back her laughter as she realized what she saw. "I'm interrupting your meal."

The tribal rose to his feet quickly. "What are you doing here? I thought you said you'd talk to Melanie and me in a few hours," he said as he cleared his face with his sleeve.

"And I wouldn't come personally if that had changed," Elenore nodded, stepping in closer with her arms crossed. "Galamon said you were curious about my eyes."

Durran stopped cleaning the blood from his face. "He told you that?"

"He did. I think he wants us to mend things," she looked to the red crescent moon in the sky. "I don't disagree with that. I... was rude to you, I think."

Durran took a deep breath. He lifted up the salamander in his hand and pointed it at her. "And you made the right choice. Eating these things to fix my fingers is a mistake. You'd think I'd learn by now to imitate you. Just... fire... it's hard for me."

The princess shook her head. "That doesn't matter." She stepped closer. "So, can we set aside the stiff conversation?" she held out her hand for a shake.

Durran held out his hand, but then paused and pulled it back. "I'm a bit bloody. But yeah, I'm done pouting. So long as you realize that I said what I said because I don't want you hurt. And not because you're important to the team, but because you're fun."

"...why?" she asked quietly.

"Why? Because..." Durran looked for the words.

"Did you think that I'd be dense enough to ignore your teasing forever?" Elenore asked evenly, walking over to his bear.

Durran didn't quite smile but came close. "Yes, honestly. I guess the ice in the shirt was pushing it a bit much."

Elenore sighed, saying nothing.

"Honestly... didn't want to push things," Durran explained. "You've had your problems, to put it lightly. Maybe you're disillusioned in the romance department. I got the distinct impression you weren't interested in me, so I was thinking about pulling back before I ruined things forever. Was I wrong? Since it's out in the open, give it to me straight."

Elenore closed her eyes and searched for words. "Argrave being infatuated with Anneliese is a problem, but one that I've kept quiet about because I can handle the future fallback," Elenore said, then turned to look at Durran. "If I'm tied up, it's even worse. All will want marriage ties to the new king. I had intended to keep that as a constant card. Keep me unwed, unpromised, and chaste. I can utilize the promise of blood ties unimaginably well, I'm certain. It's for the best."

Durran lowered his head and smiled. “Well, that’s straight alright.”

“No, it isn’t,” she shook her head. “I don’t dislike you, Durran. The thing with my old fiancé... that was over a decade ago, and I’ve long ago moved on. I think part of the reason I told you to mind your own business was because I came to realize what... you wanted. I don’t think you can get it from me, though. A family, a happy life...”

Durran tilted his head. “I’m curious what the future you have envisioned for yourself is.”

Elenore was taken aback by the seeming non-sequitur. “Isn’t that set for the both of us?”

“I’ve got dreams for long after Gerechtigkeits,” Durran shrugged and walked closer. “Dreams for my homeland, myself, and the people close to me.”

“I don’t know. I suppose my answer would be whatever Argrave wants me to do,” she looked to the side. “If he wanted to tie me to him, he has—inextricably, at that. What he does, I do.”

“What a sad future,” Durran shook his head with a sigh. “A slave to that nutcase.”

“Maybe it is. But so long as I am bound to him, I won’t compromise on remaining unwed. It’s pivotal for stability,” she told him. “I don’t think you could stand by and wait for that to end. In eight years, I’ll be forty. I imagine things will be fine by then, but you’ll have moved on.”

Durran tilted his head, and his golden eyes gleamed. “You never know. Maybe I could wait. You’ve caused a problem for me, you see. Whenever I look at other women, I think about how they fall short of you.”

Elenore’s face flushed slightly, and she turned away from him. “You like thin, tall, and spindly women, do you? With my eyes returned, perhaps you’re simply going for the closest thing in appearance to Argrave,” she suggested.

Durran laughed loudly and stepped away. Elenore smiled at her own joke. The tribal laughed until he was breathless, stirring his bear from its slumber. It huffed noisily, then squirmed in annoyance.

“Well... alright,” Durran nodded as he winded down from his laughter. “I didn’t get the answer I wanted, but I feel relieved all the same. Our little talk has changed the direction I intend to take, somewhat.”

“In what way?” Elenore asked.

“Well... I think you’ll see,” Durran told her simply. “Stability, huh? You’ve given me an idea.”

Elenore crossed her arms in disapproval, then said in a business-like fashion, “Since we’re already together, let’s walk back to the castle and discuss some things about what you need to do in Atrus...”

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Argrave looked ahead, past the forests of Atrus to the long plains of central Vasquer. The blooming of spring showed itself in bright greens and golds. He clenched the reins of his mount tight, then looked back to his small army. Galamon had chosen the best of their infantrymen that knew how to ride—just short of a thousand—and Elenore had procured horses from Atrus. That, coupled with the bulk of the spellcasters from Quadreign, formed the core of an elite force vastly better than Argrave thought they’d

manage. It might pale to Sumner's army in count, but bloodshed was not the way Argave hoped to end this war.

Argave held his hand up and pointed to central Vasquer... and Dirracha beyond it. "We ride!" he shouted.

And so they rode, leaving a great cloud of dust in their wake. Argave, Galamon, Anneliese, Vasilisa, and Elenore all moved to put an end to things. Durran and Melanie watched them go, then turned back to the north.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 333: Keys to the Kingdom

A big man with long red hair opened his eyes. Margrave Reinhardt stared at the stone ceiling above before suddenly leaning up. He grabbed his neck and grunted in pain from the sudden movement. A serving woman in the room froze in her tracks. The margrave opened his mouth to call out to her, but she quickly exited the room.

As Reinhardt leaned back into his bed, his son—a red-haired man quite similar in appearance to himself—entered the room, led by the serving girl who'd left earlier. One of his eyes had been rotted away by the waxpox, leaving a glossy useless eye in its spot. The other was rich and red like a ruby, and the two stared at each other.

"What's happened?" the margrave demanded of his son upon sight.

Elias stepped to his father's bed, and though his relief was evident, he did not hesitate in explaining, "You took a blow to the back of the head in the ambush. We won the battle, but the Duke Enrico was captured." He looked at his father and narrowed his one good eye. "We had this same conversation yesterday. We thought you were better, but then you..."

The margrave looked stunned. "Last I remember..." he closed his eyes. "Walking into the fortress, and the ambush."

"You didn't remember that last time," Elias sat on the bedside.

Reinhardt closed his eyes. "Enrico... was captured?" He opened his eyes. "And I wasn't hit by an enemy."

Elias' concern grew. "What do you mean?"

"I was in a tight corridor. There were no traps above, and no place for any enemy to attack from. You said... I was hit in the back of the head?" The margrave rubbed the spot, yet his fingers found no scar to trace past his mane of red hair.

"...you were," Elias nodded after hesitating a beat. "Are you sure you're remembering this clearly? When you woke up last time, you passed out about eight hours later."

"I'm certain. Gods be damned, how many days has it been?" Reinhardt grabbed the sheets over him and threw them off, then turned his body slowly. "You look grim. What else has happened?"

"Duke Sumner chased after the routed forces with about five thousand men—largely cavalry, partially spellcasters. A very potent force," Elias moved to his father's side, helping him stand as though the

patient was liable to collapse again any moment now. "On top of that... Nikoletta and Mina took off the day after, too. I had Stain in command of the scouts, but even they lost track of the pair." Elias looked up at his father as he came to full height. "She's pursuing her father, I'm certain."

"A quick defeat despite an ambush... Duke Sumner gathering forces to chase... someone attacking me from behind..." the margrave stepped away from his son, standing without assistance. "I feel... bare. I need my armor. I need to talk to my people."

"You're not alone in your suspicions." Elias stopped offering to help his father stand, knowing well his pride. "I've been having Stain look into things. He found one thing... it was a letter about someone who had a way to grant an army access to the walls of Dirracha. The letter ties back to Sumner. This person the duke corresponded with seemed to be very confident in their idea, whoever it was."

The margrave looked at his son, brows high in surprise. Then, his face grew stoic and he nodded. "You've grown up," he said simply, then walked towards the door. "Let's go."

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Argrave's small force of elites rode as fast and hard as they were able. Elenore had some trouble adjusting to the horse as it had been decades since last she rode. Nevertheless, she was quick to remember how, and after the first few hours progress towards the first stop occurred efficiently.

They passed back through all of the lands that Elenore had subjugated under Argrave's name, with the princess making brief checks on the various fortifications to be sure that everything was up to her standards. It was only there that they could eat, drink, and rest. Each of those experiences were short-lived, as they could afford no long breaks. Where it was reasonable, they exchanged horses for ones with calmer hearts and unworn legs.

The spellcasters with them facilitated unreasonably quick travel. When it was dark, they could light the way. When water was required, it was easily produced—this enabled them to travel lightly. Anneliese's scouting made their path highly efficient. She ensured they travelled on largely level ground, enabling the horses to show their full potential.

In one day and one night, they had cleared all of southern Atrus. Next on their mind was Relize. They arrived there at dusk. Though Argrave wished only for a brief resupply, Anneliese and Elenore prudently advised that pressing into central Vasquer might mean armed combat, so the men would need to be well-rested. On top of that, they could spread word of the victory at Castle Cookpot while they were here.

Argrave chose to sleep in a tent just outside the city with the soldiers, yet even still he couldn't avoid a select few from inside the city. Or rather, avoid a specific person.

"We had deserters come here, Your Majesty," Leopold told Argrave as the king ate tiredly, trapped. The old patrician didn't seem to care about Argrave's need for rest.

"Hope you sent them on to the fortresses," Argrave said once he finished chewing. "It was important to our strategy they spread fear. That's how the Mongols did their thing, in large part—fear," he told Anneliese. They'd discussed that topic before.

"I couldn't send them on, seeing as how they came *from* those fortresses," Leopold shook his head.

Argrave brushed his hands off of crumbs as he contemplated that, then looked to his side where Anneliese ate a large loaf of bread. While she had the loaf in her mouth, he tore it in half and took away the new piece. She didn't seem to mind.

"We executed them," Leopold continued, stroking his white beard. "No room for deserters, Your Majesty."

Argrave frowned as he chewed bread, then swallowed a spoonful of meat broth. "It's your city. You want to kill free labor, that's your business. Did you at least ask why they deserted?"

Leopold sighed. "Of course. They gave answers, but the truth of it... they sought to spy, perhaps? This was long before Rovostar's apparent 'defeat,' and your tremendous victory in that chokepoint at Atrus. Regardless, they can't be trusted. Nor can the news from the south."

"What are you talking about?" Argrave stopped eating briefly. "Speak clearly."

"I'm an old man," Leopold craned his body as though he ached. "I've seen a lot throughout my years. I followed your father's conquests as they happened, drinking in all news eagerly. And Duke Rovostar is not a commander that is so easily beaten by one like Sumner, who hastily assumed command after the margrave was injured. Perhaps if Margrave Reinhardt fought him squarely, the duke could lose. Otherwise..."

Argrave nodded slowly. "You think they're collaborating. Then why not rout the south? Why this show of pursuit? What would they be hoping to achieve? Defeating the south is much more valuable than... whatever it is they could be doing."

Leopold lowered his gaze and shook his head. "That is what I cannot say, Your Majesty. This is why I present to you only what I know, in hopes you might have greater insight. Despite my doubts, our forces have prevailed in the north greater than I thought possible. This was due to your re—your efforts, Your Majesty," Leopold caught himself.

"Recklessness works, if it's done smartly," Argrave gestured towards Leopold, knowing well what word he'd stopped himself from using. "Now, I haven't slept for two days. Unless there's something else, I'll think about what you said."

Leopold bowed and left the tent with nothing further to say, evidently as eager to sleep as Argrave was. Once he was gone, he looked to Anneliese. She stared at him with unkempt hair and tired eyes.

"Seems it's a pattern for us. Stay up two nights in a row, sleep for ten hours," Argrave noted.

"I could go for twelve, now." Anneliese sighed. "The day is long tomorrow, and we must check with Elenore about what Leopold told us."

Even with Leopold's words weighing at Argrave's mind, he didn't let it stall him in his tracks. Elenore had no answers for Leopold's concerns. The next morning, their army fed and tense, they once again took to horseback and advanced onwards towards the first of the fortresses between them and Dirrach. Elenore sent word to the new structure they'd built in the Indanus Divide ahead of time, requesting they posture with soldiers to raise alarms on one end while their force approached.

With their approach largely undetected, they managed to get near to the walls of the first fortress without much fuss. The garrison commander was all too eager to call for parley. To spark the garrison's fear, Argrave sent one [Electric Eel] dancing about in the sky above the fortress. In the parley to come, he stood with Galamon, Vasilisa, Anneliese, and an Elenore with feet and eyes recovered.

Hit by such a battery of negative omens, it took no time at all to work out a favorable deal. Perhaps the commander had been banking on their inability to enforce the fortress' seizure... but when the soldiers stationed at the Indanus Divide arrived, the castle was secured.

Their path towards Dirrachia might be considered a dire overextension, but the aim of the operation wasn't to secure the region—it was to secure the capital, and thereafter secure the support of Margrave Reinhardt. That would lead to a complete consolidation of all Vasquer as their two factions folded inwards on the center. Argrave felt, given Leopold's warnings, he would need to be prepared for significant improvisation once the full situation was at hand. Nevertheless, Argrave was ready for whatever trickery the other armies would throw.

In time, they laid claim to the last fortress blocking their path—nothing more than a rudimentary wooden keep with fifty soldiers, but it was sufficient for resupply. And in the far distance... one could see the Dragon Palace atop the mountains, and the great walls of Dirrachia shielding the city like precious jewels from the banners pitched just outside its gate. That city was the current key to all Vasquer, he felt. The snake, the kingdom, and the heir apparent... Orion.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 334: Haste to Judge

Orion stepped into the throne room of the Dragon Palace. He didn't especially like coming here. It had grandiose carved marble walls depicting the gods, but that was about the only part of this place he'd ever liked. Ever since he'd learned the truth, nothing of this place appealed to him. And now, he entered armed and armored. The point of the sword in his right hand dragged just above the floor.

The banners of Vasquer hung above the gilded coal-black throne. A velvet carpet filled the center of the room and up the seat of the king. Here, before the king, Orion recalled that no one acted truly. Maybe they had, once, in golden ages past. That time was long ago gone. Perhaps his brother could bring a just reign back. Still, Orion's steps were especially heavy as he headed for the seat of kings. It was not for the throne itself, but for the man sitting upon it.

"You always find me," Magister Traugott said curiously. He sat sideways in the throne, legs and back propped up against opposite armrests as his black silken hair descended to the floor. "Do the gods—or should I say spirits—of Vasquer tell you?"

"I have refused your every offer, Traugott. And now you sit upon the seat I have promised to my brother," Orion said with a firm yet reasoned anger, ignoring the question.

Despite the passage of time, he did not feel the broken man Traugott had once predicted he would become. He had endured well the whispers of the false gods. Vasquer and Boarmask had aided him through this. And the ancestor snake aided him in finding this man, too. Every time, Orion sent him away like a woodpecker returning to peck the same house time and time again.

"This will be the last time you see me," Traugott looked at him calmly, dark eyes mild and curious. "All I meant to ask is why you refuse to take my help, to allow me to help you part from the spirits of Vasquer."

Orion stepped closer to the throne. The steps he took left burns in the velvet carpet as his unwanted blessings surged by accident.

"Good counsel from a wise man," Orion declared. "I will not fall into temptation. Boarmask tells me what is too good to be true often is. You do not have pure intentions."

Traugott nodded earnestly. "I recall hearing, by rumor... you believed you would ascend to godhood, Orion. The gods of Vasquer told you that." The words did not mock at all.

"It is known," Orion nodded. "I do not believe them any longer."

Traugott smiled. "But you should. Because the 'gods' of Vasquer *do* intend to grant you divinity. The part they neglected to mention is that you would be one part of ninety-seven. You are the culmination of a centuries-old gambit to ascend from spirits to gods—a deal struck between the third son of Felipe I and the powerful spirits that whisper in your ears. Parts of them exist in you like parasites even now. But you still have freedom."

"I hear, but do not listen. Say what you will and begone," Orion said.

Traugott usually had a good-natured look about his face, but that mien fell away in but a moment. "It is as I feared. I am reminded why I seldom interacted with others. Brutes respond to brutality," he sighed.

Traugott's shadow danced until it covered him completely. He vanished into darkness, and Orion relaxed, knowing from experience this meant the Magister had given up or been chased off. Then, his uncanny sense told him of an attack. He whirled around to spot a gleam of white coming for his chest. Orion whipped his sword up and turned his shoulder to protect his face. A spear of ice shattered before his steel, ice fragments peppering Orion's face and cutting shallowly.

Before Orion could retaliate, Traugott fell back into his shadow. He crawled out a fair distance away, stepping free of a shadow beside the wall.

"It doesn't matter. The things I want are in place," the Magister said somberly, his inky shadow dancing around his feet. "Even you."

Prince Orion stomped his foot on the ground as he advanced towards Traugott, creating a great burst of flame against his will. The Magister remained even despite that. It seemed this time the renegade spellcaster would not part so simply.

#####

Argrave had been preparing to begin their advance to Dirracha by having Anneliese get a message to Orion, wherever he might be. But now... a lone cavalryman advanced towards them. Argrave used Garm's eyes to get a good view of his magic reserve, but the man was no mage at all.

"He bears a white flag, Your Majesty," Galamon, who was also watching, informed Argrave.

“Really now?” Argrave turned his head, and when Galamon nodded he shifted on his saddle uncomfortably. “Send someone out to retrieve him.”

Galamon barked out an order loud enough to make Argrave want to cup his ears. While waiting, he looked to Elenore and Anneliese for insight. Neither said anything, and so they waited in silence as morning winds howled across the horse-trampled plains of central Vasquer.

Soon enough, one of Argrave’s royal guards received the man and brought him before Argrave, unbound but still closely watched. Once he got near, the man dismounted and kneeled before him.

“Your Majesty!” the messenger declared loudly. “The Duke Sumner of Dedsworth requests parley!”

Argrave narrowed his eyes, puzzled. The fact that the man called him ‘Your Majesty’ implied much. It also heightened his suspicion. “For what purpose?” he pressed.

The messenger lowered his head further and shouted into the ground, “The Duke Sumner hopes to establish terms of cooperation against King Felipe’s loyalists, Your Majesty!” he shouted, his voice hoarse and nervous.

#####

Argrave waited on horseback in the center of the plains between his forces and Dirracha. In the far distance, an armored horse carried a well-armed lord forward, escorted by two others. Argrave saw the familiar heraldry of House Dedsworth on the escorts’ shields—two gray towers joined by a bridge with a green background.

Galamon held his horse slightly ahead and beside Argrave. Anneliese and Vasilisa flanked both of his sides. Elenore rode behind, supported by four royal guards. To say the least of things, Argrave was not worried about an ambush. Vasilisa could cast magic faster than any others, and Galamon was stronger than any humans Argrave could think of. Whether from sword or spell, he feared nothing. In fact, the words exchanged would be the scarier part of this.

Duke Sumner, armored in steel, removed his helmet and slowed his horse as he grew nearer. Argrave remembered the A-rank spellcaster as a neat man with a trimmed beard and short hair, but now he was a somewhat unkempt man with medium-length hair sweaty and matted from the road. Not that Argrave could disparage his appearance—undoubtedly he looked much the same, though without the beard part.

“Given that your man called me Your Majesty, can I expect this to be a fruitful conversation?” Argrave began without greetings.

Duke Sumner brought his horse to a stop and called out, “I believe so. I’d like it to be like that.”

“So would I. But at the same time, I have some concerns,” Argrave continued. “Like the bizarre oddities in the south that led to you chasing Duke Rovostar across the countryside.”

“I had to. Duke Enrico was captured,” Sumner said. “I came here today to ask for your help in that matter, with Your Majesty being both a friend to House Monticci... and the King of Vasquer.”

Argrave stayed silent, waiting for any signal from Anneliese that either statement was a lie. To his surprise, none came. He gripped the reins tighter and pressed, “I find it difficult to believe any of this.

Margrave Reinhardt is a competent commander. The only way I could see something like this happening is a betrayal of some kind. And given the extraordinary circumstances..." Argrave trailed off, letting his gaze tell all.

The Duke Sumner lifted his head. "I won't waste time on a fruitless discussion where my guilt is prejudiced. My House of Dedsworth will not bear such an accusation without protest."

Argrave said stoically, "You deny it?"

"Categorically. Whether the south or the margrave, I am no traitor," Sumner said fiercely, then grabbed his horse's reins. "I'll end the breath spent on this parley if this is the goodwill I am shown."

Given how incensed the duke was, and the fact that Sumner was already technically a traitor by rebelling against Felipe, Argrave expected the accusation to be true. But when he looked to Anneliese, she shook her head with a serious expression. As the duke turned his horse to return to his camp, Argrave called out, "Hold on."

"I see no reason to," Sumner said, continuing on as he was.

"I apologize," Argrave called out, more than willing to lower his face. "I was overcautious."

That brought the duke pause. He looked back for a few moments, then slowly turned his horse back and trotted it some steps closer. "I will accept that apology, then."

"But what happened?" Elenore spoke up, riding somewhat closer. "Why did you split off? How did any of this happen? I cannot make sense of it."

Sumner turned his head, then stared for a few moments. His face shifted rapidly, then his eyes widened as he asked incredulously, "Princess Elenore? I... am I seeing...?" His gaze shifted around rapidly for confirmation, appearing totally flabbergasted by her recovery. Still, the old A-rank mage was quick to recover his composure.

"I... was frustrated with the margrave's slow advance," Sumner admitted, still off-balance from seeing the princess. "And I was looking for options. None of those included collaboration with an enemy, I assure you. Count Delbraun of Jast had access to druidic magic. I learned and used that to deliver messages far and wide. My theory is that some were intercepted."

Argrave tilted his head. "I know druidic magic. You would definitely know if the messages were intercepted."

Sumner nodded. "Yes. And if—"

Something veritably seized Argrave's heart and squeezed it. Profound panic welled up in his being, then dispersed not a second later. By the time he'd processed this, he was struggling with his rearing horse. He was tied to his saddle and his legs were squeezed uncomfortably, but Argrave thought quickly and cast druidic magic to bring the beast back under control.

Argrave feared an attack from any direction. Everyone else, too, struggled with their horse. Elenore, who was not tied, teetered dangerously on the back of her horse. Argrave craned and steadied her, helping her horse relax. Everyone managed to recover quickly enough, and Argrave's search began anew.

The possible source of this anomaly fell into Argrave's sight quickly. Atop Dirrach, within the Dragon Palace... the only suitable description for what Argrave saw was that light was being sucked away. Beams of light stretched, almost as if vacuumed, and entered through the windows and doors of the palace. It was replaced far slower than it was stolen, and a strange dark aura emanated outwards from the mountain palace.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 335: These Shadows Grow So Tall

Duke Rovostar crouched at the top of a hill, watching the Dragon Palace radiate shadow with morbid fascination. He, just as all his men, had felt the strange force that emanated outwards... and now witnessed what seemed to pull the world inwards. And as he did, he recalled the conversations with Traugott.

#####

"Why are you doing this?" Rovostar had asked, his scarred face dancing in and out of light as a single torchlight flickered.

Traugott, the dark-skinned Magister, had smiled. "You attended the Order. You know of forces beyond comprehension... but you've never experienced them." His eyes wandered to the torch he held. "I had shelved trying to understand the gods, trying to bear witness... but I realize, now, I struggled on that field because I stared at a shut door. I have been enlightened, recently, by a chance encounter with someone who knows more than I do. Perhaps 'encounter' is the wrong word... but I was enlightened nonetheless."

Rovostar recalled narrowing his eyes back then as they met in the loyalist camp. At the time, he'd thought this was just nonsensical ramblings.

"This realm is just as dangerous to the gods as the gods are dangerous to us," Traugott said with a smile. "Spirits, gods, souls... all three are interconnected parts of a larger whole. One is transitory—a key. The other two are... symbiotic," he explained. He examined Rovostar's face, then laughed. "You don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you? Well, it doesn't matter. Orion is the key to what we both want. I will distract him for your ends, which ultimately serves my ends. That's the end of the matter."

"This is a dangerous man we're talking about," Rovostar had cautioned. "He crushed the head of some pompous Magister with his bare hands. He makes a habit of brutalizing the arrogant. When he was on my side, it was reassuring. As an enemy, Prince Orion is nightmarish."

"I'm not intending to fight. I'm intending to distract," Traugott shook his head. "And I assure you... Orion will have his eyes on nothing else."

#####

As Rovostar stared at the palace in recollection, Georgina walked up beside him. "I'm ready," she declared.

"I'm not," Rovostar said idly, questioning only now if he had too eagerly accepted help because of their desperate position. "But I never have been ready to fight, not really. Let's recover His Majesty."

#####

From the beginning of the fight, Orion had the upper hand against Traugott. The Magister was no fighter—the spells he cast were not done at opportune times, his accuracy was off, and his general situational and spatial awareness were not especially high. The only thing enabling this combat to last more than a minute was the Magister’s adroit use of his strange shadow portal.

The longer it went on, the more frustrated Orion became. Even despite calling upon the blessings he loathed, glancing blows alone were a rarity. Perhaps Orion should’ve realized that something was wrong with this strange tactic of his opponent. But under pressure from both Vasquer’s pantheon speaking to him and the Magister’s constant attacks, the cooler head prevailed.

Traugott stood before the throne of Vasquer, arms held wide. “Is this all you’ll amount to?” he questioned calmly, his breathing only slightly uneven. “I wait, Orion.”

Orion rushed angrily. He ran his hands along the ground and waved them forward as though he splashed through an ocean. In response to his whims, ice waved across the floor. Traugott fell backwards gracefully, shrouding his body in shadow once again.

As Traugott disappeared, Orion did not stop his pursuit. Where the man’s body disappeared, he reached, trying to catch him. He had expected his fingers to meet stone... yet instead, they sunk through. Shocked, Orion tried to grip beyond and seize Traugott. His hands wrapped around something solid, and he pulled.

To Orion’s great surprise, and for the first time in recent memory... what he grabbed resisted his strength. And unlike normal, the darkness Traugott had fallen into persisted like a puddle of abyssal ink. Orion put his feet to the ground firmly and pulled with all of his strength, yet still his arms did not budge.

“There we have it,” came Traugott’s voice from behind Orion. “I was beginning to worry this wouldn’t work.”

Orion whipped his head around and prepared to attack as needed, yet suddenly a great scream pierced his ears. It had no source. The prince fell to one knee in shock, and for the first time he could remember, feared what was to come.

“You should be happy,” Traugott continued, his arms still at his side. “You will get what you want, Orion. I never lied. You turned me away all the same.”

“What...” Orion said, not able to say anything more as the screaming echoed through his head. It was a chorus of voices, each and all in extraordinary pain. He released his grip entirely and fought back, yet still his arms refused to move. Pain manifested on his fingers as something ate away at them.

“I have carried with me a door to which only I have the key,” Traugott said calmly. “Yet you, parasite-ridden host that you are... are a skeleton key, Orion.”

Orion managed to come to both feet again, and put all of his full body strength into pulling his arms free. His back, his legs, his arms... all fought to no avail even as a hundred voices screamed in agony in his ears. Then, without warning, he felt a sudden deprivation. His mind felt like a hourglass turned over—as each grain of sand fell, all of the other grains scrambled to fill the space left, each and all pouring out.

Traugott noted, "The spirits leave you, having opened the border. I was right." The Magister watched in a self-satisfied yet pacific manner.

The screams lessened by the second as Orion's mind shifted dramatically. The resistance from beyond the inky portal of darkness failed, too, and the prince managed to wrest his arms out somewhat. Slowly, he gained momentum. As the last scream became an echo, Orion came free and collapsed back onto the stone with heavy breath. Most of his fingers were missing, yet they reconstituted as they always did.

Then, from the portal he'd just left behind... a shadowy protrusion jutted out. The light warped around it as though being sucked inside. Whatever emerged writhed. The more light it absorbed, the more clearly defined its form became. Orion barely recognized it as a gargantuan colorless finger with a long uncut nail. It tried to widen the opening, like a finger stuck through a hole in a cloth shirt. And eventually... it succeeded, and a second protrusion rose up. Yet more light rushed to feed it and give it form.

Traugott stepped closer, obviously fascinated. "The opening created by the spirits..." he kneeled down. "The creature struggles, but the opening tries to revert to the mean."

Orion scrambled to his feet and lunged at Traugott as he stared in fascination. The Magister widened his eyes and tried to step away, but the prince thrust his hand out at his chest. He managed to get a ward up, but Orion broke straight past it and punched the man in the shoulder. He heard cracks and pops as Traugott's shoulder twisted unnaturally. The man barely grunted in pain, but a mana ripple spread from Traugott's hand. Orion stepped away as a blast of wind exploded outwards.

The fierce spell put distance between the two of them, and Orion's armor had been torn to shreds. Traugott held his right shoulder with his left hand, healing magic already working.

"It seems I got overexcited," Traugott said, coughing up some blood—perhaps the blow had damaged his lungs. "It doesn't matter. I've proven a theory of mine with your help," he said as his shoulder corrected back into place. His eyes glanced back at the opening on the ground, where a full hand started to free itself. "Now... I'll watch and learn."

Traugott fell away into his shadow once again yet did not appear again this time. Orion stood there with a clear mind. The whispers that had troubled him... they were gone, completely and utterly. In this clear weather, he was able to focus on the pressing new issue.

The hand of shadow, now that it had gotten purchase, struggled to fit another appendage. It grabbed onto the portal of inky darkness and pulled, struggling greatly with its unformed body that absorbed all light. Orion started to walk forth, feeling that whatever tried to escape from this opening could not be allowed to do so. He raised both of his hands up, preparing to try and slam it back down. As he neared, something lunged at him, and he instinctually grabbed at it to try and stop it.

Orion held a strange tentacle in one hand. As he held it, all of the color and sensation in his hand drained away. Panicked, he released it. That gave the creature time enough to free itself. As soon as it came through, the opening shut, disappearing into nothingness. The new arrival rose up and kicked at Orion defensively, and the prince jumped back.

The creature of shadow rose to its feet. It was humanoid, standing as tall as the giants of myth. At full height, it nearly broke through the ceiling. Its body was black, gray, or white—the light around it shifted so much as to make it impossible to tell. Its arms were long, nearly touching the floor even as it stood

straight. Its flat, corklike head was eyeless and noseless, but had a long tentacle as its mouth that pulsed impossibly with a thousand folding teeth.

As Orion watched it, the creature bent its knees and ran its hand along the stone. Whatever it touched turned to black, then regained color when the touch was released. It bunched its fingers together until they formed a single point... then slammed into the stone, overturning a tile and sending it at Orion as it rushed at him soundlessly.

He swatted away the stone tile with one hand, then awaited the coming abomination with braced feet.

#####

Argrave stared at the pulsating darkness emanating out of the Dragon Palace. As recognition of the consequences dawned, his breathing grew faster and his grip around his horse's reins tightened.

"What in the gods' name...?" Duke Sumner said, one of the only others to bring his horse under control in a timely fashion. Even Galamon struggled to calm his.

Something from the Shadowlands is here, Argrave knew. That sight was too memorable to ever forget. Beings from the Shadowlands were veritable vacuums—living spaces devoid of matter. And now that it was free of its foul realm of origin, it would be made whole. It would take in light to obtain sight and sounds to obtain hearing. It would consume flesh to obtain touch and souls to obtain taste. As for sound... that, it forever lacked. Consequently, no matter what it consumed, it felt an all-consuming emptiness and would never stop its activities until stopped forcibly.

And to stop one forcibly... Argrave expected to have years to prepare for these things. This was one of the things the player fought at the *end*. But one was here now. He didn't know what kind it was, or whether it was alone... but one of those creatures alone was enough to make him shake.

Just then, a great rumbling shook the earth, and Argrave whipped his head to its source. There, a great puff of dust rose up into the air. There was a large opening in the earth, and a small force moved inside. Old bricks fell from a structural weakness in Dirracha where the old sewers and city lay dormant.

"Duke Sumner," Argrave said loudly. "I am going to seize Dirracha. If you wish to cooperate, I ask you join me. If not..." Argrave turned his horse. "If not, then I fear the city will be lost forever."

Argrave looked back at his company as Duke Sumner asked for elaboration. Elenore, Anneliese, Galamon, Vasilisa... before he had felt this entourage impossibly secure, but with the new arrival, all he felt was inadequacy. He could not deny the thought of fleeing dominated his mind—with his Blessing of Supersession empty, how could he hope to defeat a foe meant to appear so far in the future?

But the trusting eyes looking to him... that grounded him back, reminded him of what he'd done. And so Argrave said simply, "A problem came up. We have to change plans somewhat."