

"It'll be hard," Argrave stared at Anneliese as he spoke, the both of them now on foot. "Not to mention the other problems we might encounter in the city. Everyone will need heavy security."

Argrave's whole inner circle had gathered, and everyone sent nervous glances towards the distant blackening Dragon Palace. There was someone else with them—Duke Sumner.

"But it could be all we have," Anneliese reminded him. "Orion's presence is the only reason this thing has not spilled out onto the streets, if I understand you right."

Argrave nodded at her, eyes lingering on the walls. "Then we don't have any time to lose. Sumner, that breach in the walls you mentioned orchestrating—you're sure you can get your army in position at the right time?"

"Definitely," Sumner nodded. "If your people have to scale all the way up that mountain, we'll be there long before it happens. I have questions about... whatever in the world that creature was," the veteran mage shuddered, for he, too, had scouted out the Dragon Palace with druidic magic alongside Anneliese. "But if Your Majesty is confident enough to lead at the front into battle to vanquish it, I will follow."

Argrave patted his shoulder as he walked past him. "Good," he left the duke that praise. The others fell in line beside him, moving to begin their advance. "Elenore, don't take any risks. You'll be well-protected, but things can still happen. We experienced what happens there once before, trapped... and now someone's behind this. Maybe someone familiar to you."

"I know," his sister answered back. "But you won't be well-protected. Perhaps you ought to worry about yourself."

"I know," Argrave repeated the same thing she'd said. "I'm used to this sort of thing, in case you forgot."

"Go, then," she nodded patiently, gray eyes ill at ease.

Elenore remained behind, Argrave's royal guards and two loyal A-rank mages staying by her side to protect her as they advanced.

"Is there something else troubling you?" Anneliese asked as they walked onwards.

Argrave clicked his tongue once, then said, "Hegazar and Vera are going to think I knew this would happen."

"Did you?" Vasilisa asked pointedly.

"Wouldn't have sent them away if I had," Argrave shook his head. "I'll be relying on you, Vasilisa. On all of you." He adjusted the silver bracer on his arm, then pulled up his enchanted gray leather sleeve over it. "Fortunately, I've surrounded myself with reliable people. Some small relief in this hell."

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Georgina looked up at the Dragon Palace as she and Rovostar climbed up the side of the mountain. As she watched, a detached tower shook mightily. With another rumble, one brick fell free, shimmering with broken enchantments. Then, they all started to fall one after another, cascading down the mountain and dislodging yet more rock until they fell down into the city of Dirracha. Even from far away, she could see something foul and black leaking out. She saw what she thought were royal knights, and briefly thought she spotted the king's figure. *No*, she reasoned. *That must be Orion*.

"What is Traugott doing?!" Georgina called up to the duke.

"What do I know?" the crass man responded back. "But look at us. We're climbing without being peppered by insane princes or arrows. Take advantage of this. Talk less, and climb more," he ordered her.

Growing silent, the two of them led near a dozen soldiers up the mountain, using mountain-climbing gear to speed their ascent. Though they might've taken the Royal Road, the sole normal entrance to the palace, the two of them needed to reach the place where King Felipe was kept hostage. This mountain path was both covert and direct.

Their whole ascent was marked by tremendous rumblings from the devastating battle in the palace. Georgina felt something was very wrong, but she did not voice her thoughts in wake of her commander's words. Eventually, a stone overhang blocked them from proceeding further. Georgina used a rope with a hook at the end, aiming for a railing she knew was on the other side. Once it hooked, their party climbed up one at a time.

"The queen's old garden," Rovostar said, the last to climb up the rope. They all stood on a balcony overlooking the city, beyond which there was a brown and dying garden that had thrived, once. "Looks like Orion hasn't been maintaining it. Alright," the duke looked back. "The king and Levin are held in one of the detached towers, near the queen's tower. That isn't far from here."

Georgina looked to the tower in question—it was just barely visible. There, the wicked warping darkness that ate light thrived. She could not help but grow nervous.

#####

Orion stood before the titanic shadowy creature, his breath heavy. He bled from half a dozen slowly-healing wounds, and his armor had been torn in so many places. Opposite him, the humanoid from the realm of darkness bore not a single scratch. Its gray lean body was whole and solid after having absorbed much light, and its tentacle mouth swung through the air like a pendulum.

It held one hand out as it walked forward with heavy steps. The clarity of its body warped as a flexible weapon of shadow took form in its hand. It sent it forth like a whip, and Orion darted to the side. Once its weapon settled it flicked its wrist at the prince in a fluent motion. The flexible strand of darkness jumped again and Orion barely ducked low enough to dodge. The whip-like weapon tore through the walls and the ceiling as though the bricks were only wheat before a scythe, sending stone crumbling on the both of them.

It advanced further still in an unceasing assault. The weapon became rigid or malleable at its will. It thrust, cut, and slammed it as a staff, or sent it whipping inhumanly fast as it tore apart this ancient palace with ease. The creature was intelligent, brutally powerful, and impossibly fast despite its size;

Orion found no openings. Instead, he was forced on a desperate defense that called upon all of his blessings. He tried to shock the earth, create shields of ice, set the air aflame, fill the ground with acid... none of it sufficed to do anything beyond protecting his life.

It tore up the castle without a care. It was as though the being found itself surrounded by unlimited power, and now reveled in its ability. And perhaps it did. Orion saw that whenever it conjured its weapon again, its body lost clarity and needed to absorb more light to become solid again. But now, with light in such abundance...

Orion did not have time to lose himself in fanciful thoughts. The abomination struck out with its foot, hitting the prince squarely in the chest. He staggered back, winded. Before he could get his bearing, the thing raised its weapon up, stabbed it into the ground, and used it as a lever to open a great gash in the floor. It fell away, revealing bare mountainside. Orion, without purchase, floundered impotently as this palace wing fell out from under his feet.

The prince's stomach lurched as he fell further, but in an act of desperation he jutted out his foot and managed to find a foothold in the cliff face. He didn't manage to stabilize himself but flipped upside down dangerously. He slid down, barely clinging onto the last bit of stone before a titanic drop. With all the strength he had left, he crawled his way back up.

The great beast stood there, staring out across Dirracha. It turned its head about, looking at the wide plains and the city before it. Its corklike face began to unwind, revealing a soulless purple eye. Orion climbed up onto the ledge, staring up at it as he spit out blood to the wind. With a bestial lunge, he leapt forward and grabbed its hanging tentacle mouth. He pulled it down and slammed his fist into its eye. It reeled back, clutching its eye with both hands.

"I will die before I allow you to walk beyond this place," Orion declared, ignorant of if it could even understand him.

The creature was soundless as ever. Its face rippled, hiding its now-bloodshot purple eye. Orion put his back to the cityscape as the wind howled behind them. And in the city streets, out of the prince's sight... black banners bearing a sunburst with snakes as its rays moved up the streets as the citizens watched with unease.

#####

"I see it," Galamon declared, just beside Argrave as he led the soldiers up the Royal Road. Duke Sumner's men would be joining him, he was sure. "And Orion. He... struggles."

Argrave didn't look up. "You'll remedy that. Sumner and his troops have their job, Elenore has hers, and we have ours." He briefly spared a glance, watching as parts of the palace crumbled away even still. People in the city panicked, watching their troops with bad memories of the past. "So long as it's day... so long as this Shadowlander has flesh and blood to eat... it'll be near impossible to kill. Remember that. Try nothing stupid. Stick to the plan."

Galamon clenched his Ebonice axe grimly, looking ill at ease.

#####

Elenore stepped down the stone stairs beneath Dirrachia in a place familiar yet wholly unfamiliar to her simultaneously. Though she still wore the bronze jewelry... now she could see. One sight in particular awaited her, and she moved towards it eagerly even despite the situation.

"Watch your step, princess," one of the royal guards said as he hastened down the stairs.

The princess barely heeded the man, keeping her hand to the wall as she moved quickly down. Blue light entered into her vision, and in time the stairway's ceiling became low enough to see beyond. All was as she remembered, yet more—she saw every magic lamp in the gargantuan room.

And she saw Vasquer. The golden serpent, the largest living thing she'd ever seen. With her limited perception, she had seen bits and pieces. Now, she saw the whole of her—her ancestor, stretching for miles and miles. And unlike before... she was unbound, uncaptured, unfettered. Elenore managed a smile.

"I made it back," she whispered.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 337: Ground Control

Elenore stepped into the grand chamber housing Vasquer, ancient ancestor of all the royal family of House Vasquer. The now freed serpent appeared emotionless, but it curved its huge body slowly around, snout facing Elenore. It was like some sort of embrace, and Elenore held her hands out even as her royal guard seemed nervous from the prospect. A small white bird settled on her shoulder, and though it turned its head from side to side it did not flee.

As soon as she touched the large snake, jubilation filled her head—not her own, but the golden snake's. It was like a mother's pleasure at seeing a child thrive, and it was particularly directed towards her full recovery. Elenore briefly lost herself in that pure feeling, reliving her own enthusiasm for her sight, but she had other purposes that more urgently demanded attention.

Elenore sent forth a memory to Vasquer. She could not remember the background, and so the people involved strode atop formless fog as they spoke.

We faced a pitched situation once before in the distant past, Anneliese mused. We were at a huge disadvantage, but I used my Starsparrow to quickly relay directions. Effective management of a large force and intelligence on the entire battlefield has unimaginable benefits. Since Argrave needs me on the frontlines, I cannot do the same here, nor would it be practical now... but you can do something better, the elven woman pointed to Elenore in this memory-scape.

Anneliese is on to something. It'll be like playing a top-down strategy game, Argrave said. You and Vasquer will link up. You'll use her enhanced perception to view the battlefield, and then you'll relay orders to Sumner's druidic bond, whereupon he will act accordingly. He'll be able to position his troops to adapt to whatever the Shadowlander does. Like this, we shepherd it into the kill zone, barrage it with the deadliest assault we can muster.

Duke Sumner's face twisted. *That's... unconventional,* he said, though whether it was a compliment or a criticism was not certain. *Couldn't I achieve the same thing by simply watching from above with my druidic bond?*

You're limited even still, Argrave held his hand out. But with Vasquer aiding Elenore... the insides of the palace, any secluded streets, all the walls of the city... she can keep an eye on them all concurrently. If someone like Traugott is behind this, she can keep watch. She can be our ground control.

Duke Sumner slowly nodded. *Where would this kill zone be?*

It'd have to be in the city, Argrave stroked his chin. The palace won't ever offer a clear shot for many people. And considering the strength of this abomination, we'll need a shot for many people.

I saw a place when I scouted, Anneliese volunteered. Though... it is densely populated: a large garden square in the city, surrounded by tall buildings.

Argrave took a deep breath. *I think I know the place you're talking about. But...*

We have time to evacuate, Anneliese suggested. Or at the very least, encourage people to take shelter.

It'll be hard. Argrave stared at Anneliese. Not to mention the other problems we might encounter in the city. Everyone will need heavy security.

The memory faded from her mind, and Elenore waited for Vasquer's response anxiously. The link between their minds was silent, and the princess feared the response would be negative. A dim flame of caution came—Vasquer informed Elenore that the burden on her mind, though survivable, would not be without consequence. Orion had used it but seldomly, and yet his headache had been unbearable for days to come. And this was *Orion*. The prolonged contact of such a bulk of information might do genuine damage to Elenore's brain.

The princess did waver after learning that. Then, as she recalled all she already lost and regained, that hesitance vanished to the wind. And so... after some coaxing, to ease her into the process... Vasquer granted her perception unto Elenore fully. The new sensation was so intense that she lost her footing immediately, yet Vasquer's body wrapped about her tighter to keep her propped up.

The sensation... it was not entirely new, per se. Part of it was an enhancement of what already was: namely, her sense of touch. It came with such a profoundly large and delicate machination as to make her numb. She felt all the vibrations on the earth—not just things walking, but the wind against buildings, the water against the ground, or the sounds against the earth. All of this worked in tandem to give her a total sense of all that was above or below, and all of what they did.

This gray and lifeless scene was given life by a more mystical perception. Elenore saw the previously unknown forces of the world—people's souls, the magic in the air, or the foul rupture emanating outwards from the Shadowlander. Just like wind or sound, these left echoes that could be perceived. If the vibrations against stone brought shape, this mysticism brought color to this world. And like that, Elenore saw all of Dirracha laid plainly before her.

This scene overwhelmed to the point Elenore forgot the reason she was here to begin with—to speak, to relay. It took time—a long time, in fact—but she eventually remembered how to work her mouth. But then she remembered speaking required breath. If breathing didn't come naturally to her, she might've died.

When Elenore realized she could perceive *herself* curled up in Vasquer's embrace, she shuddered. "I'm... prepared, Sumner. Our task is twofold: relocation of Dirracha's citizens and positioning of your troops."

As she took note of the palace atop the mountain, she added grimly, “And we should hurry. Argrave has already begun.”

#####

Argrave thought cheese was a rather fun thing in video games. Of course, that wasn’t referring to dairy, but rather the exploitation of certain mechanical oversights to defeat a foe or overcome a challenge with relative ease. One could lure or cajole enemies into spots where they couldn’t move and then pepper them with projectiles, for instance. If these video-game enemies had non-artificial intelligence, such a thing would never suffice.

Even despite that, intelligence had historically made people do stupid things in the right circumstances. Argrave rather liked that fact. It meant that he, average as he was, could still overcome the monstrously smart people that abounded in Heroes of Berendar if he orchestrated things properly. Furthermore, he might just stand a chance against the monstrously smart monsters. He intended to put that theory to the test.

Prince Orion fought valiantly against the gargantuan Shadowlander. It clearly tried to disengage, heading for the entrance to the Dragon Palace for a safe descent down the mountain to the city—namely, the Royal Road, the place they’d entered from. Every time it separated in its attempt to find the easier prey in the city, he chased it down. The Shadowlander outclassed him without a doubt—it left wound after wound on his body yet bore few itself. But just as a man could not ignore a feral cat entirely, so too could it not ignore him. And unlike a feral cat, Orion actually had nine lives... or something roughly equivalent, at least.

When they first arrived at the Dragon Palace, Argrave sent out his Brumesingers to assist Orion in his struggle even as they desperately struggled to get in proper position for their plan. It didn’t matter if the Shadowlander was strong enough to rend stone—against their mist warriors, each swing would do precisely nothing until their reserves of magic were worn down. Their months of consuming souls might be expended in this battle, but Orion alone could not resist forever.

Argrave and Anneliese followed this fight closely, leading some of the mages as the others took their proper position. Galamon and Vasilisa were absent, alongside a great portion of them. He peeked his head through the hallway, but the battle was difficult to perceive through the absolute darkness warping around the creature. It was like trying to stare through thin cloth close to the eyes.

Argrave looked back and waved everyone forth. They headed for the outside wall with their own party, giving the battle a wide berth. Anneliese brought her forefinger and her thumb to her lips and blew, and a shrill, deafening whistle echoed out across the halls. It was returned in short order—once, then twice, each one in different locations. Their only physical advantage here was that the Shadowlander could not hear nor make sound, and they used it amply.

They followed along the outside wall, using the noise to roughly track the battle. Every so often, a whistle was sent out, then shortly returned. Argrave found a point where a large window overlooked the city, largely glass. He examined the area, then looked down the large corridor beyond. This place was the last large intersection before the exit.

“Alright. Now... we play the matador, boys and girls,” Argrave said confidently, though swallowed nervously in a betrayal of his true thoughts. “Don’t worry about the two down there. They can take it,” he assured. “Anneliese, the last.”

Anneliese brought her two fingers up once more, clenching them together. She whistled once, twice, then thrice. Like birds chirping to birds, the signal was returned. Argrave thought he might need to practice this skill.

Argrave stepped a little ahead of the group, listening for the slowly approaching battle. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, “Orion! It’s Argrave! If you can hear me, don’t bother responding. Up ahead there’s an intersection! I want you to step back for a beat for our attack, then resume! Don’t worry about letting it escape any longer!”

He repeated his directive thrice, ensuring that it would be heard. Once that was done, he rejoined the ranks of his mages. Anneliese took to the back of the crowd, sending ahead her Starsparrow with druidic magic to gather intelligence on the scene. All waited for her signal... yet all could hear, too, the coming mayhem.

The seconds that passed felt like minutes, and it grew ever closer. Anneliese watched, eyes closed and silent as she observed things through her bond. The darkness grew ever closer, corrupting the air and the stone around them with its warping refractions of light. The chiming of his Brumesingers made the scene eerier, as though some grim reaper came with bells portending his arrival.

“Attack!” Anneliese shouted urgently, breaking the silence.

It was sufficient to spur all to action. Their mages cast lightning magic of the most potent kind they knew. Though varied in power and rank, they were uniform in speed. The spells illuminated the lightless hall at once, traversing the distance too fast for the eye to see. The Shadowlander was caught in many, but many more passed by it. It flinched in pain, but only just. As it looked to them, it failed to notice where, precisely, the missed bolts had struck: on Galamon’s Giantkillers.

Holding two knives that sparked brighter than the sun, Galamon lunged forth and stabbed the Shadowlander in the leg. As the sparks discharged, the intersection was lit up, illuminating the creature and Galamon both. It staggered backwards with great burning cuts on its legs, but as it prepared to retaliate their mages sent out yet another wave of lightning magic. Galamon reeled back, catching bolt after bolt in his knives as he prepared for the second attack.

What was the intelligent thing to do in its situation? The answer was obvious: get the hell out.

And so it did. Without Orion constantly restraining it, the creature ran out towards the Royal Road, into the daylight. The moment it did, something more greeted it. The rest of the mages, and Vasilisa.

Vasilisa led the charge, a great teal mana ripple splitting the air. Befitting her A-rank ascension, the S-rank spell completed near immediately. The spell was exceedingly simple, placing all of its emphasis on a powerful spear-like thrust of wind designed to do nothing more than pierce. Even despite its raw destructive power, the Shadowlander caught the spear in hand, sliding back against the stone. Darkness erupted out from its hand, and with a wave of its hand, shattered all of its power. A great wind raged against the Dragon Palace’s outside wall.

Following up her opener, the remainder of their mages peppered the titanic creature with spells. It dug its long arms into the ground and resisted stubbornly... and indeed, became immovable. Yet as it stubbornly resisted, Galamon ran into the spells and tackled the creature's neck. He succeeded in dislodging it, and when the two were caught by a spell, both hurtled over the edge.

Argrave watched with wide eyes through the window, and then ran up to the Royal Road in a heavy-breathed frenzy. He eyed below, watching for Galamon. All he could see was the titanic Shadowlander, plummeting into the city... where Sumner's force waited, ready to herd.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 338: After All This

Elenore had absolute focus on the area where the Shadowlander had tumbled down the mountainous path to the Dragon Palace. Sumner's men were hardened warriors, fiercely loyal, well-equipped, and prepared for what was to come—prepared enough to stake their lives. That dedication to a leader did not come easy.

And these factors working in tandem were the only reason they did not break against the Shadowlander immediately.

The moment the titanic creature of darkness landed on the streets, those stationed nearby leapt at it decisively even in their fear. Their blades—some enchanted, some simple steel—wobbled and shook when they met with the Shadowlander's flesh as though they struck stone instead of meat. The weapons and enchantments did some damage, but the utter non-effect plainly demonstrated Orion's superior stature to normal men.

The creature, stunned from the fall, came alive as it was attacked. It rose to its feet and swiped its too-long arms at the attackers. It was a motion no more complex than pushing away an annoying pet, yet powerful enough that all five knights took to the air, clashing into their comrades or meeting the stone walls of Dirracha. Despite the show of insurmountable prowess, those behind advanced—there was no moral gray in this battle, only honor and duty. And Sumner's men rose to their task, shouting in defiance and slamming their boots upon the earth.

Elenore relayed its position to the duke but could do nothing more beyond that. She sighed a breath of relief when she noticed Galamon suspended higher up on the mountain cliff, if only because she knew his death would crush Argrave. Some of his bones were broken, yet he stubbornly clung to the mountain. Further up, within the Dragon Palace, she watched Argrave's actions.

"Come on. Let's go, Mary Poppins—use your magic boots to take me down," Argrave demanded of Anneliese, clearly worried for his friend and the situation down below. "Anyone who has healing spells—work on getting Orion back to fighting shape," he pointed beyond.

Orion crouched there. With his fight done, he barely managed to keep his eyes open. "I wear this pain as an honor, brother. Leave me. Go," he said weakly, some blood in his mouth.

Argrave shook his head in disbelief at the prince's words and looked to Vasilisa. "You used S-rank magic. I can't expect you to do more than that. So, please stay here," he told her.

The blonde woman knelt beside Orion. “I’ll keep your brother alive. Do whatever the hell you did back then with Margrave Ivan.”

“Read my mind,” Argrave nodded, then turned to Anneliese. “Let’s go,” he said, offering his hand.

Elenore watched as the two of them took a running start and leapt off the mountainous stretch of the Royal Road, her heart leaping just as they fell. Soon enough, Anneliese half-carried Argrave as the two of them relied on her enchanted boots that projected wind. Even as they fell daintily through the sky, the Shadowlander’s influence crept through the streets of Dirracha as hundreds of soldiers pressed against it. Though Sumner had managed to disperse most citizens, in the distant reaches of the city people panicked and fled for the tightly shut gates to the wall.

As more and more poured into the fight with the Shadowlander, the foul monster demonstrated it was no easy quarry. The tide of steel arms raged against it unabated, and it did not fall back—no, it was *forced* back. Though every swipe of its clawed hand tore through steel and flesh, and though it cleaved them in twain whenever it used its unnatural magic... Sumner’s troops proved their commitment to the kingdom of Vasquer was not rooted in mere opportunism or base greed. They fully intended to die for their cause. And many did. Dozens. Hundreds. Elenore could not even count.

Argrave and Anneliese alighted atop a distant building, staring down at this fight. Argrave took a deep breath, then cast a spell. A bow of blood took shape in his hand. Elenore had heard of this attack several times, but had never before seen it—[Bloodfeud Bow], it was called. Up ahead, all of the mages of Sumner’s force, the majority of his archers, and Sumner himself waited for the creature to come within striking distance.

Even despite their commitment, numbers were thinning faster than they could be replaced. Argrave was not blind to this—panicked, he tried to step into a better position so as to force it into the kill zone.

Just then... Elenore felt a disturbance. It was so similar in make to that of the aura the Shadowlander emitted it nearly escaped her notice. Atop a building, almost opposite Argrave, a shadow manifested. Someone crawled out of it. It was someone Elenore remembered all too well—Traugott. His eyes scanned the scene. Then, he held his hand out. She could see his body light up with mobilized power, and then a great ripple of mana split the air.

It all happened so quickly Elenore could not help but scream, “No!”

Traugott’s spell completed. A great mass of ice erupted outwards like an unending deluge from a burst dam. As it took shape, a gargantuan claw raised above the scene. It craned, cracking and splintering mightily as all on the battlefield stared in awe at this baffling arrival. Then, it descended.

When it slammed against the Shadowlander, Elenore briefly lost herself to confusion for a moment. The beast crumpled from the surprise attack. Just as suddenly as it had formed, the claw of ice pulled back, dragging an unbalanced Shadowlander straight into the city square. It rolled, tumbling, and then the ice shattered. It fell amidst thousands of ice crystals, completely exposed.

Panicked and befuddled, Elenore barely remembered to shout, “Attack! Send the order!”

But her order did not need to reach Sumner—he was competent enough to know when his opportunity had come. He gave the signal—a single blown horn. And with that, unrivalled destruction rained upon

the Shadowlander. Ice, fire, frost, earth, lightning, and even simple crossbow bolts ripped across the wide-open square. The Shadowlander did not have time to react, let alone resist.

Even as it was being barraged, Argrave held his [Bloodfeud Bow] ready, waiting for an opportunity. Opposite him, Traugott cast another spell. Another mana ripple split the air, signifying another high-rank spell soon came. Elenore's heart dropped again as she feared he would change targets. A gigantic hammer of wind took shape in the air, craning backwards. The Shadowlander could not escape the barrage of spells, yet still the hammer came down, pounding it into the ground to cement its fate. Its legs failed, and it collapsed. Argrave seized on the opportunity, releasing his blood magic.

The bolt of blood struck the Shadowlander firmly on the chest, digging in a few inches before dispersing. Even that attack was not enough to pierce it fully, and so the barrage continued for a while longer. Anneliese cast B-rank spell after B-rank spell, her A-rank ascendency [Life Cycle] enriching her magic supply with the constant discharge of magic nearby.

After what must've been a minute, the relentless barrage slowly faded away as the last of the power was expended. The Shadowlander reached one arm out, making all watching step away in despair. Then, thin curtains of light pushed past the grasping darkness, falling onto its hand. More light poured in, illuminating the city and warding away the foul darkness as its hand fell to the earth, still and dead. Everyone cheered in jubilation, but Argrave swayed, fell to one knee, and looked across from him with caution.

Traugott and Argrave locked gazes.

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Georgina and Rovostar stared at a teetering detached tower barely clinging on to the Dragon Palace, their men just behind. The battle between Orion and that foul, shadowy creature had raged through here, very nearly casting this tower to the city below. Georgina sized it up.

The path ahead was thin—very thin. It had once been a railed bridge, but that had crumbled away leaving a path no wider than one person. The tower itself was tilted at a harsh, perhaps forty-five-degree angle, barely persisting on a thin pillar of enchanted stone. There was no break from the wind, and it raged against the tower and the walls both, creating a treacherous path only the mad would walk.

"At the very least, it's unguarded," Georgina said optimistically, looking at the treacherous and wind-blown bridge.

"I don't like it," the duke said. "You go across. It looks unstable. Too much weight, it might finish what those two monsters started."

Georgina looked at Rovostar, trying to disguise the contempt in her eyes. Even until this moment, the common-born duke did not trust her commitment to King Felipe III. Perhaps it was because she had never shared her reasons for support. That distrust only gave her more reason to hide those reasons.

"Fine," she said brusquely. "Not like you'd be useful, anyway."

The bald, scarred freak laughed, then angled his head sideways towards the collapsed bridge. "Just walk, beautiful."

Georgina headed for the bridge without hesitation. She'd learned long ago to display no weakness in front of anyone. The path was thin, and every step that she took she feared it might crumble beneath her feet. Consequently, the few times it *did* crumble away, she was quickly able to correct herself. And before she even realized it, she stood at the door to the tower. It was angled as severely as the tower.

She tested the door, then chuckled beneath her breath when she realized it was still locked even tilted as dangerously as it was. She braced one foot against the wall, then retrieved her lockpicking kit. One small fortune of the mayhem meant any enchantments on the lock had shattered. She stuck a ridged stick and thin hook inside the keyhole. In not five seconds, the lock clicked. Georgina adjusted to get out of its way and pulled the door open.

On the opposite side of the door, Georgina first saw the cityscape. Most of the floor had fallen away, leaving few places for anyone to get a foothold. Her heart sunk as she realized this meant Felipe's survival was unlikely. Still, her eyes wandered, then lit up as she noticed someone trying to stay out of sight.

"You?" King Felipe said. He had been shackled to the wall by the window by his legs, and even now sat on the angled windowsill. "Hah. And to think I doubted your loyalty. You've served me much better than my own kin."

By this point, most of the king's hairs had gone gray. Georgina hadn't seen him in a long while, but this still stunned her. He had been graying before... but this? He was an A-rank mage, slow to age. It made little sense before that he should have grays, but now it was simply baffling. Perhaps there were other causes. Looking at him, Georgina judged the rumors were true—his hands were gone.

"Where's Levin?" she asked.

"He was kept on the second floor. I don't know, or care, of his fate. Given what's happening, we should leave quickly," he said, adjusting.

Georgina nodded. Slowly, she crept along the wall. C-rank wind magic was sufficient to break the shackles around Felipe's legs. Then, as chains dangled precariously, she helped him across. The tilt of the tower was treacherous, but not so much so the king couldn't walk. His simple stumps where his hands had been proved little help to walking, and Georgina dedicated most of her time to keeping the king steady.

Slowly yet surely, they made it to the door of the tower. They climbed out of the entrance, then Georgina advanced to the thin stone pathway. Behind, Felipe clambered up while she supported his arms. She advanced across the path first, turning her head back and eyeing Rovostar with a smug sense of superiority.

The duke raised his head up and widened his eyes. Georgina took the signal and turned her head just in time to see someone jump out of the tower's window. The assailant howled, slamming into Felipe as fast as gravity would allow. As Felipe tried to grapple with this new foe to support himself, Georgina very quickly realized she would need to release the king or fall with them. And the choice was easy.

Georgina let go of the king, and the other two fell off the side. She realized only as they did that the attacker was Levin. Despite the suicidal fall they experienced, he jammed his fingers into the king's eyes

as they fell. One screamed in pain and the other in rage as gravity claimed both of them. And in time, the wind drowned out the both of their screams, and there was nothing more of them.

“No...” Georgina said in quiet disbelief. Instead of sorrow, rage bubbled up. She fell to the ground, pounding her fist against the stone pathway, sending bricks crumbling away to the city below. “No. No, no, no! After all this?!”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 339: Incomprehensible Mind

Argrave judged Traugott with cold, calculating eyes, the two of them standing atop opposite roofs with the city square between them. Though they’d not had time sufficient to interrogate Orion as to the source of the humanoid monster lying dead between them, no one else could reasonably be responsible for bringing the Shadowlander to this city. That he helped put an end to it after it’d killed hundreds of Sumner’s men and devastated both the city and the palace only stoked his rage.

But he’s got no magic left, and all my men are around him. I don’t know what effect Ebonice will have on his little shadow, but... Argrave’s eyes jumped around, searching for a way to neutralize this man. He didn’t trust him. When the Magister reached into his pocket and pulled something out, Argrave watched cautiously even as people below cheered for their victory over the Shadowlander.

Traugott folded a piece of paper into a plane, then gingerly cast it forward. It glided perfectly towards them. Argrave was skeptical to the point where he considered conjuring a ward to block it, but Anneliese grabbed his arm.

“It’s harmless,” she assured him quietly, then caught it out of the air.

In that second of distraction, Traugott vanished. Even as Anneliese unfolded the paper, Argrave jerked his head about in paranoia. “This guy...” he muttered beneath his breath.

“Your Majesty!” a voice called out, and Argrave looked down to lock eyes with Sumner. “Elenore has told me about some rats trying to escape from the palace. With your leave, I would catch them,” he promised.

“Rats?” Argrave repeated, kneeling down. “Those loyalists, I imagine. Did she mention anything else? Have they succeeded in their activity?”

“She mentioned nothing of it,” Sumner shook his head.

“Alright. Time is of the essence. Hurry,” he nodded, then rose to look to Anneliese. “What’s on it?” he questioned her, looking at the paper fearfully.

“It is...” Anneliese trailed off, confusion causing her to err. “He wrote an apology.”

Argrave frowned at once. “You’re serious?”

Anneliese handed it to him in way of explaining it, and he took it after hesitating a beat. As her eyes scanned the city, she said, “We have much to do. I saw Galamon on the way down. He might need assistance. And Elenore...”

Argrave read through the letter. Just as Anneliese said, it was an apology. In it, Traugott claimed responsibility for what he did, expressed willingness to make amends, and further hoped that he and Argrave could talk about the information he wrote on the booklet he'd given to Castro someday. If they talked, all would be made clear.

Even as he read, Argrave crumpled the paper in his tight grip. "Total sociopath..."

His eyes danced between the words, looking for purpose or reason behind his actions. What exactly did Traugott want? How much was he responsible for? And squirming in the back of his head, Argrave considered that all of this might be his fault. He had exposed Traugott to things he had no business knowing, and as consequence...

"The day is young, and there is much to do," Anneliese reminded him.

Argrave took a deep breath and exhaled. "You're right," he nodded. "But this can't go on. Once things have settled down here... I don't know. I'll put out a bounty, spread word, enlist Castro's aid..." Argrave turned his head, where he witnessed a soldier kneeling before a body cleaved in twain by the Shadowlander. "The last thing we need is someone who can do this, then send an apology like it's nothing at all. He needs to go, and for good."

#####

Elenore walked through the streets of Dirracha, escorted by some guards of her own capable of casting magic. The city felt such a foreign place in her eyes now, even after her experience with the ancient snake Vasquer. It had been so long since she saw it with her own eyes. She had travelled through and around the city time and time again, blind and maimed... yet now she was back again, whole and healed.

Elenore thought seeing the city again might bring back unpleasant memories of childhood, but the city was devastated to the point it was hard to recall any memories of it at all. Falling debris had either crashed through some roofs or crashed into the cliffs of the mountain. The latter was more dangerous as the debris dislodged other rocks, provoking chain reactions that took dozens of lives in minor landslides. Some buildings were entirely buried. One detached tower had fallen away entirely, collapsing a large bazaar. People picked through its wreckage for one hundred percent discounts alongside others who tried to retrieve bodies for burial.

Despite her quick advisement, Sumner's forces had not managed to catch Georgina or Rovostar. Not that she blamed them—dealing with the Shadowlander was the pertinent matter, and she would sooner focus all efforts to that front for an assured victory than restrain two decidedly less dangerous people while endangering the other front. And besides... the loyalist incursion had turned out rather well, despite everything.

Elenore fiddled with a golden ring on her hand. It had a sun with four snake heads as rays. Argrave had enchanted it with B-rank wards and distributed it to key military members. This one was Durran's, but he had given his to her after he returned from his expedition to break the stalemate in Atrus. She thought that was stupid of him—even with this ring, she stood no chance in a real fight. But still, it made her feel safe as she proceeded towards a specific location in her memory. Her head throbbed with every step she took. She'd had migraines, but this pain felt far harsher—the blowback from connecting with Vasquer, she knew.

She came to a set of stairs, and descended down it slowly into a portion of the city that drained off into the sewers. She spotted a pair of big, dirty feet as she moved around, and took her hand off the ring to prepare for whatever would come. As she walked around the rest of the way, she saw a body. Easily seven feet tall, broad frame, emaciated, missing hands... it was Felipe, no doubt. His long gray hair drifted with the light winds, his face towards the sky. The top of his head had caved inwards, and his eyes had been gouged out completely. His body had broken in innumerable different places from the fall. He looked like a doll assaulted by a sadistic child, his limbs bent and broken in impossible manners.

Elenore's breath escaped her when she laid eyes on her father, dead. Her already-pained head danced wildly, and she held her hand to the wall to ensure she didn't pass out then and there. She had seen it all from her connection with Vasquer, yet now... now, it was different. But there was another body, too.

Levin had fallen. Tall, pale, and somewhat emaciated... he had landed face-down. And unlike Felipe, he breathed. She watched him with her gray eyes gleaming with caution. After a few moments, his voice came.

"Is someone there?" Levin called out.

Elenore stood, frozen. She looked to her escort, then back to Levin. He remained still. Puzzled and angered, she took some steps forward.

"Someone is there," he concluded. His voice was weak, barely audible.

"That was quite a funny thing you did, Levin," Elenore said, embarrassed as her voice shook despite her mocking. "You looked like a flying squirrel with a vengeance. It was very satisfying watching you two fall through the air like stones."

"Are you... that woman?" Levin asked, still remaining eerily still. "No... I... is that Elenore?"

She walked near and put her foot atop his fingers, trying to make sure he could not cast a spell underhandedly.

"Felipe... father... is he dead?" Levin asked.

Elenore put her full weight on her foot, but Levin did not even stir. Slowly, she answered, "...he's dead."

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahaaaa!" Levin laughed with a wild satisfaction, then took a deep breath and laughed again.

As Elenore observed his body, she made sense of what happened. She took her foot off his fingers, then nudged his leg with her boot. With no response, she kicked him and turned him over, still remaining cautious of his hands in case this was some trick to cast a spell. Levin's body flopped limply over. She didn't know much, but she had heard tell of this affliction. His spine had been injured in the fall. With healing magic, it could be fixed. But she did nothing.

"Oh," said Levin in surprise. He seemed capable of moving his head, but not much more. "It is you. I don't really know what's happening, but I don't really care, either."

Elenore observed him carefully. There was a huge cut on his leg. Though somewhat staunched previously, it reopened from the movement and poured blood fiercely in rhythmic pulses. It looked like an artery had been opened.

"You have eyes. That's not right," Levin said. "I must... I must be beyond mortality." He chuckled again. "It's over for me. That explains why it doesn't hurt."

Elenore stared, feeling at a total loss as to what she should do.

"Does this mean you died, too?" Levin continued. "I thought you had things rather well in hand at Argrave's side. Such a shame," he lamented. A few moments of silence passed, then he rambled, "I always wondered... what separates me from you? Why did he come to you? We had the same father, and we've both killed hundreds to achieve our aims. But I guess... I'm a little less pitiable than you. And a little less useful, to boot. Whether under Felipe's or Argrave's assessment, in the end, I'm disposable."

"You went along with whatever Felipe asked of you. You reveled in your task, murdering infants, pregnant women, and innocent people without batting an eye," she looked at his blue eyes sternly, unwavering in her hatred. "All for Felipe."

"I did. I mean, look what happened to you," Levin said, his words starting to slur. "My big sister... invincible that you are, smart and vital... what choice did I have? Induen, Orion... all of them my betters, and all of them subject to him all the same. I had to do what I did to survive."

Elenore briefly glanced to Felipe's corpse. "Then what was this?"

Levin giggled deliriously. "My crowning achievement. I never had my coronation, so... this will... do," he finished, lips barely moving as the blood left him.

Stepping to her brother, Elenore opened her mouth to speak. As she did, his eyes rolled back and his head fell limp. She stood there, words left unsaid and actions untaken as the pulses of blood coming from his leg lessened in pressure. And at some point... he died.

Elenore stood over Levin, feeling a bit empty. Then, she looked back to her escort. "Let's go. We can get their bodies later," she commanded monotonously.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 340: Settling Dust

Anneliese held her finger up to the air, and her Starsparrow settled atop it as a perch. Argrave looked out where he could see the dust clouds left by the retreating army.

"I think they head to Rovostar's fiefdom," Anneliese guessed. "Whitefields. I remember seeing it on the map."

Argrave nodded. "It's a poorly defended place, considering it's both newly constructed and in central Vasquer. But... they still have Enrico of Monticci. And Nikoletta, Mina, those two...?"

"I saw naught of them," Anneliese shook her head as the bird walked down her wrist, up her arm, and to her shoulder. She reached into her pockets and retrieved some black seeds, feeding the golden Starsparrow.

Argrave sighed. "I'll tell Elenore to—"

"Tell me what?" a familiar woman's voice called out.

Argrave turned his head to see Elenore return. He waved to her and greeted, "Sister." As he watched her, he followed up with, "Are you alright? Look a little..."

Elenore shook her head. "My head is burning. This pain won't go away anytime soon, I think. I can barely think."

Argrave shifted on his feet and said guiltily, "I am thankful you did that, you know. You're the only reason this worked."

"Levin and Felipe are dead," Elenore said, locking eyes with him. "They... fell."

Argrave took a deep breath in surprise. He looked off to the scenery, soaking in the atmosphere for a moment as he processed this information. Reluctantly, he admitted, "Tell you the truth... I'm relieved. What a blessing. I was dreading dancing around that issue with Orion."

Elenore joined him in looking out across the land. "It's a net benefit to us. Rovostar's primary driving force for maintaining cohesion in his ranks just crumbled. He has a lot of personal charisma, but not enough to send his men to their deaths against an overwhelming force with no cause."

"I'd agree," Argrave nodded. He could tell she didn't wish to linger on the subject of Levin and Felipe. "Rovostar in Heroes of Berendar had been a Felipe loyalist, too. After his death, he was still firmly on the Vasquer camp, however. Now..."

"With Sumner having offered his aid, I see nothing preventing the whole of the south from joining us. The north is under Quadreign's reign, and by extension yours... though I do wonder how firm their grip is. Either way, any weakness they might have can be remedied, and we already have their spellcasters regardless. Durran and Melanie are subjugating the rest of Atrus, and I see no reason why they would have trouble. You, as king, have a great deal of personal fame: the plague, the battle at Castle Cookpot, and now here. Once things settle at the Tower of the Gray Owl..." Elenore looked back to the city. "We've won. The only problem, as I see it, is that Duke Enrico is held captive."

"We were just talking about that," Argrave nodded. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Widespread pamphlets, delivered to Whitefields by bird," Elenore nodded slowly. "If Duke Rovostar's head is delivered to us, Duke Enrico is released, and they surrender to the crown, their treason will not be punished by death."

Argrave looked at her, raising a brow.

"What?" she asked. "It's inevitable. Would you trust Rovostar to stand at the same table with people like Reinhardt, Enrico, or Sumner? He stood by Felipe despite everything. He stood by Felipe *because* of everything," she said, her voice wavering with emotion. "He would never have changed. He *couldn't* have changed. He was indoctrinated, and he believed all he did was justified. It's no use thinking about it, dwelling on it."

Her appearance presently reminded Argrave of how she had been in moments past. He felt compelled to put his hand on her shoulder and say, "I agree with you. Don't get worked up. And don't think this is your responsibility alone. I took on this role—I have to stomach the uncomfortable truths, too."

Elenore closed her eyes. Her lower lip trembled, and she nodded. "You're right."

Argrave bit his lip musingly, then suggested, “We can’t deal with this today. There are more pressing things. Why don’t you get some sleep? You’ve been running about, straining your mind, and riding on horseback for days, now. You need some rest.”

“I have things to do,” Elenore shook her head.

“Your king commands you to sleep,” he pointed his finger at her face, then pushed her nose. “I can finish things up around Dirracha. Got enough talent at hand to fill the whole city. I command thee, sleep. Do not make me say it thrice.”

As Anneliese nodded to show her support, Elenore stared at him blankly. “I would lay down on the ground here as a joke, but I’m much too sore.” She sighed. “Fine. Fine, Your Ever Gracious Majesty, sovereign of all Vasquer. I will heed your command,” she amended.

Argrave smiled. Then, he hugged her.

“You always do this after battles,” she noted dryly, yet did not rebuff him.

“Don’t ever think you’re alone,” he told her, clutching her head with his hand. She seemed small and fragile after today’s events. Maybe she always had been. “You’ll only be alone if you want to be. And even then, I’ll still pester you.”

She pulled away. “You’ll have to talk to Orion,” she reminded him. “And... you’ll need to know about Levin and Felipe, by consequence.”

#####

“You sure you’re okay to walk?” Argrave asked Galamon. They were in a simple stone home that had been lent to Galamon as he recovered. They all stood about in a dining room, planning things out. The owners of the home were staying with relatives who’d lost family.

“Yes,” the knight-commander responded simply, picking up his gauntlet from the table in the dining room. His armor was badly damaged. It had been bent in many places to the point where some of it had to be bent back into place to fit. Still, he was fine. His regeneration still worked overtime, even despite his vampirism being banished. Certain parties present—namely, Sumner—weren’t privy to that.

“There is such a thing as working too hard,” Vasilisa noted, eyes, darting around the stone house as though it might cave in. “You tackled that thing off the mountain road. Probably saved all of our lives.”

“Traugott lives,” Galamon disagreed as he slid the gauntlet on firmly. “Until I change that... I will follow His Majesty.”

Argrave sighed. “I miss you calling me Silvaden, somewhat.” He pounded the man’s shoulder with his fist. “Thanks, friend. As much as I hate to admit it... I do need your help.”

“He’s a lucky man, surviving that fall with only wounds that could be healed by magic,” Duke Sumner noted.

“Luck had no part,” Anneliese shook her head. “Galamon is strong.”

Sumner looked at her, seeming a bit disconcerted at her presence. Back when they first spoke, they'd had no times for introductions... but now the duke knew his company and knew their relations to Argrave. He hadn't protested yet, but it was obvious he wasn't exactly jumping for joy that the knight-commander and the king's future queen were both elven.

"I had a proposition for Your Majesty," Sumner changed the subject, turning his gaze to Argrave. "I'd like to propose a summit between your people and all those of the south, here in Dirracha."

Argrave walked up to the table and tapped his finger against it, testing it. Content it was steady, he sat atop it. "A summit?" he repeated.

"Yes," Sumner nodded. "Consisting of all nobles at the rank of count or above, to discuss what happens after this war—no, rather, how Your Majesty intends to rule his kingdom. I've heard rumors of parliament and other such things, but..."

Argrave crossed his arms and looked to Anneliese. She brooked no protest, so he faced Sumner and said, "You're getting a bit ahead of things. Rovostar still runs free. I have a plan to deal with that, but it's still in the development phase."

"The people of the south are uncertain about the future," the duke shrugged his shoulders. "Holding this could officiate support and guarantee flawless cooperation in catching that bastard."

"And guarantee some nice rewards," Argrave smiled. "Well... considering how many of your men died against that thing, I think it's only just that they be rewarded."

"I won't deny many will probably posture for land in central Vasquer. Not the margrave, certainly, but others," Sumner nodded.

Argrave pulled back the silver bracer on his wrist and scratched it fiercely. "There's going to be some news in a few days. It's going to... change the field rather significantly," he alluded vaguely. "I do think this summit is necessary. But I'd like to wait for certain information to come to light. And given Leopold's age, he can't exactly arrive quickly."

"Leopold?" Sumner furrowed his brows.

"The leader of Relize," Argrave said. "He's well over a hundred. But come to think of it... he might not be the oldest there," Argrave realized. "But now I'm getting ahead of myself. There's still a lot to do vis-à-vis restoring order to this city. And I definitely can't manage that alone."

Duke Sumner nodded. "I'm glad to have been wrong about you, Your Majesty."

"Hopefully I'll hear a lot of people say that," Argrave nodded as he stood up off the table.

#####

The duties of re-establishing order in the city were not small. Housing had to be provided not only for those displaced by the battle, but to the soldiers. Argrave, Anneliese, Galamon, Vasilisa, and Sumner spent a great deal of time working on this. Fortunately the populace were cooperative, as the soldiers in the city weren't conquering invaders but rather people who'd saved them from the monstrosity of darkness that came down from the palace.

Rumors abounded. Some of them reached Argrave's ears—some said that shadow monster was King Felipe III himself, and that Argrave had known about the demon that had possessed his father the whole time. Rumors on the opposite end existed, too. Argrave had spawned this demon himself, apparently. Regardless, no one mounted a resistance. Orion's Waxknights, even though fiercely diminished after attempting to aid Orion in the battle against the Shadowlander, still helped facilitate ease of transition and distribution of supplies. By the time that was finished, it was well past midday. But another task awaited him. Namely... greeting Orion, who had recovered from his wounds.

#####

Argrave's hand hovered near a heavy wooden door. He clenched his fingers into a fist and then slackened them time and time again, taking deep breaths all the while. He glanced backwards where Galamon and Anneliese stood by as silent, if impatient, support. Argrave rolled his shoulders, and then as if he was jumping into cold water, hastily knocked thrice on the door.

Instead of a vocal response, the door opened. Argrave looked up at the man beyond—not something he was used to doing—where Prince Orion stood in an ill-fitting cloth robe.

"Brother," Orion greeted. "I..."

"You looked healed," Argrave said optimistically. He very nearly asked if he could come inside but lost himself in indecision as he wondered if a king was supposed to ask if he could enter. Royal etiquette was foreign to him.

"There is much to talk about," Orion nodded. "What happened here. What happens next. And most importantly... why *you* are in my brother's body," his meaty finger pressed against Argrave's chest. "Our ancestral matriarch informed me of the truth of things."

I don't want to be in this body right now, Argrave rued. Without other options, though, all he could do was nod and enter inside Orion's recovery room in the Dragon Palace.